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The Importance of Passive-into-Active Testing in Psychotherapy Supervision

While passive-into-active testing is not the primary mode of testing in psychotherapy, it is a significant factor in most cases presented for supervision. The reason for this is that passive-into-active testing makes the therapist feel uncomfortable and disempowered, and the supervisee is highly motivated to seek help with these cases. Once I became aware of this phenomenon, I have been impressed with how common this is. I now believe that, when the supervisee selects the cases that the supervisor will hear, there is almost invariably a significant passive-into-active enactment occurring in the case. That is to say, there is some issue with which the supervisee feels “stuck” or uncomfortable. In contrast, in cases where there is no significant passive-into-active testing the therapist may not be particularly troubled by the case, even when it is not going well. The therapist may be thinking about it, wanting to do better, and not sure of how to work with the patient, but this in itself is not experienced as personal distress. The therapist may simply try different approaches, talk about the case with colleagues, read up on the issues, or try other ways of doing a better job, but not feel upset in regard to the patient. When passive-into-active testing is involved, however, the therapist is typically preoccupied with the case, has feelings of wanting to avoid the patient or dislikes the patient, feels concerned when the time for a session nears, talks about the case with others in an attempt to get help with it, and may even dream about the patient. So as long as the supervisee has a case involving passive-into-active testing, *that* is the case that he or she will be sure to present.

For these reasons, it is very important that the supervisor understands this form of testing and listen for it when hearing cases.

The Experience of Passive-into-Active Testing

In a passive-into-active test, the patient is attempting to influence the therapist in a negative way, which the therapist experiences as threatening. The essence of a relationship is that each person grants the other the right to his or her own experience, his or her own point of view. That is, we make some provision for the other person to be different from us. We can hold in mind simultaneously our own point of view, be aware of our own experience, and also assume that the other person has some other experience which is also valid, has some other way of thinking about and giving meaning to events which may differ from ours in some ways and overlap with ours in other ways. Of course, we can never *know* the other person’s experience, but we make an allowance for it and try to imagine it.

When we are attempting to have a relationship with someone who is doing passive-into-active testing (which is the same thing as saying that they are behaving narcissistically at that moment), the other person at that time is making no provision for our experience. Our point of view does not exist for them, or, worse, we are being characterized as bad, destructive, worthless, etc. They do not grant that we may have healthy or sensible reasons for what we are doing (even though they may not agree with it), but insist that their way of viewing us is the only valid way we can be seen. In trying to make an empathic connection with such a person, we initially may try to accommodate to, and accept, the point of view that we are bad. This dysphoric experience motivates us to respond assertively, and not to comply with the negative view of us the patient presents.

Supervising in regard to passive-into-active testing

One question I have in mind as I listen to someone present a case is, “Why is the therapist presenting this case?” I assume that they are likely to be in some kind of emotional distress in regard to the patient. The question helps me to consider what the presenter is seeking help with, and it helps me to look for clues as to what the nature of that distress might be. I frequently ask the person directly why they are presenting the case, and typically this question helps us both to focus on the significant issue for the presenter.