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Book review: Personification: using the dialogical self in psychotherapy and counselling, John Rowan, Routledge 2009

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debate issues that are of concern and interest to people in this sector, we promote members’ research and encourage dialogue and networking.

The executive of the division is always keen to hear from you. You can check out who’s who at: www.bacpworkplace.org.uk/exec_profile.php

Additionally, Rick Hughes, BACP’s Lead Advisor, Workplace, bridges the gap between the division and BACP to champion campaigns and echo the voice of counselling in the workplace.

Please do check out our website at www.bacpworkplace.org.uk and if you practise as a workplace counsellor or work with or in organisations, you’re most welcome to come and join us!

Association for Pastoral and Spiritual Care and Counselling (APSCC)
Are you...
- interested in spirituality and how it engages with your working life?
- open to acknowledging and working with the deep spiritual beliefs of your clients? Or wondering how to be?
- making your own spiritual journey, along whatever path you have found?

APSCC is BACP’s division for those who see spiritual issues as at least potentially important in any therapeutic work. The division is neither ‘only for Christians’ nor ‘only for religious people’. We are explicitly committed to being an open and diverse group, bringing into conversation not only different spiritual traditions but also an enormous range of therapeutic approaches.

One of the things we often hear at divisional conferences and other meetings is how good it is to have found a place where these issues can be freely discussed. Especially for independent practitioners having like-minded and open-hearted colleagues can be a tremendous support. APSCC maintains, through our journal and other methods, a lively, challenging and open conversation.

Our quarterly journal Thresholds may contain – in a single issue – articles celebrating links between Hindu values and person-centred therapy, exploring spirituality and pain, opening up research on prayer and mental health, looking at the challenges and crises that affect faith communities, offering original viewpoints on healing, and much more. We even welcome atheist contributors who seek to convince us that spiritual beliefs are all nonsense – and get very lively responses!

Our conferences draw outstanding reviews from members and non-members alike, for their careful preparation, warm atmosphere and stimulating content. Our most recent gathering looked at spirituality as an ethical essential for counselling and psychotherapy. Our next conference, in September 2011, will look at the impact of spirituality on ourselves as practitioners and on our practice.

Our ‘task groups’ are working on a range of issues as diverse as spirituality and therapy in new and emerging communities, and training in working with spiritual issues in therapy, including work in mental health settings.

We have also recently launched our website (www.apscc.org.uk) offering many resources to our members. This continues to evolve. A new feature is an online diary showcasing CPD opportunities.

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Chris Jenkins, Chair of APSCC

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his argument for integration of therapies. These are ideas that give food for thought, although I was concerned that there is no mention made of the fact that sometimes, at the extreme end, these voices can be so powerful that disassociation (when one personality becomes so powerful that there may be an unknown gap in time for the normally-dominant personality) may, and can, occur.

The book is divided into three unequal parts, with an introduction that sets out the aims of the book: to question the idea of any absolute truth in psychotherapy, and to criticise the literature on sub-personalities (with the ‘secret’ desire to influence current writers and thinkers on the subject of the dialogical self).

Part one serves as an introduction to the topic, and lays the groundwork for what will come next. It defines the dialogical self as ‘the warring voices in our head’. Rowan’s method is to quote extensively from writers he admires, as if because they say something, then it must be right. In order to do this, he goes as far back as Plato, and demonstrates an impressive knowledge of the subject. However, there are points when there are so many of these quotations that they begin to merge into a quasi biblical theme, full of begots and begats.

Part two, the main section, begins with a history of the use of multiplicity in therapy, and moves on to criticise many of the current therapies, without properly critiquing them. Given that this is a book whose expressed intent is to offer a theory that could integrate the different psychotherapies, it is a little surprising that Rowan allows himself to be quite so rude about so many of them. In just one chapter, for example, he says that Freud is questionable, Jung needs a new look, Perls has problems, Berne is over-simplified, there are difficulties with psychodrama, Shapiro is too fixed, NLP is insanely pragmatic, as well as relentlessly trivial and adolescent, and, by extension, Rowan alone is right. Some of the people he is so contemptuous of were actually great thinkers of their day and their contributions deserve a more considered appraisal.

In this section, Rowan explains the ‘serious research’ behind this approach. I struggled to follow what he meant, as his research seemed to be based on single case studies (though from different therapists). Case studies are usually interesting, and can often help to bring to life a theoretical point, but there are inherent dangers in generalising from anecdotal evidence.

This part of the book also introduces the reader to a subject that Rowan is passionate about – reification. This means taking a theoretical concept (such as Freud’s Id, Ego, and Superego) and treating it as if it is a real entity and therefore unchallengeable. Whilst I have long noticed this phenomenon I had not known that it had a name.

Again, this part includes very full quotations from other writers. There are simply too many of these. They interfere with the flow of the narrative, and take away from the experience of hearing Rowan’s own original voice.

In the last, short section of the book, Rowan discusses the potential for working with the client’s different voices. This, in some ways is the most pertinent, as well as the most interesting part of the book, as Rowan allows himself to discuss working transpersonally, or spiritually, and using this as a bridge to cross religious or cultural differences.

Dr Rowan is passionate about his beliefs but he allows no room for doubters – Perls is wrong (though on the right lines) Berne is wrong (though Clarkson gets close), everyone but those who accept his ideas are simply wrong. He does not so much try to convince the reader of the viability of his ideas, as to assume that he is right, and therefore others are wrong. I found this approach simply baffling. Broad assertions are not the same as argued points.

This is quite a short book, of 146 pages of text. However, it is not until chapter six that Rowan says that he has come to the ‘real meat’ of the book. More than halfway through seems quite a long wait for the meat. The starter should be a prelude to the main course, rather than equally substantial.

In conclusion, this is a book about an experience that, he says, cannot be named, that language will only distort and misrepresent, and in trying to do that, he has set himself an impossible task. It may be that this review, in using language as it does, also distorts and misrepresents. However, in the end, this is a book whose style comes across as hectoring and lecturing. Passion is a wonderful thing, but if it is also meant to educate and convince it may need to be tempered with reason.

Heather Dale is a senior accredited therapist and trainer in independent practice, and senior lecturer, University of Huddersfield.

Jay Haley revisited
Madeleine Richeport-Haley, Jon Carlson (eds)
Routledge 2010
ISBN 978-0415805339  £22.50

Jay Haley revisited is a collection of 20 papers, written by Haley between 1958-2001. When I saw that one of the editors was Haley’s wife, my first reaction was to be a little dubious. Wives can view their spouse’s writing through rose-tinted spectacles – and persuade others to – so I was pleased to see that each paper is introduced by a different colleague from the related fields of psychology, psychiatry, social psychology, marital and family therapy or counselling academics/teachers/lecturers. These introductions are really useful and insightful.