

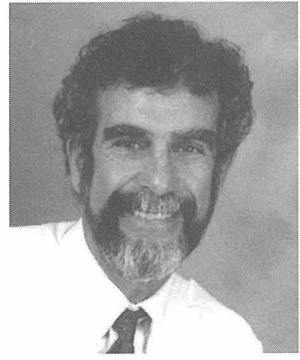
Re-Thinking the “Power Differential” in Psychotherapy: Exploring the Myth of Therapists’ Omnipotence and Patients’ Fragility

FROM THE FIRST DAY IN GRADUATE SCHOOL in psychology, I was instructed to pay great attention to the “inherent power-differential in psychotherapy,” to be aware of the “imbalance of power between therapists and clients,” and was repeatedly told, “never abuse or exploit our vulnerable and dependent clients.” Apparently, not much has changed in almost 30 years. In their widely used textbook, now its 3rd edition (2007), Pope and Vasquez unequivocally state, “The power differential is inherent in psychotherapy” (p. 43). Similarly, in 2008, the respected ethicist, Dr. Jeffrey Barnett wrote, “The psychotherapy relationship, by its very nature, results in an imbalance of power. The psychotherapist is in a much more powerful and influential position than the client...” (p. 401). Leading ethicists like Brown, Koocher, Pope, Sonne, Vasquez and many other authors seem to emphasize the power inherent in the therapist’s role and have likened the therapist-client relationship to the parent-child relationship, viewing clients as generally powerless and helpless.

THE MYTH OF “POWER-DIFFERENTIAL”

The question of therapists’ power has been the focus of the investigation of exploitation of clients by their therapists. Obviously, the valid concern is that predatory therapists may take advantage of vulnerable clients for their own sexual and other benefits. It is important to emphasize that it is always unethical for therapists to exploit, harm or have sex with current clients and it is illegal in most states. Many authors have used the “power-differential” argument to demonize all dual relationships and interventions, such as non-sexual touch, self-disclosure, gifts, bartering, etc. The term “power-differential” has been used synonymously with exploitation. These authors obviously have ignored the fact that many dual relationships in small communities are unavoidable and are, in fact, healthy aspects of inter-dependent

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communities. They also ignore the extensive clinical data on the healing power of touch, the clinical effectiveness of self-disclosure, the humanity of gifts and the potential cultural correctness of bartering. Other ethicists and scholars have taken the subject of power a step further and suggested that "Once a client, always a client," meaning that therapists' god-like power and potential to exploit sexually and cause harm may last long after therapy and perhaps indefinitely.

Very few therapists explore the issue of power beyond the assumption of "a power differential." They still focus on therapists' power and ignore clients' power when they assert that short-term therapy, psychoeducation, medication consultation, behavioral, symptom reduction, and non-transference therapies are less likely to yield a significant power differential compared with long-term or insight-oriented, psychodynamic therapy.

The view of a client's child-like vulnerability has come from two sources: (a) originally, psychoanalytic psychotherapy focused on clients' transference which, within this analytic frame, implies that therapists have enormous power to influence and control their regressed and vulnerable clients; (b) the focus on power relationships in psychotherapy has emerged from valid and important concerns regarding sexual exploitation of female clients by male therapists. Since the 1970's, the client's helplessness was emphasized by some feminist social-political analyses of the nature of patriarchy and the inherent vulnerability of women to men in general, and more so to men in power positions. This strand of feminism views women as generally powerless, helpless and at the mercy of men in authority, such as psychotherapists, counselors, priests, etc. (Rutter, 1989). Although the power differential is valid and real in many psychotherapeutic situations, it is still unfortunate that it has been used, at times, synonymously with exploitation and harm in the ethics literature. (Lazarus & Zur, 2002; Zur, 2007)

ON CLIENTS' POWER

While I obviously share the concern about exploitation of clients by their therapists, the stereotype of the omnipotent therapist who dominates all clients neither fits with my view of myself, with my experience with my clients over the years, nor with my understanding of power dynamics. I do not need to look far to know that, although I have been a client of several therapists, I have never felt powerless nor at the mercy of my therapists. I suspect that most of the readers of this article have spent some time in therapy and I doubt if they experienced their therapists as possessing some kind of inherent power and superiority.

Looking back at my almost 30 years of consultations, it has become clear to me that: while some of my clients have been vulnerable and dependent, others could not have been further from that; while some clients seek my counseling when traumatized, confused and disoriented, others have been very centered and assured but needed a new direction in their generally successful lives; while some were young and helpless, others were mature and in reasonable control of their lives; while some were clinically depressed, others were existentially depressed;