

Reviews

Group Analytic Art Therapy

Gerry McNeilly

London, Jessica Kingsley, 2005, 240pp

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This book aims to describe and analyse the development of 'group analytic art therapy' (GAAT) through marrying together a theoretical and historical overview of the field with rich personal reflections on practice. The author is a senior adult psychotherapist, group analyst, art psychotherapist and art therapy educator and has already made a significant contribution to the literature in this field. Consequently he is well-placed to provide this perspective.

The structure of the book is a little idiosyncratic and requires some effort on the part of the reader to orient themselves and determine which parts of the book might be of most interest or use to them. It begins with very personal reflections on the author's entry into the field in the mid-1970s. A critical account of trends and developments in art therapy, group art therapy, and Foulkesian group analytic therapy is provided in some depth. Through this the author demonstrates how the concept of 'group analytic art therapy' (GAAT) developed through the bringing together of these different strands. The approach of 'psychotherapy *by* the group, *of* the group' (after Foulkes, 1986, p.3) is seen to be key. It is distinguished from more psychoeducational (e.g. Hagood, 1991) or directive (e.g. Cooper and Milton, 2003) group art therapy approaches, in a way which illuminates, critiques and validates, rather than rejects, or derogates alternative methods. This is refreshing as approaches are often presented in silos as if they are the only appropriate method. The evidence base (or lack of) for these different approaches is not really addressed, unfortunately.

The dialectical relationship between the private communication of the artist and their art work and between artist and group or therapist is interrogated (drawing on Skaife, 2000). The author critically examines questions such as how much focus should there be on art-making or group interaction? When/how might one or the other be prioritized?

Is there enough time for both? To what extent should communication be through the artwork itself or talking about what has been created? Ultimately he concludes that too often false dichotomies are drawn between content and process, when, in fact, both are always in our overall vision, moving between figure and ground, interacting dynamically.

The book has an informal and engaging narrative style. What is slightly problematic is that the overall text seems rather uncertain about its identity and purpose, wavering between the theoretical and clinical in a personalised way which is not always accessible. There is not a clear sense of progression through the book in development of argument or focused conclusions. Despite this it offers much of benefit as an immersion into the practice world of a highly skilled and reflective therapist. It will not suit those looking to see how to 'do' GAAT (except perhaps through the example of the first session of a new art group), but it will provide stimulation and thought for practitioners seeking to deepen and broaden their ways of understanding and thinking about art therapy in groups from an analytic approach.

References

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A Safe Place to Grow
A group treatment manual for children in conflicted,
violent, and separating homes

Vivienne Roseby, Janet Johnston, Bettina Genter, and Erin Moore.
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The sad reality for many children who live in a climate of fear and violence at home is that one of the first lessons they learn is that they have to provide safety for themselves. The impact of this coping mechanism, combined with exposure to ongoing chronic stress and acute traumatic episodes, can have a detrimental impact on the child's subsequent development.

In *A Safe Place to Grow* the authors provide practitioners with a targeted intervention groupwork programme for children aged between five and fourteen years. The overall goal of the model is to support the children to become conscious of their coping strategies and to challenge the rules and expectations that support them. This is accomplished by addressing specific developmental deficits in a sensitive, coherent and useful manner.

The first edition of this step-by-step model was developed for use with older school going age children from highly conflicted separating and divorcing families. This second edition is designed to be applied more broadly in the context of multiethnic, multicultural settings and now includes a section specifically designed for younger school going age children.

The format of the book is that it is divided into two main sections: the little kid's manual and the big kid's manual. There are 12 sessions outlined in the little kid's manual and ten in the big kid's section. In the little kid's section I found session 8 'Going back and Forth: Managing Transitions and Change' particularly useful in helping the children become aware of how they manage and tolerate feelings during transitions. In session 5 of the big kid's manual, 'Defining wishes for yourself and rules that work for your family and relationships' the authors have given practitioners a method to help children develop their own code of ethics or rules for relationships, and to reality test right and wrongs.

The book itself will appeal to practitioners, particularly those who

have some experience of groupwork and those who are thinking of co-facilitating for the first time. Each chapter outlines the goals of the session, the materials required and the process the groupworker should apply.

As with much groupwork with children this model uses puppetry as a medium to connect with the children and create meaning. In that regard I was unfamiliar with the American textbooks the puppets referred to: 'Where the wild things are' and 'Quick as a cricket'. The manual suggested that most American children would be familiar with those textbooks and would appreciate the references used by the puppets. There were other materials suggested in the manual for use in groups that also wouldn't automatically be familiar to a European audience, i.e. a Nerf or Koosh ball?

However, they are the only criticisms that I would level at this manual. Having been trained in the Seasons for Growth programme, which specifically deals with loss and younger people, I can appreciate the contribution this manual makes for clinicians working with children from highly conflicted, violent backgrounds. Specifically this manual is written in a user friendly style, is accessible to clinicians and offers a model of intervention that is developmentally appropriate and culturally sensitive. In short, it is an important contribution to the groupworker's library.

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