Living With Lies and Deceit in Psychotherapy

A review of

The Assassin and the Therapist: An Exploration of Truth in Psychotherapy and in Life

by Jeffrey Kottler


Reviewed by

Jeffrey E. Barnett

The Assassin and the Therapist: An Exploration of Truth in Psychotherapy and in Life is really two separate but interrelated stories that have artfully been integrated into one compelling book by the author, Jeffrey Kottler. The first story is the intriguing narrative of a man, Jacob, who describes in great detail how he was recruited, trained, and then served in a top secret assassination squad for the precursor to the Mossad in post-World War II Palestine. His reported exploits are truly remarkable.

This part of the book reads like a John Le Carré spy novel. In fact, having recently read David Ignatius’s novels The Increment (2009) and Body of Lies (2007), I found myself carried away in a similar manner, feeling I was reading a gripping spy novel. To really appreciate and enjoy reading such novels one must suspend reality and allow oneself to enter into the world the author is describing—a world that feels real with a story that is exciting
and gripping. Skilled novelists are able to accomplish this for their readers. Kottler is able to
do this in the telling of Jacob’s story in the first part of *The Assassin and the Therapist*.

But this book is much more than a compelling spy novel. Jacob’s story is real, and
Kottler is merely telling the story to the reader as it was told to him by Jacob. Or is it? As
time passes, Kottler finds himself questioning the veracity of Jacob’s story. Kottler shares
his internal struggles to include addressing and coming to terms with his own role in
assisting Jacob to tell his story and perhaps even to lie. He also delves into the very complex
and potentially troubling issue many psychotherapists share: the need and tendency to
generally accept as true all that clients share with us.

Yet, it is correctly pointed out that we actually know so little about what is true or a
fabrication on the part of our clients. In *Body of Lies* Ignatius (2007) shares, “There is only
one kind of narrative where the accuracy of what’s described on the printed page cannot be
questioned, and that is fiction” (p. 247). This quote stuck with me as I read Kottler’s analysis
of his time spent with Jacob as well as his time spent with clients in general. For unless we
know that what we are reading (or hearing) is fiction, we really have no way of truly
knowing or accurately assessing the veracity of what is being shared.

The second part of the book is a psychotherapist’s exploration of the meaning of truth,
lies, and deceit in life in general and in psychotherapy in particular. Kottler expertly
examines these important issues from both scholarly and personal perspectives. His soul-
searching and his open sharing of the doubt he has struggled with are especially moving.
Additionally, his use of case examples from his clinical practice over the years expertly
illustrates the many important and functional roles that lies and deceit can play for a client.
He helps us to see how clients’ lies can be a window into their personality, vulnerabilities,
and conflicts, rather than betrayals provoking anger.

The extant psychotherapy outcome literature focuses on several key factors that may
each contribute to psychotherapy effectiveness. These include psychotherapist qualities and
attributes, client qualities and attributes, and the role of the psychotherapy relationship in the
form of the therapeutic alliance. Of these factors, the role of the therapeutic alliance and
treatment relationship are seen as essential for positive psychotherapy outcomes (Baldwin,
Wampold, & Imel, 2007; Gelso & Samstag, 2008).

This literature accentuates the important role of relationships built on trust. Kottler
importantly adds to this literature by focusing attention on the role that lies and deception
can play in psychotherapy and how they may affect psychotherapy outcomes—both
negatively and perhaps at times positively. Kottler often speaks the unspeakable, sharing the
doubts, questions, and concerns that psychotherapists may often experience but are often
loathe to discuss openly with others or even to acknowledge to themselves (Pope, Sonne, &
Greene, 2006).

In doing so, Kottler liberates us. He gives us permission to focus our conscious
attention on our own doubts, questions, and fears. He assists us to better understand
ourselves, to better understand our clients, and thus to better assist our clients in
psychotherapy. He also assists us to understand clients’ lying in a clinical context, which can enable us to work with our clients, not at cross-purposes with them.

Kottler also breaks down many of the barriers that can impede our clinical work with clients by speaking honestly about the “myths and illusions” (p. 230) we hold, perpetuate, and convey to clients. Many of these are present as defenses against the anxiety and self-doubt that might overwhelm us if we were to acknowledge just how unsure we often are about our ability to truly understand our clients and their clinical needs, and to assist them in a meaningful way, despite the presence of our own issues and difficulties.

Kottler addresses the many unresolved issues we each bring with us to the psychotherapy room as well as how clinical work with challenging and traumatized clients can affect us, professionally and personally. The complex interplay between our own histories and vulnerabilities and the client’s unique presentation and the challenges presented for us is thoughtfully addressed. The role of personal psychotherapy and the need to prevent secondary traumatization and burnout through appropriate self-care (cf. Baker, 2003) are points that are well made and hopefully will be heeded by all readers.

In *The Assassin and the Therapist*, Kottler the master storyteller reels in the reader with Jacob’s compelling story. Then, rather than revealing the answers, he raises a number of other questions to consider. It is hoped that with thoughtful soul-searching and careful consideration of the questions raised, each of us will be better psychotherapists and better people. While Kottler challenges us in a way that may be unnerving for some, reading and thoughtfully considering this book are experiences no psychotherapist should miss.

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**References**


