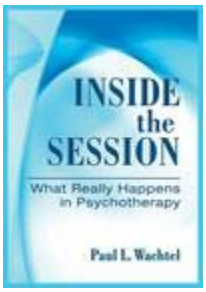
PsycCRITIQUES
April 4, 2012, Vol. 57, No. 14, Article 2



Psychotherapy Inside Out: What's Real Is in the Context

A Review of

Inside the Session: What Really Happens in Psychotherapy
by Paul L. Wachtel
Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2011. 286 pp. ISBN 978-1-4338-0940-8. $69.95

doi: 10.1037/a0027423

Reviewed by

Timothy Anderson, Xiaoxia Song

Paul Wachtel's latest book *Inside the Session: What Really Happens in Psychotherapy* may be the first time in which raw, fully transcribed therapy sessions have been published in book form along with a video recording (Wachtel, 2007) available to accompany the transcribed session. The video and this book together make for an amazing correspondence of "real" therapy material, interspersed with a concordance of insights and fascinating disclosures by this master therapist.

Transcriptions of recorded therapy sessions have been long used by therapy researchers. Attention to the veracity of the observations of actual therapy sessions emerged early in psychotherapy research, including Carl Rogers's first published audio recordings of therapy sessions in 1942 (Elliott & Farber, 2010). Even with these tools regularly used in psychotherapy research, fully transcribed therapy sessions have not been available for use by the professional public. Instead, case histories are heavily edited and selectively summarized, usually with the aim of illustrating the author's points.

Not surprisingly, students in graduate therapy training courses frequently speculate on whether the clinical illustrations from textbooks actually represent all facets of the therapy being described. If the material is transcribed, questions arise about how the segments were selected or what material might lie between the excised segments, the ubiquitous ". . ." within quoted examples. Wachtel's book of commentary integrated within the fully transcribed segments would seem to address such doubts. As Wachtel explains, the accuracy of specific details of what actually transpired within the session makes way for more interesting and complicated questions about how the client and therapist constructions collide or intersect in a wide variety of ways to form new meanings.

Wachtel devotes the first two chapters of the book to communicating his theoretical perspective, which has been carefully crafted for over 30 years. Wachtel's earlier landmark integration of psychodynamic and behavioral clinical theory is woven into these most recent constructivist and contextual additions. Throughout these two chapters Wachtel is making a case for looking beyond both the client's and the therapist's individual perspectives (or what he calls one-person thinking), as well as the client–therapist relationship (two-person thinking), and toward a fully contextual approach that considers all facets of a client's experience, relationships, and culture.

This theoretical grounding is not only applied to understanding the individual lives of the two clients Wachtel describes but also emerges in numerous delightful ways throughout the book where context is highlighted and discussed. An important strength of this book is Wachtel's frequent commentary and insights regarding extratherapeutic events, including the various aspects of filming the sessions in a studio as well as the limitation of therapy to a single-session encounter for the purpose of filming. These sections are not dry pieces of information about what it's like to film psychotherapy sessions because it is almost exclusively about Wachtel's own disclosures about his own psychological reactions and how these in turn may have influenced his therapeutic work. Thus, Wachtel models the very contextual principles that he is teaching by openly considering the situational constraints of these sessions.

The heart of the book is the transcribed sessions and commentary (a chapter devoted to each session). The first client ("Louise") is negotiating her experience with her family of origin, whose culture was different from that of her marriage family. As a child, her mother had inexplicably left her alone with her ill father, and she consequently became a caregiver. As an adult, Louise was attracted to her husband's family partly because it was larger but also felt conflicted because her boundaries were not respected.

One peak moment within the session, which seems to lead to a new insight for Louise, occurs after Wachtel offers an interpretation that her experience of her two families, though dramatically different in many respects, is similar because Louise's emotional needs were pushed aside in both families. Wachtel's tracking of the client involves balancing between Louise's reactions to having widely varied contextual situations (i.e., her childhood versus marriage family) and becoming more aware of how her experience is consistent between the two families.

A minor criticism is that Wachtel's contexualism is slightly segmented and thus perhaps not fully integrated. Much of the commentary seems grounded in a traditional two-person/relational theoretical framework, yet it drifts into some traditional one-person analysis of the client's defenses. At times, our perception was that Wachtel's contextual commentary is more of a top layer of this theoretical integration.

However, it is also clear that Wachtel is always working toward integrating these perspectives with contextual aspirations. Still, we wonder whether there could not be a way in which individual dynamics and relational dynamics could be replaced with concepts that are more wholly and consistently contextual. However, it would be difficult to be more contextually integrated than Wachtel has been without beginning to discard some of our more common individualistic ways of understanding people (e.g., "defenses").

One extraordinary aspect of the book is Wachtel's interpersonal sensitivity, demonstrated by an impressive mindfulness to (a) the actual and potential momentary impasses between each client and himself; (b) his potential contribution to all momentary shifts in relational process; and (c) his frequent consideration of his motivations to impress the reader by demonstrating his array of clinical skills or as he says, to "show my wares" (p. 67). There is a refreshing self-reflectiveness that runs throughout, not often seen in many clinical vignettes.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the second case ("Melissa"), a client who had a "breakthrough" session with another therapist (Diana Fosha) that had also been previously filmed before Wachtel's session. Wachtel's disclosure of his countertransference, openness to disclosing his vulnerability about being filmed, performance concerns, and insecurities make for fascinating reading and provide a wonderful model for therapeutic genuineness. The somewhat "ordinary" quality of that session is more than compensated by the manner in which Wachtel describes how his own agenda collided with the client's agenda and affected alliance building early in the session. The session also illustrates how even relatively benign sessions may be filled with rich and meaningful interpersonal exchanges.

Wachtel's self-awareness and self-monitoring are continually linked to the goal of attaining greater

understanding of the clients. His “acceptance” (a frequently used word in contemporary clinical theory) of both clients reaches beyond understanding them as individuals and incorporates the more difficult relational task of how both therapist and client negotiate meanings within a broader context. Thus, acceptance for Wachtel implies a more complete negotiation of various client, therapist, and cultural perspectives. Recognizing the broader context of the client’s experience means that uncovering the client’s “real” feelings is not really possible:

> When the implicit (and indeed, sometimes even explicit) message to clients is that we are pointing to what they are “really” feeling, the implication can become one of invalidating what they are feeling or experiencing at the moment or even the way they have long thought about themselves. (p. 60)

What “really” happened in these sessions is in many ways indisputable, and the recorded evidence is literally complete, with the full transcripts provided in the book as well as in the previously published video for one of the sessions (Wachtel, 2007). And yet Wachtel’s focus is less about what happened and more about the client’s shifting, multiple perspectives mixed with his own varied responsiveness to the client and situations. What really happens, then, is a matter of perspective. As he explains,

> I *did* behave differently with each of them, and my own behavior, in turn, partially *created* (and at the very least maintained) the differences in their behavior toward me over the course of the session. There was no clear chicken or egg here. Everything is scrambled. (p. 234)

Because this book is written with sophistication and openness to different perspectives, many readers will likely be engaged in deciding for themselves how these eggs should be cooked.

References

Elliott, R., & Farber, B. A. (2010). Carl Rogers: Idealistic pragmatist and psychotherapy research pioneer. In L. Castonguay, J. C. Muran, L. Angus, J. A. Hayes, N. Ladany, & T. Anderson (Eds.), *Bringing psychotherapy research to life: Understanding change through the work of leading clinical researchers* (pp. 17–27). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. doi:10.1037/12137-002

Wachtel, P. L. (2007). *Integrative relational psychotherapy* [Video]. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

©2012 American Psychological Association | PDF documents require Adobe Acrobat Reader | Terms and Conditions