

ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

Book Review by Diana Collins

**'Psychodynamic Art Therapy Practice with People on the Autistic
Spectrum'**

Eds: Matt Dolphin, Angela Byers, Alison Goldsmith, Ruth E. Jones

Routledge, 2014.

The stated aim of this book is to provide a survey of each contributor's journey over the years towards new, more current understandings and does not overtly seek to offer strategies for working with this client group. It's divided into four sections of case study material and a final chapter on current context with an overview of developments in art therapy literature. The case studies more or less relate to themes such as apparent resistance to image making, holding the therapeutic process, working outside stated norms of practice and working with young people who struggle with being different while seeking an identity. A large proportion of the book is concerned with the changes in theory and many useful texts are cited in the case study afterwords, making this a relevant but dense source book for collective research in this field. The range of settings where the therapy takes place is extensive with 'deeply individual' authorial voices detailing an art therapy intervention through case study. The four editors of this densely

packed 162-page book have also each contributed a chapter about clients seen some 10-20 years ago.

I wondered why the case study format was adhered to but can see how the authors' descriptions about their experience benefits from the linking the historical impact of the sessions with later insights made at a different stage in their careers. The book has a 'time traveller' quality by virtue of the kinds of questions that are asked along the lines of 'what would I do differently now?'. I was impressed with the level of detail in the case studies but sometimes the reflections became biased towards theory. While the overriding premise of the book developed from a working group of the authors who have been actively involved in clinical discussion and debate it would have been interesting to have had the opportunity to 'witness' some of those dialogues that led to the genesis of this book. Many of the chapters were first delivered as papers in a conference in 2002 ('Images and the Emergence of Meaning' at Somerset House) and the work described may have taken place as far back as that author's training. Generally, each chapter details a case study of work and what is then unusual is this account is followed by a reflective afterword by the same author to open up themes of how theoretical ideas about people on the spectrum have changed since then. With the 'benefit of hindsight' each author is not only talking to the reader but also to their former selves and this is powerful way to share the iterative process that forms their journey within their therapeutic thinking.

The introduction offers a brief account of common features of autism and is then followed by a survey of non-directive psychodynamic approaches with particular reference to art therapy. The editors state that '(r)ather than being concerned with structural categories of difficulties ...art therapists are more involved with the creative potentials of the individual person...(w)e try to meet and make connections with the individual, rather than having a pre-conceived notion of a goal (that) we want the person to reach' (Dolphin et al 2014: 5) This seems an important statement anchoring the shared purpose of the book; primarily, to understand the implications of making meaning when it does not always feel possible to make a relationship in the therapeutic space.

Matt Dolphin speaks of the prevailing scepticism about the efficacy of the psychodynamic approach as part of his early doubts about a therapeutic process with a hard to reach young man. He later gives, if he were 'a time-travelling supervisor' the following advice when clients do not engage in image making: 'The images are there anyway in your reflections and descriptions' (ibid: 31) and as a therapist to feel permitted and allowed to engage in image making in the sessions as a relational tool. Dolphin cites the 'Interactive Square' as an example of this and the reader can follow this up if they wish given the tantalising reference.

I looked for some themes that might, for me, link the chapters and struggled with this; they can be read in the way suggested by the editors and what unifies them all is approaches towards making meaning with difficult to engage clients. However each chapter is so concentrated and steeped in material from years ago and then overlaid with more current analysis each drawn from various realms of theory that I found the 'loose developmental arc' difficult to follow. My reading journey was similar to Ruth Jones's description of the clinical work as being something organic, a river, with 'batches of themes, ebbing and flowing' (Dolphin et al 2014: 108). The book itself had for me that quality and the twists and turns in a river that might be difficult to follow by readers who don't have a base with this client group or with psychodynamic theory.

One central theme I found that could relate to my practice was how working with people on the autistic spectrum evokes powerful responses and the author's counter-transference material is reflected upon, using language that seems to embody the powerful psychodynamic processes. The authors write powerfully and use words that are evocative of the frozen presentation of some clients whose process can be so draining that any lively thinking or connecting can be hard to manage. The child psychotherapist Ann Alvarez is frequently cited as making sense of this difficult to process behaviour in terms of seeking connection and developing 'mindful attentions' to what is unfolding in the room. Ritualistic behaviours and sounds, flicking water, making eye contact only through short quick glances means the therapist relies upon an awareness of their own emotional responses to the material that pays attention to the silences, hesitations and 'almost' manifestations of an idea. I could empathise with

each of the author's particular journeys - often made while still in training - to reach and maintain some connection, with the patient and with themselves in the presence of something that can feel so shut down. It is well known that the territory of the art therapy space is marked with unexpected routes and I enjoyed reading the descriptions of the process of this. Certain adopted quantitative outcome measures that are now the currency of our times means that so much else can be lost in accounts of this type of work.

Another strength of this book is in the exploration of making and maintaining relationship within the psychodynamic framework. People on the spectrum are typified as having a poor capacity for narrative play or rigid patterns in play with fixed roles and limited capacity for other's ideas. Alison Goldsmith includes in her chapter working with a woman in her fifties with a diagnosis of autism made in childhood and a long term inpatient that was part of her MA work on Jungian and post-Jungian studies. She describes moving from a self-conscious state to one of more shared meaning using found objects bringing the theory alive in her description of sharing a playful moment with her client, looking through a piece of red cellophane as a way of acknowledging that seeing things differently does not have to be a barrier to communication. 'The red material was initially a shield for us both, mediating the painful intensity of seeing and being seen' (ibid: 84). A unifying feature of the book is how a more interactive stance is adopted by the therapists and the non directive approach is considered and often challenged. The overlap between autism and mental illness is examined in Lesley Anne Moore's chapter who challenges the thinking of symptoms based on the patient being autistic or are perhaps an expression of profound isolation. This made me think of another recently published book entitled 'The Reason I Jump'; a collaborative work by author Naoki Higashida, a 13 year old Japanese boy who has a diagnosis of autism and translated by David Mitchell (whose own child is on the spectrum). Both engaged in a series of email conversations with Higashida that led to this insightful book about the kind of lived experience that the therapists in this book have given thought and time to value understand.

With regards to theory, new ways of working, and a 'loose developmental arc' as Dolphin describes it (Dolphin et al 2014:1), within the psychodynamic theoretical frame, are included. The reader would do well to have a working knowledge of this as some references make only a passing nod to well-known theories and adds some fresh takes on theories that form the praxis (joining of theory and practice) through the reflective writing process. I came to this book with a few questions of my own regarding the children and young people who have had or are likely to have a diagnosis of Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) who I meet in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Sometimes the similarities of children who are experiencing the sequelae to trauma to those on the spectrum often 'muddies' the diagnostic waters. While the book does not question how diagnoses may be less than certain for cases where a history of trauma is present, I felt this book is a useful addition to work within this field as a source of psychodynamic enquiry.

Dolphin, M., Byers, A., Goldsmith, A., Jones, R. (Eds.) (2014) *Psychodynamic Art Therapy Practice with People on the Autistic Spectrum*. Hove: Routledge.

Higashida, N. (2014) *The Reason I Jump*. London: Sceptre.

