

Art Therapy Online: ATOL

Rethinking Research and Professional Practices in Terms of Relationality, Subjectivity and Power: Art Psychotherapy & Narrative Therapy: An Account of Practitioner Research

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I can (truly) say that this book opens up new and exciting territory for art therapy, an invisible wall has at last been dismantled. It is a very brave book as well as a very scholarly book. Linnell introduces poststructuralist ideas, primarily from Foucault, Derrida and Butler, examines similarities and differences between two therapeutic practices, art therapy and narrative therapy with their convergent theoretical underpinnings, and in expressive detail, poetically explores her clinical practice in relation to the ideas. Top of the agenda are relations of power in a postcolonial context, in gender and race and between therapist and client.

Author and series editor describe the book, in the spirit of Foucault, as an 'experience book' rather than a truth or declamatory book, and they both speak of the transformation that can be achieved through writing and reading 'books of experience'. As someone also researching and writing a re-thinking

of art therapy by an incorporation of poststructuralist thinking, I have, indeed, found myself transformed by this book. As I read, I felt myself feeling both joyous that someone appreciated what I appreciated, and also malleably moved into a new form in response to this moving form. Firstly, I have been full of admiration for how Linnell has dealt with certain difficulties that I have been facing. For example, how can one possibly explain complex theory, which the philosophers themselves are in the process of developing as they write, without reducing the ideas to neat packages of closed meaning? Linnell tackles this by giving us a sensuous feel for how the ideas have impacted on her; she uses metaphors of textiles, clothing and objects to describe her experience. Next, how can one introduce writers without a long introduction as to who they are, and where they are placed in the history of ideas, in other words, contextualising them? The metaphors that Linnell uses enable her to move in and between philosophical ideas, and rather than a historical story placing ideas in a linear sequence, the context is the impact and agency of the ideas on the reader. Another question: how can one prevent the reader from becoming weary from the hard work that is necessary to understand complex ideas? Linnell intersperses theoretical exploration with personal stories. And another: how can one, at one and the same time, promote the undoing of thoughts and ideas, creating uncertainty about all 'truths', and say something that is worth anyone's trouble reading? Linnell's unpicking of the thoughts, or truths, that she has stated, is illustrative of a reflexive practice familiar to therapists and researchers, but unusual in writing about therapy. Most therapy writing is concerned with building theory rather than in unpicking it. However, due to Linnell's underpinning this dismantling practice in post-structural theory, the experience for the reader is one of expansion and depth, rather than destruction and nihilism. Other questions that we both faced related to the subjects of therapy: how can you describe therapeutic work without exploiting the subjects of that work? How can you make this therapeutic work interesting to read at the same time as remaining 'true' to the reality of the therapy? Linnell is clear that she is writing a story and that our experience is already a story anyway. She gives enough specific detail for us to engage with the reality that this story refers to. Linnell is able to do all this

because she is an able and creative writer, able to understand and convey complex thinking and ideas.

Whilst noting points about which I felt critical when reading the text, I became aware that these were places where, despite the unpicking, I felt Linnell had slipped back into claiming truths. Sometimes these were later unpicked or unpicked in some ways, though not in others. An example of this, is the story that women always blame themselves. Linnell decides to tell a member of the family, 'Groovy Granny', that she is working with, about her personal issues in relation to maternal guilt. Groovy Granny responds to this by finding a shared truth that Linnell thinks is enabling for her, this is, that women have a tendency to blame themselves when things go wrong for their children. I wondered about this 'truth' – it bothered me, on the one hand I too believed in it, and on the other I realised that I can be quite happy blaming other people! It was then it dawned on me that its importance was as a story with agency, rather than a truth. I wondered then about the role of the truth/ story in the relaxing of the therapeutic boundary. As a truth about gender that was beyond the pair of the two women, one therapist and one client, it seemed to function as a leveller of the power relationship. I felt then that the function of the truth/story had been to support the relaxing of the therapeutic boundary of abstinence. My thinking was that in stepping out of therapist role the therapist would hold only one identity for the client, that of another oppressed woman but still one that as therapist, as Linnell points out, held power. For the client, the therapist's experiences and statements are likely to hold more import than other people's including their own. I felt that Linnell might be denying the clients the opportunity to experience her, in the transference, as the oppressor and to hate her. In my practice, I feel it important that, as the therapist, I can feel the hate but not identify with it. (Something of this experience is described later in the book in a fictional story of being the client in a psychodynamically based therapy). I share Linnell's view that the deconstruction of binaries should always mean a deepening or developing of possibilities rather than shutting them down. If the therapist is always to be experienced as good and helpful, where does this place the clients with their feelings of hate? This relates then to the place of psychoanalysis in the book. In her tackling of this area, I felt that Linnell addressed this as an 'other', about which she was

critical. I felt that this prevented her then from seeing this other as holding often contradictory and changing ideas, some of which might be useful whilst others might be outdated or culturally inappropriate. Rather than think that either Linnell is right and I am wrong or vice versa, or that one practice is right in one context and not in another, I think that we might consider this as a binary that could be deconstructed or as a difference that can create a dynamism.

Linnell's writing has undoubtedly transformed what I will do in all my work in the future. She has taken an enormous risk to put herself right in the middle of her thinking and writing, 'to put her money where her mouth is'. She does this whilst reflecting on herself making this story of herself – the very process of becoming that she is advocating. She is performing what she writes about. What she has enabled me to see, is that anything else is cowardice.

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