

## **Colloquium Series Presentation: Review of Donnel B. Stern, PhD “Implicit Theories of Technique and the Values that Inspire Them”**

*On January 29, 2010 at the NYU Kimmel Center, Dr. Donnel B. Stern marked the Inauguration of the John Fiscalini Memorial Lecture in Interpersonal Psychoanalysis with his paper: “Implicit Theories of Technique and the Values that Inspire Them”. This annual lecture honors Manhattan Institute's longtime Faculty Member, Supervisor, and Director of Training, John Fiscalini, Ph.D. who died in 2008.*

Dr. Stern's paper investigated the implicit private theories of psychoanalysis and the value systems that underlie these theories. He began by discussing implicit theories of technique and the values that inspire them. He noted that our implicit theories, far from being static, are continually shaped by our experience and the world around us. He suggested that the field has often misguidedly looked down on the co-existence of multiple, collective theories or techniques in favor of a “technical rationality” or a single set of best practices that are specifiable as the solution for a problem or the best approach. Dr. Stern expressed his belief that the existence of multiple conceptions of theory and practice are a sign of the field's vigor and that no single theory can explain everything. In fact, according to Stern, explanation is “no longer the point”. Citing Foehl, Dr. Stern noted that in the past, mainstream theory attempted to portray the causes of experience, while contemporary thinking focuses on the experience itself. Dr. Stern echoed Foehl in his support for “epistemological pluralism”, and noted that there are often “multiple valid versions of reality” at play.

Dr. Stern went on to cite the ways in which we are guided by our implicit theories and suggests that our explicit theories emerge from our implicit ones. Implicit theories arise from value positions we often hold with only minimal reflection or none at all. From an Interpersonal perspective, the meaning we assign to an experience from one moment to the next depends on the nature of the current interpersonal context. Dr. Stern outlined the difference between objectivist schemes where “data exist prior to and independently of their interpretation” and a constructivist vantage point where “data are inevitably constituted by interpretative acts”. He argued that we are continually in the process of creating and constructing experiences. Each of us possesses some theory by which we work, though as practitioners we are not always aware of having learned these theories explicitly. This “non-symbolic knowing” Dr. Stern characterized as “unformulated experience”. Dr. Stern gave a case example of a patient that he is working with. He noted how he feels “drawn” or “pulled” to behave in certain ways over and over with this patient and eventually became able to think about the experience in words. That is, he was able to “name” his previously unformulated experience of being in the room with the patient.

Following the paper, a lively discussion ensued, in which audience members debated the idea of whether there wasn't scientific merit to technical rationality, wherein, there are, after all, some theories where x really does fix y time and time again. Dr. Stern reiterated his point of view that psychoanalytic interpretative schemes should not be judged by whether they can be confirmed objectively, but whether working according to specified techniques actualize the purposes behind the conceptions.

Dr. Stern emphasized that we constantly need new explicit theories of technique to respond to the changing conditions of humans in the world. As new theories of technique are explicitly articulated, our clinical perceptions are broadened and deepened. Thus, one cannot claim superiority for any one theory as every theory has a particular context of application where it is effective.

Dr. Stern invited us to identify the values that shape a theory's goals in order to identify the context in which to evaluate it. By doing so, we become aware that a fact is seldom a fact; it is a fact selected by, and possibly shaped by values.

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