

Psychotherapy as abuse

Book review

Jehu, D (with Davis, J, Garrett, T, Jorgenson, L M, & Schoener, G R) (1994) **Patients as victims: Sexual abuse in psychotherapy and counselling.** Chichester: John Wiley. 241pages. ISBN 0-47194398-3 pbk.

Steven J Collings
Department of Psychology
University of Natal
Durban

Derek Jehu and his associates set out to provide a concise presentation of the issues and regulatory provisions regarding the sexual abuse of patients by mental health professionals in the United States and the United Kingdom. In Section 1 of the text the reader is introduced to some of the major issues and controversies in the field. The first of these issues relates to the difficulties involved in defining sexual abuse. Although there is a general consensus in the literature that explicit sexual acts (sexual intercourse, genital fondling, etc) between a therapist and client, in the context of ongoing therapeutic contact, are always improper/abusive, there is less agreement as to the propriety of other forms of intimate behaviour (e.g., touching or hugging). As Jehu points out, behaviours such as touching may be appropriate in some circumstances (e.g., when used as an expression of reassurance, support or comfort) but not in other circumstances (e.g., when therapists use touch to evoke sexual arousal in themselves, when touch is used by therapists as a transitional step in a sequence towards more intimate sexual involvement, or when touch is used with patients who are likely to incorrectly perceive nurturant touching as sexual/abusive in nature).

A further area of considerable and ongoing controversy relates to the propriety of sexual contact with former clients. The divergence of opinion around this issue is highlighted in the American State of Florida:

"Where the Board of Psychological Examiners has ruled that for the purposes of determining the existence of sexual misconduct the psychologist-client relationship is deemed to continue *in perpetuity*, while in the same State the medical board permits sexual contact between psychiatrist and patient *immediately after termination*". (Jehu et al, 1994:14)

Rather than condoning or condemning all sexual contact between therapists and clients, Jehu suggests a selective proscription of sexual contact when certain conditions exist (e.g., the continuing psychological vulnerability of clients, the absence of valid and/or mutual consent, termination of therapy for purposes of starting a sexual

relationship, or the misuse/abuse of power by the therapist). Although such a compromise would appear to constitute a rational solution to the problem, one has to question the extent to which such selective proscriptions can meaningfully be operationalized in legal provisions and ethical codes, as well as the extent to which selective proscriptions can effectively be monitored by professional bodies.

The latter parts of the text are given over to a discussion of available epidemiological findings. What emerges from this discussion is two things. First, that approximately four percent of psychologists surveyed in the United States and in the United Kingdom admit to having had sexual contact with a client, and second, that the quality of available research leaves much to be desired.

From Jehu's discussion it becomes clear that our current understandings of the nature and scope of the problem are based on a body of research which is still very much in its infancy. Issues of definition (particularly issues relating to the definition of key constructs such as 'sexual abuse') have not been adequately addressed by either researchers or by authors of ethical codes and methodological problems (e.g., extremely low response rates) continue to pose a serious threat to the validity of research findings. In addition, available research is, largely based on accounts provided by perpetrators of sexual abuse with little, if any, attention being paid to the victims of abuse.

In the context of these limitations there is clearly much work that needs to be done before we can claim to have even a basic grasp of the nature and scope of the issues involved. For researchers involved in such an endeavour, Jehu's book is likely to constitute an important point of departure and for this reason alone it can be thoroughly recommended.