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Book review: The assassin and the therapist: an exploration of truth in psychotherapy and in life, Jeffrey Kottler, Routledge 2010

Original Citation

Dale, Heather (2010) Book review: The assassin and the therapist: an exploration of truth in psychotherapy and in life, Jeffrey Kottler, Routledge 2010. *The Independent Practitioner*. pp. 18-19.

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relevant reading and short workshop training. He also has a very useful chapter on working with just one partner, so this book is not solely relevant to practitioners with two other people in the room (or occasionally, apparently, three).

He does also touch on the thorny subject of sex, but rather briefly. Many of us find this area quite difficult, and the lack of specific training might be more problematic than he admits. His references to sexual abuse are even briefer, and, again, I wonder if he is minimising the implications of working with clients where this is a factor. Certainly no mention of erotic countertransference!

In conclusion, a worthwhile and likeable book with plenty of good, useable material, but less so for the experienced couple therapist. Unless, of course, you are planning to teach the subject!

Ruth Morgan, senior accredited counsellor and supervisor

Life scripts: a transactional analysis of unconscious relational patterns

Richard G Erskine (ed)

Karnac 2010

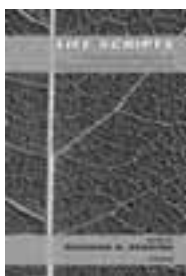
ISBN 978 1855756625 £23.99

The assassin and the therapist: an exploration of truth in psychotherapy and in life

Jeffrey Kottler

Routledge 2010

ISBN 978-0415800655 £15.95



This quarter I have reviewed two books for the delight and delectation of readers of this

journal. Interestingly, there is a theme that runs through two otherwise completely different books. The theme is to do with the co-creation (primarily, but not necessarily, between therapist and client) of a narrative of the client's life story, in order to create a larger understanding.

Consequently I am going to write about both books in the same review, and comment on the differing ways that the same themes are explored.

The first book, edited by Richard Erskine, who has been a bit of a hero of mine for some time now, is a volume of writing by transactional analyst (TA) writers about the TA concept of scripts, or the life plans that the theory says that we all write for ourselves, unconsciously, at a very young age. The thrust of the pieces is to show that understanding of scripts develops from the therapeutic alliance, with client and therapist working together to provide a meaningful analysis of the client's life.

In reading the various chapters, I was reminded of what I both love and hate about TA. I love the plethora of ideas, and the truly brilliant and original minds it often attracts. On the other hand, I loathe the self-conscious cleverness that can be pervasive in the owners of some of these minds. The writers in this edition demonstrate a fair amount of both qualities. However, the need for some of the authors to prove their own cleverness by dismissing others of the contributors was quite entertaining, if only for the glimpse it gives into the sometimes murky underworld of small therapeutic organisations.

Eric Berne's original idea was to create a therapy that could be explained simply enough for everyone to understand. TA writing works best when authors remember this, and, like Berne, explain complex ideas using simple language. This does not happen nearly often enough in this volume, with a couple of honourable exceptions, such as Ian Stewart, who discusses the ways in which suicidal or violent clients leave open ways of allowing themselves to commit suicide or other violent acts

(‘escape hatches’) or Rosemary Napper, writing about how (psycho) pathology may have cultural and social aspects as well as personal and family ones. It was good to see at least one author taking a wider perspective than parent-blame for clients’ woes.

Each of the 13 chapters has at its core a case study that illustrates the theoretical points. This works well in some of the chapters, but in others appears to be a merely a paean of praise to the writer’s own brilliance as a therapist. The first and last chapters are written (the last co-written) by Erskine himself. The first chapter is a scholarly review of the (TA) literature on scripts, (or the ‘unconscious relational patterns’ of the title). The review takes the reader as far as 2005, after which writing on scripts appears to stop, except for Erskine himself, as he is the only author he references after that date.

One problem is that at least some of the authors appear to be reprising their own work, rather than saying anything new. The final chapter for instance, discusses a theoretical concept (Racket system) that Erskine first wrote about 13 years ago. Some of the writers had clearly not done their research properly: for example, a chapter by Claude Steiner, a very venerable figure in the TA world, is called ‘Then and Now’, but there is only just over a page devoted to ‘now’ and only three references to writings this century. Not so much ‘Now’ as ‘Then’.

Given that the foreword describes the book as ‘an exciting collection of contemporary writing’ I thought that this was sloppy, as well as disappointing. However, there did appear to be some original work such as the chapter by Heiller and Sills, who discuss the notion of a life plan as a method of dealing with existentialist angst.

Jeffrey Kottler’s book also has at its core an extended case study – but not of a client. The case study is of a man (Jacob) whom the author meets almost by chance. Kottler is at a stage of his life when ‘things are not going well’ and Jacob is at the stage of life

when he needs an audience to listen to his story. Each needs the other: Jacob, coming to the end of his life, needs to tell the extraordinary story of his life; Kottler needs something to lift him out of a near-depression, and in his own words, he becomes obsessed with the story. Out of their joint need, they co-create the narrative of Jacob’s life, a startling account of a young man’s experiences working for what he believes to be the Israeli army in the late 1940s.

It is the story of an American Jew, growing up in the 1940s, who is groomed to join the Israeli army, as part of an elite, though totally expendable small force of youngsters. Once trained, both to work as a team, and in their trade of murder, the boys’ job is to work out how to assassinate the people they are told to target.

This part of the book, while based on year-long interviews, is, in part at least, a confessed work of fiction. Kottler spent some time researching and adding details to the story in order to make it more readable. As a result, this half of the book reads as if it is a short story. Between the two of them, Jacob and Kottler construct a startling narrative, which reads as well as any detective story I have come across. It may not be exactly true, but it is not exactly a work of fiction either.

There are some discrepancies between Jacob’s and Kottler’s versions. In Jacob’s version of the story, he is picked for his intelligence, and relied upon by his superiors, for his quick-wittedness in difficult spots. Kottler, however sees him as ‘not that bright’.

This makes the interesting point about the nature of truth, which is not really explored by any of the authors in the Erskine volume. The question is not only whether our clients are telling us the truth, but whether their truth is believable to the listener.

Whatever the reality, Kottler enters Jacob’s internal world. One twist is to do with the fact that Jacob is not a client – and the normal rules are

therefore not in place. For example, they regularly meet in a café, and there is no time limit to their conversations. Jacob is desperate to tell his story, and, later, Kottler becomes desperate to publish it, though this is vetoed by Jacob at first. He is reluctant to allow the story to be published, but ultimately agrees.

Jacob’s story is all about deception. His job for the Israelis is to do with getting close to people defined as the enemy, and then assassinate them. As the book unfolds, Kottler shares his belief that he too became the victim of an assassination attack – though on his emotional rather than physical self.

Kottler becomes increasingly concerned about whether the story is true or not. Consequently the second half of the book becomes a series of short essays in which Kottler muses on the nature of truth and falsehood in the therapeutic relationship. He offers reasons clients might lie in therapy (lack of trust, fear of humiliation, fear of disappointing the therapist). He also explores the unconscious dynamics between himself and Jacob that would make it possible for Jacob’s story to be untrue.

This half is written with searing honesty. Kottler does not flinch from examining his own part in co-creating a story that may (or may not) be a lie.

It is this honesty that is missing from the TA book. There are some interesting concepts here, such as Maria Teresa Tosi commenting that scripts should be seen as a changing dynamic rather than a static system, or Helena Hargaden’s detailed examination of the importance of the relationship in one therapeutic relationship. However, the wisdom of using one case study as a way of making several theoretical points may not be very wise, and is certainly no longer seen as sound practice.

So here we have two books, both interested in looking at the conscious and unconscious dynamics of the

therapeutic relationship. Erskine's idea has been to invite writers to contribute to a volume loosely bound around a common theme. The writers have been chosen as experts in their chosen fields, so perhaps they did not need to show off their skills quite so overtly. The book does set out to do what it says in the title: to analyse the unconscious patterns in the therapeutic relationship. In practice, this often, but not always, means an examination of different ways of understanding the unconscious dynamics between therapist and client.

I am not sure that I have learned anything new about scripts, but I have enjoyed some of the case studies. I have been reminded about the power of the transference relationship. However, I expect the book will be of interest to those new to TA, if only for the pleasure of having so many revered figures writing in one volume.

Kottler, too, has done what he set out to do. He has written a story which invites the reader to consider their own practice, and the place in that, not only of falsehood and truth, but the therapist's role in that. He has peppered the second half with case studies, which are short enough to hold the attention, but often show him struggling or confused, as indeed he is with Jacob, and as indeed I am very often in my own practice.

For those primarily interested in TA, and in old and new theory on the development of script, the Erskine book may be essential reading.

For those interested in looking more deeply at the nature of the unconscious play of forces between therapist and client, go to Kottler. The question the reader is left with at the end is this. Is Jacob's story real, or were the two of them complicit in developing a work of fiction? Perhaps we should be asking that of ourselves more often.

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