

ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

Book Review by Tess Crane

Mentalizing in Arts Therapies

Marianne Verfaillie

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This book is an important first step in an emergent field where arts therapists internationally are grappling with how to integrate the theory of mentalization into arts based practice.

Mentalizing in Arts Therapies signifies the first substantial text dedicated to this area of clinical practice and highlights the unique capacity that arts therapies bring to the table when translating this form of therapeutic encounter into an accessible, creative, client lead interaction. Essentially, the book discusses and reflects on Bateman and Fonagy's theory of mentalization – a fundamentally human capacity for responding to the social world around us (p. 3).

As Verfaillie explains, the capacity to ‘feel understood’, empathize with another and the capability to interpret human interactions as based on intention (p. 4) are essential capacities when navigating our social world and are informed by our early attachment experiences with a primary care giver. The opportunity for arts therapists lies in the capacity to provide a platform for alternative and reparative experiences using the creative process, of ‘feeling understood’ in a way that can enhance someone’s capacity to mentalize and thus develop a more flexible and robust form of intra and interpersonal ways of being.

On a practical note the layout of the book is fairly straightforward, the first section is dedicated to *theory* whilst the latter half is described as *practice* – however as the author reflects in the introduction, the *theory* section is informed by her clinical encounters, reflecting on case studies and vignettes throughout – a theme of the clinician’s voice is paramount throughout the text.

I appreciated the tone of the text - it is a frank, concise and practical discussion around a theory that I have often found to be quite complex to decipher. I also found that overall there was a refreshing perspective that was underpinned by hope and capacity to change, for example:

‘In all of us, the capacity to mentalize changes from day to day, from moment to moment. Successful mentalization requires a balance between thinking and feeling. If you are overwhelmed by your feelings, or if you feel nothing, you cannot mentalize properly....you must feel safe and secure in order to mentalize. If you are afraid, you will be preoccupied with protecting yourself and will be unable to take the time and trouble to mentalize’ (p. 5)

Also, an initial metaphor that Verfaillie refers to, *An iron that is too hot or too cool*, is a helpful tool to understand the balance that needs to be achieved in order to mentalize successfully. Also, for myself as a practicing art therapist, it gave context to the challenging presentation of clients who are so aroused it seems almost impossible to meet them in a place of reflection and thoughtfulness and for those who are so withdrawn or numb that the capacity to feel is a frightening concept.

As the book progresses, Verfaillie includes her clinical interactions to support her theoretical postulations, this was both helpful and interesting to see how she integrates the art making process into a mentalizing framework – from encouraging a client, who experiences a deep mistrust of their feelings, to engage with a novel art material as a way of sitting with the capacity to experiment and perhaps be surprised by emotion, to utilising the group image making process to act as a *mirror* for each client's inner emotional world. Reassuringly the art making process is not seen as adjunctive to this substantial theory, but as a new and exciting way to reflect and work on some of these core interpersonal capacities.

In the first half of the book Verfaillie goes to great lengths to outline and explore the core aspects of mentalizing theory – from attachment theory and the early development of the child. These sections are well explained and clear, demonstrating to the reader the robust nature of the theory of mentalization and the important contribution this theory makes to understanding and working with people in a relational and non-judgemental framework.

The last chapter of Part 1 is entitled “Techniques” and is the transition point between the theory and practice elements of the text. This chapter begins to outline in a practical sense how art therapists can begin to translate mentalization theory into their practice.

As a clinician I enjoyed reading this section, however as Verfaillie points out, Bateman and Fonagy:

‘stress that mentalization-based treatments require a particular mental attitude on the part of the therapist...rather than the use of certain techniques’ (p. 81).

I appreciate the values that seem to underpin these therapeutic interactions. For example, a section that explores the concept of *Giving reality value to a person's lived experience* – the act of validating and acknowledging the client's lived experience, suspending any personal response from the therapist – gives the client the capacity to feel seen and understood in the world:

‘Just as the mother of a newborn imitates her baby to show him that she understands what he feels, by giving reality value to the client’s feelings, the therapist shows that she knows what goes on inside the client’ (p. 82).

The second part of the book, *Practice*, begins and ends with more theoretical chapters that are filled with further reflection on the integration of the arts therapies and mentalization theory, these chapters are really fleshing out the practice based content of the book – looking at practical evidence of the ways in which the arts therapies can promote mentalizing.

In particular, *Chapter 8 The art therapist and the mentalizing stance* is a thorough and thoughtful account of the mentalizing therapist:

‘The essence of mentalizing is not the intervention techniques used, but the therapist’s attitude to the process. A mentalizing therapist will not tell a client what to do or how to deal with a problem. The mentalizing stance is an inquisitive, curious, perhaps even playful attitude towards the states of minds of both client and therapist’ (p. 119).

Verfaille does well to get to the real heart of the theory here – looking at the way in which the mentalizing therapist can be an authentic presence that provides a platform for change and reflection

For the remaining chapters the book outlines four case vignettes, written by a number of different authors. It is promising to see that there are multimodal cases that are included and that there is a consistent format to each chapter which allows for a more systematic examination of the therapeutic process being explored.

Unfortunately the book seems to end abruptly after the last chapter on *Forms of group work that promote mentalizing*. It’s a bit disappointing that some of the core threads from the vignettes are not drawn together and that the author doesn’t end with some final reflections about next steps, considering the substantial content that Verfaille has outlined and that it is a novel area for arts therapists across the world.

Overall I feel the book is an important step in substantiating the integration of mentalizing theory and the arts therapies. The very practical nature of the writing and content, I am sure, serves to make this theory accessible and relevant to the practicing clinician and academic alike. Upon finishing reading the book I feel like I am armed both with some real-world methods to take into my practice and also a deeper understanding and appreciation of the theory of mentalization, and how this capacity is essential for humans to negotiate the world around us in a connected and meaningful way.

Biography

My name is Tess Crane and I am currently employed as an art therapist in an inpatient adult mental health setting and in the La Trobe University Master of Art Therapy program in Australia, teaching and supervising first and second year students. Since graduating seven years ago, I have worked in a range of settings; however I have developed a particular interest in group art therapy, women's mental health, parent/child work and working with clients diagnosed with eating disorders.