
The Use of Interpretation and Body Awareness to Enhance Client Self-Understanding in Counseling

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Abstract

Professional counseling is fundamentally based on a trusting relationship, upheld by strict ethical principles such as confidentiality. While maintaining client confidentiality is a non-negotiable cornerstone of practice, counselors require effective, ethical techniques to facilitate meaningful change. This article explores the integrated use of two such powerful techniques: interpretation and body awareness strategies. Interpretation allows the counselor to offer insights and connect patterns in the client's thoughts and behaviors, while body awareness techniques help clients access and process unconscious emotions and trauma stored somatically. When combined, these strategies provide a holistic framework that bridges cognitive understanding and embodied experience. This article argues that this integration can significantly deepen client self-understanding and promote more profound therapeutic outcomes. The discussion includes the theoretical underpinnings of this approach, practical methods for its implementation, and its applicability within both individual and group counseling settings, all while adhering to the highest ethical standards of the profession.

Keywords – Counselor; Counseling; Interpretation; Body



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1. Introduction

Counseling is fundamentally a dynamic and collaborative learning process designed to facilitate profound personal growth within the client. Its primary objective is to guide individuals toward a deeper, more accurate self-knowledge, leading to self-acceptance and a realistic adjustment to their environment. This transformative journey occurs within the context of a unique, trusting, and professional relationship. Through this personalized interaction, the counselor assists the client in making wise decisions, selecting appropriate life paths, and formulating constructive plans. The ultimate aim is to empower individuals to not only develop their potential more fully but also to assume more effective and satisfying roles within their societal context. By engaging in this process, clients learn to understand their own motivations, explore uncharted aspects of their personality, and ultimately cultivate the capacity for self-guidance. This empowerment is crucial for navigating the complexities of modern society, enabling individuals to move from a state of confusion or distress toward one of clarity and self-directed action.

The process of counseling is inherently geared toward fostering significant and positive change. A central expectation is that clients will undergo a transformation in their attitudes, perspectives, and personal decisions. This internal shift is not an end in itself but a means to achieve healthier and more productive adaptation to their life circumstances. As clients develop greater self-awareness and emotional regulation, they are better equipped to handle interpersonal relationships, occupational challenges, and societal pressures. Consequently, the benefits of counseling extend beyond the individual, contributing to the overall welfare of the client and, by extension, the community around them. Counseling functions as a powerful tool for developing mental health, replacing maladaptive behaviors with more functional ones, and fostering a resilient mindset. As such, it stands as the central strategy within the broader guidance framework, representing a standard, evidence-based technique and the core professional duty of a counselor.

Within the counselor's repertoire of techniques, interpretation holds a particularly significant place. It can be defined as the counselor's strategic endeavor to impart new meaning or insight into a client's experiences, feelings, and behaviors. This process moves beyond simple reflection by presenting the client with a tentative hypothesis—an educated perspective—about the connections, patterns, and underlying meanings in their narrative and conduct. For instance, an interpretation might link a client's current avoidance of intimacy to past experiences of rejection, or connect their procrastination to a deep-seated fear of failure. The goal of this sophisticated technique is twofold. Firstly, it aims to make the unconscious conscious, bringing to light the hidden dynamics that contribute to emotional distress and dysfunctional patterns. Secondly, and more profoundly, it seeks to help the client recognize the relationship between their personal history and their present dysfunctional feelings, thereby creating an opportunity to transform their behavior from within.

While interpretation is a powerful cognitive tool, its effectiveness can be significantly amplified when integrated with somatic approaches, such as body awareness strategies. Interpretation primarily operates on a verbal and cognitive level, helping clients "understand" their patterns. However, many emotional wounds and stress responses are stored implicitly in the body, outside the realm of language. Body awareness techniques—such as mindful attention to breath, bodily sensations, tension, and posture—allow clients to access and process these non-verbal experiences. When a counselor helps a client interpret a cognitive pattern while simultaneously guiding them to notice the accompanying bodily sensation (e.g., "As you speak about your anger, I wonder what you notice in your chest right now"), the insight becomes embodied. This integration of "top-down" cognitive interpretation with "bottom-up" somatic awareness facilitates a more profound and holistic form of self-understanding. It enables clients to not only intellectually grasp their issues but also to release the physical and emotional hold of those issues, leading to more sustainable therapeutic change and a truly integrated sense of self.

2. Method

This research employs a literature review methodology, a systematic approach to identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing existing scholarly work relevant to the topic. The process involves several key stages: collecting a wide range of bibliographic sources, conducting a critical review of their content, and systematically comparing their findings and perspectives. As Danandjaja (2014) posits, library research is a scientific method characterized by its systematic procedures for gathering literature related to the research objectives. In line with this, the data collection technique for this study is documentation, which, according to Arikunto (2010), entails sourcing data on relevant subjects or variables from various recorded materials such as books, scholarly articles, scientific journals, and other published works.

The analytical framework for this study is content analysis. This method provides a structured process for managing the collected literature, involving the careful selection, comparison, and integration of information from the various sources. The core of content analysis, as described by Arafat (2019), is a rigorous process of selecting, comparing, and synthesizing information to uncover underlying meanings, identify emerging patterns, and distill relevant insights until a coherent and comprehensive understanding of the subject is achieved. Through this analytical process, the research aims to construct a robust theoretical foundation and draw meaningful conclusions based on the collective body of existing knowledge.

3. Result and Discussion

The Essence of Interpretation in Counseling

The essence of interpretation, while rooted in broader communication theory, takes on a specific and nuanced role within the counseling context. Pioneering thinker Freeman Tilden (1977) provides a foundational view, defining interpretation as an educational activity aimed at revealing meaning and relationships through the use of original objects and direct experience.

Translating this to the therapeutic setting, the "original objects" become the client's own life experiences, behaviors, and emotions. Kaelan (2017) further refines this by describing interpretation as an art form of indirect communication, suggesting that its power lies not in direct instruction but in skillful suggestion. Within the counseling field, Brammer (1982) crystallizes this concept, explaining interpretation as the counselor's deliberate effort to impart meaning to the client's experiences. It is a process of presenting the client with a tentative hypothesis about the connections and significance underlying their patterns of behavior, feelings, and thoughts. The ultimate aim of this sophisticated technique is to foster greater client self-awareness, specifically by illuminating the links between personal history, dysfunctional emotional patterns, and current maladaptive behaviors, thereby creating a pathway for transformative change.

A Continuum of Interpretive Methods: From Reflection to Confrontation

The application of interpretation is not a monolithic technique but operates along a continuum of methods that vary in directness and depth. This continuum begins with the most client-centered method: Reflection. Here, the counselor acts as a mirror, primarily focusing on reflecting the client's expressed feelings. This technique does not venture far beyond what the client has already stated explicitly; instead, it involves selectively echoing and highlighting the emotional content to deepen the client's awareness of their own affective state. The next point on the continuum is Clarification, which often follows reflection. This technique moves slightly deeper by bringing implicit elements of the client's narrative to the surface. The counselor seeks to clarify the underlying messages, conflicts, or connections that are suggested but not directly stated in the client's words, thereby reflecting relationships and ideas that are just beneath conscious awareness.

Confrontation as a Catalyst for Awareness

At the more directive end of the interpretive continuum lies Confrontation. This method involves the counselor tactfully directing the client's attention to inconsistencies, contradictions, or self-defeating patterns that the

client may be implicitly unaware of or actively resisting. Unlike the common negative connotation of the word, therapeutic confrontation is not an aggressive attack but a supportive and honest challenge. In practice, the counselor confronts the client by juxtaposing their own words, highlighting discrepancies between their past and present behaviors, or underlining conflicts between their expressed values and their actions. The purpose is to bring these incongruities into sharp focus, helping the client to acknowledge and address aspects of their experience they have previously avoided, thus serving as a powerful catalyst for heightened self-awareness and behavioral transformation.

The Depth and Continuum of Therapeutic Interpretation

Deep interpretation represents a sophisticated level of therapeutic intervention where the counselor introduces new concepts, relationships, and associations that, while rooted in the client's material, are designed to expand their conscious awareness beyond what is immediately apparent. For instance, when a client expresses distress over a dream involving a young girl resembling both his sister and his daughter, the counselor has a spectrum of responses. This spectrum progresses from a simple Reflection of the client's stated distress, to a Clarification that tentatively suggests the presence of suggestive erotic impulses, and further to a Confrontation that directly points out the parallel nature of these impulses towards both figures. The deepest level, a full Interpretation, would then synthesize these elements to offer a transformative hypothesis: it might connect the client's current anxiety to a newfound, albeit troubling, freedom to acknowledge forbidden feelings towards loved ones, framed within the context of powerful social taboos. This progression from reflection to interpretation illustrates a movement from supporting client self-expression towards actively constructing new, therapeutic meaning.

Associative and Suggestive Methods of Clarification

The method of clarification can be systematically broken down into specific techniques, primarily through associative and suggestive types. Associative clarification involves the counselor formulating hypotheses that link

different elements of the client's experience. This can take several forms: connecting ideas based on Similarity (e.g., linking feelings about a wife to those about a mother); highlighting Contrast (e.g., noting opposing feelings towards each parent); establishing Contact by linking feelings to specific times and places (e.g., anxiety in the biology lab); or using Distance to connect current feelings to distant past events (e.g., relating present interpersonal difficulties to a childhood situation with a mother). Alongside association, the Suggestive type of clarification involves the counselor more actively proposing a specific idea or feeling related to the client's material. For example, suggesting that underlying hostility might be the root of social difficulties opens a pathway for the client to explore this possibility emotionally, facilitating a deeper engagement with the core issue.

Advanced Clarification Techniques and Their Application

Building on the foundational types, suggestive clarification can be further categorized into five advanced techniques. Clarification by Imitation involves the counselor echoing the client's words to enter their world and encourage deeper reflection. Selective Clarification requires the counselor to strategically emphasize a feeling or idea expressed by the client that is therapeutically significant, even if the client does not yet recognize its importance, thereby guiding the focus of the session. Label Clarification introduces common psychological terms to help the client conceptualize their experience, such as naming a pattern of behavior as "resistant." Clarification of Untenable Attitudes is a delicate process where the counselor sensitively identifies and challenges irrational or self-defeating beliefs held by the client, such as the notion that it is a sin to have hateful feelings without a "good reason," and helps reframe them in a more realistic light (e.g., introducing the concept of ambivalence). Finally, Clarification by Humor is a nuanced technique where the counselor uses light-heartedness to help the client gain perspective on a distressing situation, defuse tension, and reduce feelings of guilt, thereby making a problem more manageable and opening the door for further productive work.

The Foundation and Application of Free Association

Free association is a foundational technique in psychoanalytic therapy, predicated on the principle of allowing the client's mind to wander without censorship to uncover unconscious material. The counselor facilitates this by using permissive prompts such as, "Say whatever comes to your mind," "Let yourself be free," or "Don't try to be consistent or logical." The objective is to bypass the client's conscious defenses by encouraging a spontaneous flow of ideas, fragments, and words, no matter how illogical, contradictory, or insignificant they may seem. For instance, a counselor might guide a client who shows emotional resistance regarding their mother to use the word "mother" as a starting point for a chain of rapid, uncensored associations. A resulting sequence like "mother-kind-soft-does everything-stupid-crazy-damn her" provides a raw, unfiltered glimpse into the client's ambivalent feelings. This technique, as expanded upon in methods like Karpman's (1960) "objective psychotherapy," uses the client's own verbalized data as the primary source for formulating interpretive hypotheses, moving the therapeutic process from surface-level narration to deeper, often conflicted, emotional layers.

The Art and Nuance of Formulating Interpretations

The formulation and delivery of interpretations are a delicate art requiring strategic phrasing, repetition, and a questioning stance to be effective. A key element is the use of tentative language; counselors are advised to employ "soft" words like "perhaps," "I wonder if," or "does it seem possible that" to present interpretations as hypotheses rather than facts, thereby reducing client defensiveness and inviting collaboration. This tentative approach is crucial because interpretations must be based solely on the client's data, not the counselor's personal projections or experiences with other cases. Furthermore, the principle of repetition is vital, not in the sense of badgering the client, but as a means for the counselor to repeatedly test their hypothesis against emerging facts. Finally, structuring interpretations as questions—from moderate probes like, "What are your thoughts on that?" to more direct interpretive questions such

as, "Do you think your distrust of men stems from your father's neglect?"—transforms the process into a shared inquiry. This Socratic method, as illustrated in dialogues about impulsive spending, guides the client to self-discover the underlying anxieties (e.g., a fear of deprivation) behind their behavior, making the insight more powerful and personally owned.

The Critical Limitations and Potential Pitfalls of Interpretation

Despite its power, the technique of interpretation carries significant limitations and risks that require careful management by the counselor. A core principle is that of restraint; interpretations should be used to strengthen the ego, and the counselor must be prepared for and accept client resistance as a natural, spontaneous barrier against prematurely confronting threatening unconscious material. A major pitfall is the potential for interpretation to inhibit the client's own self-exploration and lead to premature intellectualization. In this scenario, the client may intellectually agree with an interpretation without emotionally connecting to it, effectively using the "insight" as a new defense mechanism to avoid true feeling. This is particularly likely if the client is not yet ready to accept the responsibility that comes with confronting the feelings unveiled by the counselor. Therefore, an interpretation offered without proper timing or adequate client readiness can be counterproductive, reinforcing defenses rather than dissolving them. The counselor's sensitivity to these limitations is paramount, ensuring that interpretation serves as a tool for liberation from internal conflicts, not an intellectual exercise that fortifies them.

The interpretation methods within the actualization model, as conceptualized by theorists like Shostrom, are designed to uncover and transform deep-seated psychological patterns. These methods begin with the analysis of manipulative styles, where individuals, having learned to avoid pain, employ manipulation as a fundamental defense mechanism to navigate their environment without engaging in meaningful emotional experiences. This manipulation manifests as controlling or exploiting others, managing situations, using power games, or adopting a helpless posture. The counselor's role is to

identify and illuminate these core manipulative "games" for the client once the patterns become clear. A more profound level of interpretation involves Character Style analysis, which links these basic manipulations to enduring, maladaptive personality constellations. For instance, a need for love can transform into a dependent character style, while bullying may evolve into an exploitative, psychopathic character. These characterological issues are often somatized, expressed as chronic muscle tension, holding patterns, or hyperactivity in the client's body, reflecting underlying distrust and hostility. To access these deep structures, counselors employ Character Dialogue techniques, where clients "play" the roles of significant figures from their past to express and release pent-up anger and trauma from early childhood. This process of catharsis is often paired with body awareness procedures, such as kicking, pounding, and shouting "No!", to physically resist internalized parental behaviors and restore bodily consciousness.

Building upon this foundation, body awareness techniques offer a direct, somatic pathway to therapeutic change by focusing on the physical expression of blocked emotions. The process starts with the Recognition of Body and Feelings, helping clients understand common expressions like "you're a pain in the neck" as literal descriptions of bodily states. A core technique is the Breathing Method, where clients are taught diaphragmatic "baby breathing" to counteract the shallow breathing associated with anxiety and fear, thereby promoting a sense of comfort and integration with their entire body. The therapy then guides clients through the expression of key emotional dimensions. This includes expressing Anger through simple, structured conflicts (e.g., insisting "No" against a demanded "Yes"), expressing the opposite dimension of Care and Attention through warm, mutual affirmations, and exploring Strength through powerful, grounding actions like stomping feet or pounding a bed while declaring "I won't give up!" Conversely, the dimension of Weakness and Vulnerability is accessed through regressive exercises, such as role-playing a helpless child reaching out to a parental figure, which often evokes profound tears and a genuine experience of

need. Finally, techniques like Gendlin's Focusing are integrated to help clients connect verbal insights with bodily-felt sensations. This process involves guiding a client from a vague discomfort (e.g., "It makes me uncomfortable") to a specific, physically-felt sense (e.g., "My body becomes tense and cold during intimacy"), ensuring that therapeutic breakthroughs are not just intellectual but are deeply rooted in the client's embodied experience.

Cognitive Approaches to Interpretation: Restructuring Thought and Building Skills

Cognitive therapeutic approaches frame interpretation as a collaborative, scientific process aimed at adjusting maladaptive thinking to construct behavioral change. The focus is not on every verbal expression but on identifying and challenging key underlying assumptions and belief systems. This work is categorized into three groups: cognitive restructuring, problem-solving, and coping skills training. A central figure, Albert Ellis, with his Rational-Emotive Therapy, posits that emotional disturbance stems from irrational beliefs, such as the need to be loved by everyone or the idea that people must be severely punished for their wrongdoings. The therapist's interpretive role is to show clients how their heightened emotions result from these illogical fears, not from the external events themselves. Aaron Beck's Cognitive Therapy further refines this by focusing not on the content of thoughts but on their distorted forms, such as dichotomous thinking, overgeneralization, and selective abstraction. Beyond restructuring, Donald Meichenbaum's Self-Instructional Training views cognitions as a set of learned responses; interpretation here helps clients develop new, functional self-talk to replace maladaptive internal dialogues. Similarly, Problem-Solving and Coping Skills Therapies interpret behavioral issues as a deficit in adaptive cognitive skills, training clients to manage stress and identify self-defeating statements in real-time. Finally, George Kelly's perspective views interpretation as a process of personality construction, where life events are constantly compared and contrasted with an individual's personal predictive concepts, facilitating a continual reinterpretation of one's life narrative.

The Gestalt and Neo-Analytic Perspectives on Interpretation: Awareness in the Here-and-Now and Deep Structural Analysis

In contrast to the cognitive focus on thought patterns, Gestalt therapy, as developed by Fritz Perls, offers a distinct view of interpretation that emphasizes present-moment awareness. The therapist avoids intellectualized "why" questions in favor of "what" and "how" questions to direct attention to current behavior and its incongruities, such as pointing out, "You say you are afraid, but you are smiling." The goal is for clients to perform their own interpretations by becoming acutely aware of their manipulations and taking responsibility for their behavior. This philosophy of "learning by discovering" is complemented by the more structured neo-analytic approach of Karl Menninger, who provides a detailed schema for interpretation within a psychodynamic framework. His process begins with preparing the client, followed by interpreting the content of their conflicts and, crucially, their resistance and transference—the redirection of feelings toward the therapist. A key tenet is "working through," which involves the repetitive nature of interpretation to break down defensive structures and allow the client to see their neurotic patterns across different life contexts. A more provocative variant is Grossman's Hyperbolic Therapy, a reorienting values approach that uses exaggeration, humor, and sharp satire to adopt and amplify the client's own defenses. The goal of this confrontational style is to shock clients into a clearer self-perception by holding up a distorted mirror to their behavior, ultimately guiding them toward a more authentic existence.

Specialized interpretive additions provide innovative avenues for deepening the therapeutic process beyond traditional verbal exchange. One such method is written communication, which has gained acceptance as a valuable supplement to individual counseling. While some counselors remain skeptical, viewing it as a potential avoidance of interpersonal contact, many others, since Pearson et al. (1965) first reviewed its advantages, have become experienced and enthusiastic about using documents like diaries, letters, and creative writing. Progoff's (1975) intensive journal method, for instance, offers an elaborate

framework for systematically recording and interpreting personal data. Another powerful addition involves the use of fantasy and metaphor, which introduce interpretations through the evocative language of imagery. A counselor might, for example, share a "waking dream" fantasy of a client at a crossroads in a forest, using this metaphor to gently illuminate the client's indecision and open new pathways for self-acceptance and discussion. Similarly, when constrained by a client's own frame of reference, it can be profoundly useful to reflect their experience through a metaphorical image, such as describing them as a "large, stalwart, yet gentle Teddy Bear." Gordon (1978) further developed this approach, establishing metaphor as a primary tool for building trust; by employing parables, fables, or short imaginative tales, the counselor provides a projective mirror in which clients can see their own life cycles and conflicts, with the metaphor itself often suggesting a potential resolution.

4. Conclusion

Interpretation serves as a fundamental technique and guiding principle employed by counselors during the awareness phase of the counseling process. Its overarching purpose is to augment the client's self-understanding and foster self-interpretation, thereby guiding them toward greater personal maturity and informed action. Individual counseling itself is predicated on the goal of understanding the individual, contributing significantly to a deeper self-awareness of their strengths and weaknesses, potential, talents, interests, and emotional landscape, as well as their interaction with their environment. When an individual achieves this level of self-knowledge, they are empowered to develop their inherent qualities, including their potential, in an optimal manner. Furthermore, through the process of individual counseling, a person cultivates the capacity for autonomous decision-making, enabling them to confront and resolve the challenges they face with greater confidence and self-reliance.

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