

INTERPRETATION

interpretation: an attempt to understand and explain the meaning or significance of something; in psychotherapy, this applies to the meaning or significance of a person's behavior, feelings, thoughts, beliefs, needs, desires, or dreams.

Discussion:

Fritz Perls' famous command to "never, never interpret" (1969a, 121), along with the phenomenological method's rule, "Describe, don't explain" (Spinelli, 1989/1992, 17) have led to the erroneous impression that interpretation is never used in Gestalt therapy. However, Perls himself did not follow his own rule. For example, his claim that all dream images are projections of disowned parts of the individual is an interpretation. What he was against was traditional psychoanalytic interpretation, in which all phenomena are explained according to a preconceived theoretical framework, without regard to the patients' understanding of their own experience. In the traditional psychoanalytic therapeutic relationship, the analyst is seen as the authority on interpretation, having exclusive access to and understanding of the patient's unconscious. The patient is put in a passive role, without responsibility for his or her own understanding or growth and development.

Staemmler points out that "*You cannot not interpret.*" Thus the question becomes not *whether* interpretation is used in Gestalt therapy, but *how* it can be used in a way that is compatible with gestalt principles and beliefs. (2006b, 29/2, 19) These would include: (1) the importance of bringing the client's subjective experience to awareness, (2) the dialogic process between client and therapist as the means of co-creating understanding, (3) the existential imperative of personal responsibility for the creation of one's authentic self, and (4) observation and description of the client's process: *how* he is behaving, rather than *why* he is acting in a certain way or *what* or *who* he is. Rather than saying "You are a hostile person," a descriptive process interpretation might be: "You are acting angry without being direct." (Yontef, 1993b, 404-5) Instead of labeling or diagnosing, the therapist would describe an observed behavior and look to the client to provide the interpretation of that behavior.

Illustrative Quotations:

- **Fritz Perls:** "...intellectual interpretation...says, 'I know you are stupid and immature. I know what you are doing. I know more than you. I will explain everything.' But this prevents the person from truly understanding himself." (1966a, 18) "...every interpretation...is an interference. You tell the other person what they think and what they feel. You don't let them discover themselves." (1973, 142)

- **Laura Perls:** "Interpretation...promotes introjection rather than assimilation and integration." (1977, p. 202)

- **Polster & Polster:** "Interpretations are bold attempts at divination, ...a special game, ingeniously played, offering challenge and confirmation for excellence in psychological marksmanship. For the person observed it may offer illumination and surprise. Aha! ... The risk is that one learns...to depend on an external authority to explain reality. To interpret the nature of a person's unconscious neutralizes his own developmental process. This process is more firmly established when it is based on his own awareness ... " (1973/1974, 46)

- **Naranjo:** "I was very impressed with how much could be done without the conventional use of psychoanalytic interpretation. It seemed like Fritz had another kind of awareness, ... which seemed to be almost psychic. ...I think it was...connected with seeing in gestalts rather than in terms of detail. To perceive configurations is a subtle form of computation, which constitutes much of what is called

intuition. ...Fritz could see the total gestalt. He could see a certain rhythm in events and thus know what was coming and what was missing, and what a person was silent about.” (in Gaines, 1979, 297)

• **Simkin:** “If I do have a very strong hunch, I put it out as a hunch...rather than interpret. ... [A]lthough...frequently I am on the right track..., there are times when I am not....If I say ‘I *know* I’m right and you must accept what I say,’ this becomes...a power struggle between my...need to be right and the other person’s. ... a complication I prefer not to have.” (1976/1990, 86)

• **Yontef:** “Perls’ unique contribution to psychotherapy...lies in replacing interpretation with behavioral observation and experimentation.” (1993b, 61) “Explanations and interpretations are considered less reliable than what is directly perceived and felt.” (1993b, 123) “Rather than ...passively awaiting the therapist’s interpretation..., the patient is seen as a collaborator who is to learn how to self-heal.” (1993b, 129) “This...enables patients to be more responsible for their own existence, including their therapy.” (1993b, 130), “But any claim that gestalt therapists make no analysis or interpretation at all is nonsense. ...The choice of what to observe, what to emphasize, what meanings come out of the interaction between the observer and the observed, ... [o]ur suggested experiments, ...homework assignments, our emotional response, all arise in part out of the meanings that arise in the...interaction... .” (1993b, 404)

• **Yontef:** Case example: “An ambitious hard-driving man denies any wish to be taken care of. The therapist has the belief, derived from intuition or...theoretical analysis, that the patient has a strong wish to be taken care of and resists being aware of this. ... Two possible interventions:

- Intervention by interpretation: ‘You really do wish to be taken care of and are denying that.’
 - Gestalt therapy intervention: ‘I would like to suggest an experiment. Imagine you are a little boy and your mother says ‘I really love you. Let me give you a hug.’ Now imagine that and tell me what you experience.’ (1993b, 214-215)

• **Wheeler:** “...interpretation has an important role to play, *if it is experimental as opposed to authoritarian in nature*. The interpretation...is our hypothesis about the...meaning of various elements of the patient’s life and experience, ...a *trial* organization of meaning, ...offered not as ‘the truth,’ but as an experimental figure of interest for him or her to consider.” (in Wheeler & Blackman, 1994, 24)

• **Staemmler:** “Perls’s [dictum], ‘*never, never interpret!*,’ ...is...impossible to comply with.” (2006b, 11) “Even in perception we...interpret, since we always see something *as* something. I see this thing here as a table.” (2006b, 17) “Gestalt psychologists...[demonstrated] how human beings organize their perceptions in meaningful wholes. The interpretational process is already intrinsic in what we call ‘perception. ...There is no such thing as ‘immaculate perception,’ as Nietzsche ironically called it.” (2006b, 18) “‘Organizing the field’ is...synonymous...to what I have called ‘interpretation’; ‘figure formation’ is another synonymous term. ‘Reorganizing the field’ is tantamount to a ‘new interpretation.’” (2004, 54)

“Meaning is being produced by the two persons involved in the conversation, it is not merely expressed by one person and received by the other.” (IGJ, 2004, 39) “understanding...is based on the willingness to let the other person speak to me and to accept that he or she has something valid to tell me. It is based on a willingness to be uncertain, on an openness, which not only implies the possibility that I might learn something from the other, but also that I let something pass even against my own point of view.”(2006b, 28)

“...each participant enters the dialogue...from the perspective of...her or his *personal background*, which is both unique and *limited*.” (2006b, 29) “in...any encounter...our cultural...[and]

personal history, ... our educational and professional backgrounds, our...gender, our...expectations, etc., many of which we are not even conscious of, ...determine the ways we first look at and understand things” (2006b, 20)

“...for every neuron which processes primary sensory data, about one hundred thousand neurons process this ‘information’ further, compare it with past experience and use it to construct cognitive reality. We can say without exaggerating that memory is our most important sense organ.” (Roth, in Staemmler, 2004, 40)

• **Gadamer:** “There is no such thing as ‘the’ interpretation, which is true once and forever. This means that the process of understanding will never be finished. Women and men are historical beings who will change continuously as time goes on; and so do their surroundings. Therefore ‘...*knowledge of oneself* [as well as of others...] *can never be complete.*’ ” (in Staemmler, 2006b, 33)

• **Staemmler/Spinelli:** “In gestalt therapy we prefer not to interpret analytically, i.e. ‘...to go behind or beneath the presented (or ‘manifest’) material contained in a statement so that its hidden (or ‘latent’) meaning may be ascertained’ (Spinelli, 1996, 198). We rather interpret descriptively, i.e. in a way that “...retains its focus on the manifest material and seeks to extract the meaning of that material to the client...by focusing on various elements contained in the manifest material and considering what they express to the client about his or her currently lived experience, what they reveal or imply about his or her self-construct, relations with others, and so forth.” (Spinelli, 1996, 199f.) (in Staemmler, 2004, 53-4).

Last update: 12/25/12

Stephanie Sabar, MSW, LCSW
Website: stephaniesabar.com