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Book review: Relational transactional analysis: principles in practice Heather Fowlie and Charlotte Sills (eds) 978-1855757622

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There is a new form of Christianity called ‘non-theistic Christianity’ which, so far as I can tell, involves believing in all Christian precepts except those that include God. This book is the transactional analysis (TA) equivalent. When I opened it I wondered if there was a need for it, as, to quote Elana Leigh, books about relational therapy ‘have flooded the field’. Reading it, I realised that it is a book whose main purpose is to take the theory out of TA so that it can become a more integrated way of working. Whilst I agree wholeheartedly with this approach, it is at odds with the guiding principles of Eric Berne, the TA founder.

In particular the editors wish to encourage TA therapists to work relationally. They believe that the current interest in relational therapy stems from the development of the women’s movement, as an interest in relational issues may be considered to be more female than male. This is an interesting idea, and perhaps also explains why the majority of the contributors to this volume are female.

Working relationally, as explained in this volume, means having the courage to be open about one’s own countertransference reactions, or, to put it simply, sharing one’s deepest fantasies with the client, in order to develop a deeper relationship, and thus enrich the therapeutic work.

As always with books that have multiple contributors, unless the editing is so restrictive that there is a loss of authentic voices, the writing is uneven. There are some beautifully written chapters, such as Katherine Murphy’s ‘meditation on a two-person practice’ and some challenging thoughts, such as William Cornell’s comment that, when he was studying to be a therapist, he skipped the lessons on empathy as he considers it ‘a much overrated skill’.

Virtually all of the chapters include case studies. The writers generally explain that they have the client’s permission to discuss their work. Given that some of the clients appeared to be on-going, I checked to see if this appeared as an ethical issue in the one chapter devoted to ethics: it did not. This is a shame, as I would have liked to see the arguments for and against using clients in this way being clearly stated. Indeed, whilst many of the writers comment on the usefulness of supervision, none comment on the ethical issues involved.

This is a book about TA coming of age and its practitioners integrating themselves into the wider therapeutic world. Carole Shadbolt sums it up, finding a 30-year-old letter from a friend and colleague who uses TA language, she writes that the letter made her ‘physically squirm’. As someone trained in TA, but who has moved away from a pure TA way of working, it is heartening to see that TA therapists have, been moving in the same direction. However, there is a question: if TA practitioners stop analysing transactions, as with taking God out of Christianity, what remains?

Heather Dale is a senior accredited counsellor/psychotherapist in private practice and a senior lecturer at the University of Huddersfield.