Sexual attraction in the psychotherapeutic relationship

Authors: Lara Vesentini, Johan Bilsen

Introduction: Psychotherapists feeling sexually attracted towards clients are a common phenomenon. Studies, mainly from the eighties and nineties, show prevalence rates between 60 to 90%. However, studies on prevalence rates of sexual attraction and how sexual attraction is experienced and coped with are scarce and not being continued in the last decades. Recent studies are needed, because population of psychotherapists, ethical perspectives, training and education change over time and more insight in this topic could empower psychotherapists in handling these feelings well and with more confidence.

Aim: Besides analysing the prevalence rate of sexual attraction in Flanders (Belgium), this study aims to determine which and to what extent feelings, thoughts and behaviours, related to proximity and sexual attraction towards clients, occur and to investigate the related emotional experiences.

Method: In November 2016 a large scale electronic survey was sent to psychotherapists, who were member of one of the four largest and accredited psychotherapy-societies and/or member of the Flemish Society of Psychiatry. The questions for the survey were based on earlier scientific studies on this topic, and interviews with experts and persons working in the field. The survey was pilot tested among researchers and psychotherapists in training.

Results: In the first half of 2017 the data-analyses will be finished and preliminary results will be available. The findings will give more insight in feelings, thoughts and behaviours related to proximity and sexual attraction, and their related emotional experiences, and will be presented at the congress.

Discussion and conclusion: We hope that these findings will contribute to an increased awareness on this topic and give input for discussion, which can be helpful to enlarge the support for and coping skills of psychotherapists when feeling sexually attracted towards clients.

Keywords: sexual attraction, empowerment, psychotherapy

Biography:

Lara Vesentini is a PhD-student, working under the supervision of Professor Dr. Johan Bilsen, in the Mental Health and Wellbeing Research Group (MENT) at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. In 2000 she completed her study Health Sciences in Maastricht (the Netherlands) and proceeded to work ever since in the academic field at several universities in Belgium, on topics like elderly care, sexuality, and mental health. Lara is also active in the courses evidence based medicine, epidemiology, social medicine and mental health in the Department of Medicine at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel.