BOOK REVIEW

The Ongoing Process of Consent in Psychotherapy: Examining What Is Said, Meant, and Understood


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This interesting book weaves together three broad themes into a developing narrative addressing how therapists and clients should and do meet in the therapeutic encounter. Patrick O’Neil utilizes information from the practice of psychotherapy, the ethics of consent, and the domain of qualitative interviewing as research to fashion an approach to the topic that is both complex and conversational. The book is well worth reading and is something of a page turner for those thinking about the interface of ethics and psychotherapy and who want to hear from clinicians and clients about the issues involved. The strengths of the book are many, but I was particularly taken by the openness, curiosity, and attempt to weave a story from interview material that is relevant to the question of what is consent in therapy.

The main focus of the book centers on the question of how the therapist and client negotiate the therapy enterprise. It seeks the answers in interviews conducted with therapists and clients. On the basis of the author’s analyses of the interviews conducted, and on the basis of the presentation of the selected interview segments, a broad meta-story is constructed that carries the reader along. In the best tradition of negotiation, Patrick O’Neil is open, explains his methodology, and invites the reader to understand what is going on. In contrast to many other books based on qualitative, quantitative, and case material, the book has the distinct advantage of hearing di-
rectly from the author about his *Weltanschauung*. O’Neill takes pains to make himself clear to the reader. In this, he sets an admirable model for how one might prepare the groundwork for a co-construction of a therapeutic or learning experience.

The book has a mixed intellectual ancestry. The opening chapter on the ethics and changing nature of the patient–client healthcare provider relationship gives relevant examples of the significance of the issue of patients’ involvement in their care and is addressed from changing ethical medical and societal perspectives. As the therapy process is conceptualized as a place where the narrative of therapist and client combine into a co-constructed therapy narrative, the ethical and legal requirements forming the basis for the co-construction are presented first to set the stage and to contextualize the questions involved.

Next, in the tradition of social science’s emphasis on methodology, the following two chapters are devoted to the rationale, method, and history of the qualitative type of interviewing and meaning-making conducted by the author. The discussion of the background is an honest portrayal of how interview material is edited from the uneven strands of the spoken word to the final product. The discussion of the making of meaning is a continuation of the question of what to present, as well as the importance of interpretation in this line of research.

The next three chapters, which are clearly the heart of the book, consider the negotiating process in therapy with clients with eating disorders, those who have suffered sexual abuse, and finally sexual offenders. These chapters are based on 72 interviews with therapists and 20 with clients gathered over a 5-year period. The questions asked include “What do therapists believe should be part of the consent to therapy and why?” and “How do clients experience the process?”

This section of the book has the form of the case study genre—the selective editing, the narrative emphasis and construction, and the fascinating life beat that can only come from staying close to case material and dialogue. There is a trade-off to be had here, however, and this results in a decision to forego a systematic analysis of the etiologic, therapeutic, and outcome literature that characterizes the eating disorder, sexual abuse victim, and sexual offender domains. Although O’Neill occasionally refers to the professional literature on these matters, it is generally to illustrate a particular point rather than to survey the issues themselves. Had he intended to make particular statements about the content of these disorders and their treatments rather than about the process of negotiating consent (or consents) in treatment, these would have been problematic omissions. In the context of listening to therapists and clients talk about how and what they wish to share as well as hear from each other, the systematic consideration of such issues can be dispensed with. The book concludes with a chapter pulling together the material covered.

As a reviewer, the four hats that I wear shaded my responses and review of this book, and I found myself engaged in dialogue with O’Neill from the perspective of each. These roles are those of therapist, teacher of interviewing, researcher, and one involved in health care ethics. The therapist looking for information on how therapists and clients might better meet came away the least satisfied. The complex issues that emerge are generally not systematically addressed and might belong better to a consideration of issues about contracting in treatment, rigidity versus flexibility in treatment, counter-transference, and dealing with the particular disorders under consideration. By contrast, from the perspective of a teacher of interviewing as well as that of a researcher in social science, there is much of interest here for myself and for my students. The questions of what are our data, how to ask, how to listen, and ultimately how to structure our understandings of what we have are matters that Patrick O’Neill’s volume helps consider. Finally, from the perspective of one involved in ethics, the points raised in this wide-ranging volume sensitize one to the complexity of the issues of what is presented and what is heard around the therapy negotiation process. By having O’Neill share his material, we are in a much better position to generate hypotheses, research, and ethical guidelines than we were before.

This is a shorter book than it might have been. Each chapter could easily be the source for a book in itself. On the other hand, had each chapter been a separate book, it is unlikely that one would have been exposed to the breadth of topics and issues considered in the book. Regarding brevity, one might remember that such things, as in the words of my colleague M. Kellner (personal communication, November 13, 1999), should be considered in perspective. Kellner’s own response, when one of his offspring commented on the “shortness” of one of his own works, is relevant. He replied, “It’s a damn sight longer than anything you have written.” This might be paraphrased for O’Neill’s volume to read “a damn site longer than anything that has been written on the topic to date.” With O’Neill’s work before us, that situation should change—and some of that change will be to his credit and as a direct result of this work.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

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