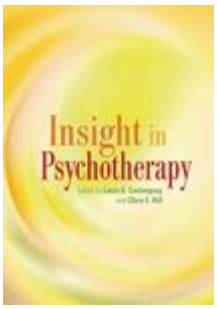
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Epiphanies on Insight

A Review of

Insight in Psychotherapy
by Louis G. Castonguay and Clara E. Hill (Eds.)
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If you have wondered what it might be like to be privy to the workings of a think tank, then reading *Insight in Psychotherapy* may capture that experience. This sizeable volume explores the multifaceted psychological construct of insight in 21 chapters authored by many of the most renowned modern-day psychotherapy researchers and theorists.

The topic of insight has fascinated scholars, historians, and scientists for centuries. There are apocryphal stories of the Greek mathematician Archimedes, who was said to have discovered the buoyancy principle while taking a bath and then run through the streets shouting “Eureka!” (Perkins, 2001), and scientist Kekulé von Stradonitz, who ostensibly figured out the ring structure of benzene while dreaming of a snake (Benzene, 2006). Research has ranged from ethological psychologists studying the “Aha” experience in animals to scientists, psychologists, and philosophers studying human behavior. Across the 21 chapters of *Insight in Psychotherapy*, authors frequently refer to variations on the “Eureka” or “Aha” experience. For example, Caspar and Berger recount the classic (1927) study by Kohler in which a food-deprived ape sits in a cage with two wooden poles and a banana, “out of reach of either pole” (p. 375). When the ape, without apparent use of trial and error, had the sudden, insightful idea of putting the two poles together in order to gain access to the food, Kohler called the apparently sudden solution an “Aha experience,” a term that has stuck in the literature on insight.

According to editors Louis G. Castonguay and Clara E. Hill, the more than four dozen authors who contributed chapters to *Insight in Psychotherapy* wanted to explore the topic in a format different from a typical conference that features prepared papers, panels, and posters. Instead, they sought a forum for a freewheeling discussion of insight, particularly as it relates to psychotherapy. The group met on three separate occasions over a period of four years at Pennsylvania State University, following the October 2000 conference of the Mid-Atlantic Society for Psychotherapy Research at which this novel format was conceived.

The volume begins with an engaging introduction that includes a series of quotes on insight, including Socrates' famous aphorism, “The unexamined life is not worth living” (p. 3) and the Franks' description of insight in psychotherapy as “healing through self-understanding” (p. 4). The editors tell us that the group chose insight as a focus for their meetings, and ultimately for this book, because the construct is pantheoretical, widely referenced, and likely affects psychotherapy process and outcome. From the structure of most chapters, one may deduce that each author was given a basic outline that included a definition of insight, extant research, clinical illustrations, suggestions for future research, and summary remarks. Specific topics appear to have been selected on the basis of authors' particular expertise, as for example Hill's chapter on dream analysis and insight and Ladany's writing on supervision in relation to insight.

The book is divided into five sections: theoretical perspectives, empirical psychotherapy research literature, clinical issues, perspectives from basic research in psychology and philosophy, and a final chapter summarizing progress and

limitations. The last was generated by asking the authors to reconvene in an effort to achieve consensus on four questions: “What is insight? What leads to insight? What are the consequences of insight? What other issues need to be considered in thinking about insight?” (p. 442). The concluding chapter of *Insight in Psychotherapy* is reminiscent of a concert finale in which participants come together on stage to blend their unique voices. Although there was good agreement on several of the questions (e.g., directions for future research), there was less consensus on others (e.g., the importance of insight in facilitating therapeutic change).

Insight Across Theoretical Orientations

Insight as conceptualized across theory orientations is covered by the first section of *Insight in Psychotherapy*; this includes discussions of psychoanalytic theory, humanistic modalities, cognitive–behavioral therapy (CBT), the assimilative model, and insight as a common factor. In a later section, Hayes and Cruz go so far as to introduce the theory of the Armenian mystic Gurdjieff and his student, the Russian philosopher Ouspensky, who famously wrote, “A man must begin observing himself as though he did not know himself at all” (p. 283).

As noted across a number of the chapters, one's first association to “insight-oriented therapy” would likely be to psychoanalytic theory, in which insight is sometimes conceived of as a goal in itself. Messer and McWilliams (Chapter 1) note that Freud himself made little direct reference to insight, although his writings surely point in that direction. Psychodynamic goals of bringing unconscious conflict to consciousness, interpretation of transference and countertransference, criteria for patient “analyzability,” and meaningfulness of repetitive enactments are all related to insight—even though, as the authors tell us, “It remains a mystery how the psychoanalytic love affair with the concept of insight began” (p. 10).

Chapter 3, on CBT, notes that although one does not typically associate behavioral therapies with insight, the construct can “be defined independently of what may facilitate it… . by using a jargon free vernacular” (p. 57). This seems like an excellent suggestion for a future goal, because many of the chapters appear to be describing analogous conceptions of insight, though in language particular to each theory. For example, Stiles's assimilative model (Chapter 4) defines insight as “mutual understanding between internal voices” (p. 115), which seems similar to, but in different language from, insight defined by Messer and McWilliams as “the development of new understanding on the part of the patient” (p. 21). In CBT, an example of insight by a student who had a schema of being repeatedly bullied in life could relate to the psychodynamic concept of reenactments (p. 61). Or insight conceptualized as schemata in relation to self and others might translate to the language of object relations theory.

The CBT definition of insight (offered by Holtforth et al.) is perhaps the most economical among the many proffered in this volume. Here insight is defined simply as “the acquisition of new understanding” (p. 57). A person's representative schema of self and others is considered ripe material for insight even though “insight” as a goal was initially eschewed by behaviorists. Historically, Ellis distinguished between “intellectual insight as ‘nothing but an idle New Year's resolution’…, [versus] emotional insight [that] involves seeing and believing; thinking and acting; wishing and practicing” (p. 59). More currently, Haverkamp and Tashiro (Chapter 17) relate insight to social cognition research, stressing the importance of accuracy of insight and noting it may be compromised by “confirmatory biases” (p. 359). Insight as defined for humanistic, experiential therapy with its emphasis on “experience-near” insight or “awareness” is characterized by affective richness and a process of “co-creation” by therapist and patient (Pascual-Leone & Greenberg, p. 31).

Although psychoanalytic theory is generally credited with highlighting insight as a key psychotherapeutic goal, some chapters seem to give psychodynamic contributions relatively short shrift; for example, the otherwise informative chapter on systems theory, in which Ackerman's seminal, psychodynamically based family therapy is not even noted (See Freedheim, 1992.).

Twenty Definitions of Insight

Looking across these chapters, one sees very different definitions of insight. In Chapter 8, Elliott traces the psycholinguistic history of insight, a term first used in the 1200s, when it was defined as “a kind of second sight [with] spiritual or even magical connotations” (p. 169). Later, in the 1600s, insight implied inner characteristics such as wisdom, sagacity, and “deep, thorough or mature understanding” (p. 170). The authors of *Insight in Psychotherapy* appear to be quite aware of both historical and current variability in conceptualizing the construct, such that there is no “one size fits all” definition. As a result, the reader is struck by the lack of a relatively uniform definition of insight and definitional inconsistencies that likely contribute to contradictory research findings.

In the first 20 chapters of this volume, there appear to be nearly as many definitions of insight, some overlapping more than others. As the editors note, defining insight is one of the greatest difficulties for studying the concept in a meaningful way. In consideration of this occurrence, one wonders whether it might have worked to organize the book according to theorists and researchers who define insight most similarly. In Chapter 6, “Insight as a Common Factor,” Wampold, Imel, Bhati, and Johnson-Jennings offer an integrative approach that may be clarifying for the reader. Conceptualizing insight as a common factor is credited to early work by Jerome Frank, who described insight as “a beneficial common factor present in and critical to all psychotherapeutic orientations” (p. 119). In presenting representative and engaging cases treated by several of the major theoretical orientations, Wampold et al. effectively demonstrate how insight may be conceptualized best as an integrative construct.

Sixteen Issues in Thinking About Insight

There is a nearly alphabet-long list of dimensions on which the authors in this volume conceptualize and discuss insight. These include, but are not limited to, (a) whether insight refers only to self-understanding or also includes understanding the other, as in conceptions of “psychological-mindedness” (Hatcher & Hatcher, 1997); (b) whether insight is conscious and observable and/or unconscious and latent; (c) whether it is instantaneously experienced, as in the classic “Aha” experiment, or can manifest as delayed reaction; (d) whether insight can occur outside of psychotherapy, as spontaneously realized or perhaps facilitated by therapeutic “homework” (Kazantzis & L'Abate, 2007); (e) whether the effect of insight on therapy outcome is positive and direct, or indirect, or potentially negative; (f) whether insight must necessarily be based on past experience; (g) whether by its nature it is cognitive, affective, or some combination thereof; (h) whether insight invariably involves only new understanding(s); (i) whether insight yields a fleeting glimpse or deeper understanding of what is true; (j) whether it is client driven, therapist driven, or co-constructed; (k) whether insight is a prerequisite or the result of psychotherapeutic change; (l) whether we can know if perceived insights are true; (m) whether insight must be verbalized; (n) whether insight is necessary or sufficient for positive therapy outcome; (o) whether it is a transitory or lasting phenomenon; (p) how and whether insight overlaps with other key psychotherapy constructs such as empathy, awareness, openness, creativity, cognitive development, therapeutic alliance, and therapy change process variables; (q) whether the capacity for insight is a trait or acquired; (r) whether there is a mind–body connection for insight, in one direction or the other; (s) whether insight is itself a cultural construction; (t) and whether accuracy of insight matters.

Varieties of Research on Insight

Not surprisingly, the conceptual and definitional conundrum appears to affect research findings on insight, as “even among the insight-oriented theorists the term *insight* has various meanings” (p. 144). In Chapter 7, Connolly Gibbons, Crits-Christoph, Barber, and Schamberger note, “There is a lack of studies evaluating the relation of insight to other important psychotherapy process variables” (p. 154). Later they comment,

> Many studies attempted to explore the construct of insight, yet failed to explicitly define the construct of interest. In addition, the lack of an adequate definition in each of these investigations is evident by the implementation of measures that fail to do justice to the full complexity of the construct suggested by the clinical and theoretical literature. (p. 160)

Although much of the research reviewed in the section on empirical research suggests that insight likely leads to positive

therapy outcome, it has been difficult to measure reliably, and findings have been contradictory overall.

Taking a qualitative approach to the study of insight, Angus and Hardtke (Chapter 9) use client-centered narratives. They conceptualize insight as "the sudden awareness of new ways of experiencing and understanding the connections between actions, emotions, and intentions of self and others, expressed in personal stories," particularly those with narrative coherence (p. 187). Also creative in concept is work by Hill et al. (Chapter 10) that relates potential attainment of insight to Hill's dream model in which a psychotherapy client, increasingly understanding his or her dreams, is thought to experience gradual insight. Illustrating her model of dream interpretation, Hill writes of a client, "Rather than viewing [her] insight as a gold *nugget* dropped on her by the therapist or revealed suddenly, a better metaphor for her acquisition of insight may be gold dust that was gradually sifted and gathered" (p. 226).

Research by Hayes, Feldman, and Goldfried (Chapter 11) focuses on a single measure of insight: the Change and Growth Experience Scale (CHANGE). The idea here is that "insight-processing, rumination, and avoidance unfold and interact over the course of a therapy for depression" (p. 249). Although the CHANGE so far includes client responses only, the authors report they are in process of developing a companion measure to focus on therapist response. Other measures of insight are discussed in the book, though none is utilized across the various studies cited.

Though it is alluded to in Chapter 18 on cognitive science (Caspar and Berger) where "information processing" is discussed (p. 379) and in Gelso and Harbin's brief discussion of neuroscience (Chapter 14, p. 299), one research perspective not emphasized in this book is that of neuropsychology. Recently published is an intriguing article by Kounios et al. (2006) titled "The Prepared Mind," which suggests psychologists may be able to predict sudden insight by noting how much or little the brain is in a state of preparedness—that is, when there is "heightened activity in medial frontal areas" (p. 282). This seems like potentially exciting new work with implications for scientifically tracking readiness for insight.

Clinical Issues and Insight

Although some chapters in *Insight in Psychotherapy* are specifically devoted to clinical issues, it must be noted that every section contains rich and engaging clinical illustrations from which the reader may gain a vivid sense of each author's conception of insight. Altogether, the clinical material serves to enliven and illuminate the work, offering the reader a best sense of commonality across the different theoretical "languages" by which insight is defined.

In a charming analogy, Bohart (Chapter 12) describes the essence of Dorothy's quest in *The Wizard of Oz* as "finding her way back to Kansas" by dint of her own powers of insight, presumably available to her even at those times she felt directionless (p. 257). How the client may be an "active self-healer" in generating insight, through "experiencing" and "productive reflection," is illustrated in Bohart's recounting of this tale. And, in addition to this kind of inner resourcefulness for a client, Hayes and Cruz note (Chapter 13), "The therapist's personal history can (also) serve as a type of inner well from which insight might be drunk" (p. 288).

Rounding out the clinical section, Gelso and Harbin importantly discuss "whether and how insight may lead to constructive action" and behavior (p. 297). Ladany (Chapter 16) describes an events-based model for psychotherapy supervisors to help facilitate insight for their supervisees. Particularly notable in this chapter is the seamless and compelling way in which the author integrates theory with clinical illustrations.

Basic Psychology and Philosophy

In Chapter 17, social psychologists discuss how social cognition research has identified more barriers to insight than factors that facilitate it (p. 370). It is interesting to note that some of the authors who are not primarily clinical psychologists offer recommendations for practicing clinicians; for example, Haverkamp and Tashiro recommend that therapists motivate insight by encouraging positive client emotions, abstract problem solving, and a focus on future solutions versus "linear, logical decision-making" (p. 370). In a related vein, Caspar and Berger (Chapter 18) suggest

creativity-promoting strategies to activate insight in therapy that include stimulating motives and dialectical-type thinking. A developmental psychology perspective on insight offered by Bowman and Safran (Chapter 19) compellingly suggests secure attachment leads to “autobiographical competence” (p. 409) and “narrative coherence” (p. 413).

Conclusions

Insight in Psychotherapy represents the thinking of some of the best minds working in the field of psychotherapy theory and research. It offers its readership state-of-the-art wisdom as to progress and conundrums for considering insight in relation to psychotherapy. One is impressed by its illumination of the fertile field for future research and the abundant, intriguing research questions presented in each chapter as to how future work might seek to define, understand, and measure various aspects of insight. In the end, although there are numerous valuable contributions in this work, one may still wonder why insight rather than other important topics such as empathy or working alliance was chosen as the focus.

Though perhaps serendipitous to its primary intention, an exciting contribution of *Insight in Psychotherapy* is in proposing a kind of think tank model as an alternative to the typical conference structure. As Vernon writes, “What is an annual meeting of researchers, or a book on insight, if they are not at least places to share and celebrate knowledge, or bemoan the lack of it?” (p. 427). In reviewing this nearly 500-page volume, one could conclude that one of its most useful contributions is in offering its readership a treasure trove of intriguing research questions for future study. Readers of this rich and prolifically referenced volume can expect to have numerous “Aha” experiences and epiphanies as 50 stellar authors share their insights.

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