

Dramatherapy and destructiveness: Creating the evidence base, playing with Thanatos, edited by Ditty Dokter, Pete Holloway and Henri Seebohm, London and New York, Routledge, 2011, 232 pp., £27.99 (paperback), ISBN 978- 0415558518

Dramatherapy and Destructiveness brings together ten dramatherapists working in Britain to explore the idea of “destructiveness” as it is applied to working with people who “offend” - either against others or against themselves. Many of the contributors work in forensic settings. For example, Maggie McAlister describes her work with clients involved in serious psychotic violence, sometimes with fatal consequences, in a medium-secure psychiatric unit in the NHS. Others work in a range of socio-political and health care contexts from addiction to intellectual disability. Several of the contributors work with clients who present serious challenges to service providers and in situations where dramatherapy can be a last resort: “my work in the community tends to be with individuals who have exhausted community mental health team resources and/or optimism by virtue of their chronic self-harm and/or numerous suicide attempts” (Holloway, p. 172). Despite the challenges, the common thread that binds the “story” of each dramatherapist is their desire to facilitate clients in working creatively and constructively with destructive manifestations of energy. Significantly, this desire links each practitioner/researcher directly to the paradox at the heart of this text:

whilst this volume has attempted to deconstruct destructiveness as an unambiguously negative phenomenon, when we attempt to link its manifestation to diagnostic categories it inevitably falls back into a negatively-construed ‘problem’ located within the psycho-pathology of the individual, rather than the far more complex, relational and systemic phenomenon we have attempted to illuminate. (Dokter et al, p. 182).

This paradox is explored and held in consciousness throughout the text as the editors and contributors consistently and relentlessly problematize the notion of destructiveness and all attempts to work with it.

By way of introduction, the editors of Dramatherapy and Destructiveness declare their general aim as “a modest attempt to explore the phenomenon of destructiveness as it arises and is worked with in the dramatherapeutic encounter” (3). Emanating from this is their aim “of producing a body of practice-based evidence” (p. 4) documenting the experience of dramatherapists working with the phenomenon of destructiveness. Further, there is an explicit desire to address gaps in the existing literature by including previously undocumented evidence, e.g. Jackson’s focus on self-harm in clients with learning disabilities. Contributing to the evidence base is, in itself, problematic as the editors recognise that the “clinical vignettes and practice-based discussions ... remain(s) a long way from the objective, quantitative evidence of effectiveness or efficacy that is currently the vogue” (p. 181). Undaunted by this, the editors, Dokter in particular, interrogate the dominant discourses regarding what constitutes “evidence”. This is not surprising in a text that undertakes a multi-layered interrogation of the phenomenon of destructiveness with considerable success.

Other specific aims emerge as the text progresses and individual contributors address pertinent issues. For example, Zografou clearly states: “I hope this chapter will provide support, encouragement and creative ideas to dramatherapists facing similar problems” (p. 110). Meanwhile, in evaluating the evidence, the editors delineate three aims that are less explicitly stated at the outset, namely, an exploration of dilemmas of human existence experienced by clients in relation to destructiveness; dramatherapy’s potential to encourage ‘acting out’ of dangerous material vis-à-vis its potential to transform destructive energy; and how destructiveness manifests and relates to clinical diagnoses. These considerations are implicitly woven through each chapter to greater or lesser extents depending on the focus of individual authors. The first and third aims are certainly achieved; however, a more explicit and rigorous examination of the material with regard to the second aim would strengthen the research.

Structurally, *Dramatherapy and Destructiveness* is divided into three sections. Part I, “Destructiveness and Dramatherapy” comprises three chapters that stimulate the reader in critically considering “destructiveness” through numerous frames. In chapter 1, the editors explore our understanding of “destructiveness” through several lenses ranging from a socially constructed linguistic signifier through psychoanalytic understandings, attachment theory, Jungian analytical psychology, and group analysis. It presents an argument for viewing “destructiveness” as “primarily a propensity within the psyche and within relationships” (Holloway et al, p. 10). This propensity sometimes results in violent acts of aggression against the self or others but is equally capable of forcing an individual to completely withdraw from the external world for fear of releasing this toxic force. The aim of dramatherapy is seen to be to facilitate clients to reflect on the destructive act within the containment of the creative process.

A review of literature in Chapter 2 explains destructiveness “as purely negative, allied with individual and group violence, distress and illness” (Jones, p. 26) necessitating interventions to “combat or eliminate” it (Jones, p. 26). In contrast to this, Jones posits that destructiveness is not always negative and creativity is not always positive. With this in mind, an analysis of the dominant discourses within dramatherapy examines how dramatherapists contend with destructiveness and creativity, revealing that “Creativity is not seen as the opposite of ‘destructiveness’, but can be identified as a way of encountering, reframing and enabling dialogue between areas that are often positioned as opposites” (Jones, p. 37).

Chapter 3 “introduces the debates around evidence-based practice and practice-based evidence” (Dokter, p. 38). The relevance of research from other countries to the UK context is considered, and the chapter concludes: “a narrow definition of evidence, which privileges particular types of evidence, does not enable practitioners to use available research with their clients” (Dokter, p. 49). In contrast, it argues, “A wider engagement with practice-based evidence proves an excellent opportunity for dramatherapy practitioners to evaluate evidence as to its suitability for their client work” (Dokter, p. 49).

Part II, “Clinical Practice”, offers practice-based evidence from nine dramatherapists working with diverse client groups, united through their common experience of destructiveness. There is much to be gleaned from the work of these therapists and it is important to note that it is impossible to do justice to their contributions within the confines of this review. Ramsden draws attention to “the fickle nature” (p. 58) of the children’s play as they switch from playing bank robbers to playing softball, suggesting that enactment can reduce and even transform destructive energy. Meanwhile, Zeal presents evidence that dramatherapy offers schools “a designated chaos and destruction zone, which acknowledges rather than simply tries to control the behaviour of excluded adolescents” (p. 77). Dokter highlights the potential for self-destruction and destructive acting out in the therapist as well as the client, cautioning that therapist hopelessness is detrimental. She also pinpoints peer work as significant, a point that is picked up in the book’s conclusion, where more research into the possibility of developing a fourth dimension to the traditional triadic relationship in creative arts therapies is suggested: “therapist, client, medium + collective sense/solidarity of the group (and anti-group) – that socialises” (Dokter et al, p. 191). Jackson’s research addresses a gap in the literature regarding people with intellectual disability and self-harm, and she presents evidence of self-harm among this client group as communication rather than behaving badly or attention seeking. Zografou highlights the challenges to dramatherapists working with addiction and the need to bracket out assumptions and make an ally of resistance. Seebohm’s essay focuses compellingly on the theme of surviving the transference in working with destructiveness (a theme that has run through the two previous chapters) as well as the challenge of creating, and then sustaining, the dramatic space in the face of destructiveness and “captivity”.

Sustaining the dramatic space is again a theme in Thorn's research as her client "slowly 'killed off' the 'drama' with her unconscious attacks of sleep, a defence mechanism to fend off new experiences" (p. 143). McAlister finds that the gradual use of symbol in dramatherapy is a useful intervention with violent offenders with psychotic illness, facilitating their transition from the concrete to the symbolic and from disassociation to owning disturbing aspects of themselves. Finally, Holloway presents findings from his work with survivors of suicide. He stresses the importance of client feedback as, through collaboration, the structures of his work developed to facilitate clients in re- connecting with the body they had previously tried to kill off. Like previous practitioners, he draws attention to the difficulty of evaluating the effectiveness of his intervention as it coincided with an intensive programme of interventions.

Part III, "Towards An Evaluation Of The Evidence Base So Far", comprises a single chapter "Playing with Thanatos: Bringing Creativity to Destructiveness". This chapter offers a summary of the main arguments and conclusions drawn from the evidence presented by clinical practitioners. It identifies emerging clinical themes and highlights areas for further consideration and research, concluding with a hope that it has provided stimulation for further contributions to the evidence base to "play with Thanatos" (Dokter et al, p. 193).

Dramatherapy and Destructiveness is an important book and an essential addition to every dramatherapist's library. All dramatherapists are familiar with the theme of "destructiveness" though it may not always be so-named: Dramatherapy and Destructiveness names it, (re)defines it and explores it – all essential components to addressing and surviving it. In its consistent multi-dimensional critical engagement with the concept of destructiveness it enables dramatherapists to have a better understanding of what destructiveness means in practice and theory. In exploring destructiveness as a communication it supports dramatherapists in finding the means to facilitate clients in symbolically expressing that communication. In its focus on engaging with destructiveness rather than remedying it, it supports dramatherapists in being with clients, in their hardships and pain, withstanding external (and internal) pressures to 'fix' people.

Paradoxically, in terms of practice-based evidence, this is an explicitly UK-centric book. As such, a glossary of terms (e.g. NICE) would be a useful addition rather than having to trudge back and forth to remind oneself of the words behind the acronym. Meanwhile, as the volume concludes it states that:

findings on the centrality of the dramatic process would seem to support our initial hypothesis that 'enactment' of destructiveness moves clients beyond an 'acting out' state of evacuation and intolerability, and provides the space for gradual reflection upon and re-incorporation of such destructive potential. (Dokter et al, p. 185)

More explicit exploration of this idea would strengthen the research and offer more clarity to the reader. However, this is a minor objection in the context of what is otherwise an excellently structured and highly accomplished book that, overall, delivers what it sets out to do and contributes substantially to practice- based research in the field of dramatherapy.

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