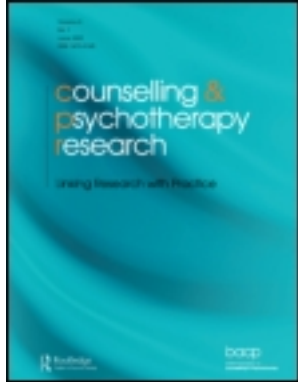


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Publisher: Routledge

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Counselling and Psychotherapy Research: Linking research with practice

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcpr20>

Self-agency in psychotherapy: Attachment, autonomy and intimacy

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Version of record first published: 08 Nov 2011.

To cite this article: Sue McAndrew (2012): Self-agency in psychotherapy: Attachment, autonomy and intimacy, *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research: Linking research with practice*, 12:2, 162-163

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14733145.2011.624839>

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BOOK REVIEWS

Self-agency in psychotherapy: Attachment, autonomy and intimacy, by Jean Knox, New York, Norton, 2011, 246 pp., £25.00 (hardcover), ISBN: 978-0-393-70559-1

This is an interesting book that I think will appeal to those who have a psychoanalytic orientation and those who wish to learn more about this approach. Basically this is a book of two parts; part one presenting a variety of theoretical underpinnings regarding self-agency and part two focusing on the application of such to clinical work related to self-agency. The introduction poses the fundamental question of what does self-agency mean? In trying to address this question the author draws on contemporary developmental and neurobiological research on inter-subjectivity that subsequently provides a framework for the exploration of self-agency within the book.

Section one is made up of four chapters, offering the reader insight into self-agency from relational, developmental and neurobiological perspectives. Chapter one starts by challenging some traditional psychoanalytic theories, moves on to consider an integrated biological, developmental and relational model of psychotherapy which metamorphoses into an interpersonal model of which self-agency plays a central role. Considering how differing developmental models might have relevance for self-agency, useful examples are offered of how such theoretical understanding can be used to make sense of what might be presented in the clinical setting. Chapter two concerns itself with physical agency as an integral process of self-agency. From Stern to Fonagy, Knox presents research that relates to the way in which the infant's development of agency is predicated on relationships with primary caregivers. Again, two good case illustrations are used to demonstrate the application of theory. Chapter three, the neurobiological perspective, starts with a critique of the various domains of neurobiology and acknowledges the problems encountered in trying to integrate them into a coherent theory of developing self-agency. Chapter four, moves from action to more mature experiences of agency, namely imagination and symbolic thoughts and the subsequent ability to express agency through language rather than actions alone. Well known and contemporary studies are

used to highlight comparisons of those who have achieved self-agency and those whose self-agency remains under-developed and potentially problematic. For me I was disappointed that chapters three and four offered no clinical examples, when the examples in the former chapter had been helpful in applying theory to practice.

Section two concerns itself with the clinical aspects of self-agency. Chapter five focuses on the place of language and in particular it's potential to be coercive. Initially the work of Harold Pinter is used as a backcloth for demonstrating the nuances of language, setting the scene for the remainder of the chapter. The reader is reminded of the importance of therapeutically 'staying with' the patient as he/she works through some of the earlier developmental stages of self-agency manifesting through coercive indexical communication. Knox raises the notion of coercive communication on the part of the therapist albeit in response to the patient they are working with. For me, this raised the important issue of the interpersonal space that exists between client and therapist, and how, when used effectively, it can facilitate understanding of unconscious processes. Indeed Knox highlights the importance of focusing on the interpersonal space rather than spending time identifying specific mental content, leading to a discussion of therapeutic boundaries and the violation of such through various re-enactments. Finally, the chapter offers a Jungian perspective of regression with its potential to be used as an analytic tool, the therapist being akin to the 'containing parent' facilitating the 'child's' emotional development. This chapter offers good case examples, but I do wonder if they would be accessible to the novice psychotherapist. Chapter six focuses on 'fear of love' and how agency can become lost in a relationship. Early in the chapter case studies in terms of dreams are introduced and returned to throughout, applying theory to facilitate understanding and attribute meaning. The chapter concludes with the therapist's task of moving to a position of being open to alternative meanings rather than imposing their own interpretation on the

patient. Chapter seven explores how inhibited development of self-agency might contribute to a variety of addictive behaviours. Again a patient's dream is the vehicle for exploration and interpretation. In chapter eight the focus is on the therapeutic relationship and the centrality of unconscious processes ever present in the encounter. The managing of one's own affect, particularly when in response to the patient's emotional being, is discussed and a further case illustration is used to show how the therapist works with the patient towards individuation. The final chapter in part two raises the important issue of the effect the therapist's approach can have on the patient's self-agency. Inconclusive findings from research spanning 35 years regarding 'the best' therapeutic approach are presented, reaffirming the importance of the patient-therapist relationship. In a final post-script Knox addresses negative attribution both in infancy and in psychotherapy and how, for therapy to be successful the therapist needs to be mindful of what is happening in the therapeutic encounter as it is only then that the

patient will be able to gain or regain a sense of self-agency.

This is a well written book that will engage the reader through the application of theory to case illustrations. The research base is excellent, offering a trajectory of the way in which varying concepts of self-agency have developed. The application of such theories makes the book accessible, bringing clarity to what previously might have been considered difficult, complex concepts. Being familiar with psychoanalytic theories, I would have appreciated the neurobiological aspects being applied to a case illustration. That said, I would recommend this book to all whose work involves therapy as its strength lies in bringing understanding and meaning to the centrality of self-agency in human life.

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Psychotherapy and the highly sensitive person. Improving outcomes for that minority of people who are the majority of clients, by Elaine N. Aron, London, Routledge, 2010, 276 pp., £24.95, ISBN 978-0-415-80074-7

This is one of those books which lands in your lap at the right time. It guarantees to increase knowledge of high sensitivity thus helping the practitioner identify those with sensitivity, and therefore better able to help highly sensitive clients. Its specific power is in differentiating high sensitivity from shyness or neuroticism for example, or DSM Disorders such as Asperger's Syndrome. The book also touches on the very real and specific difficulties faced by men who have this trait. As a counsellor who has recognised high sensitivity in clients, this publication has already helped support a long-held view that high sensitivity, whilst problematic if not nurtured, is not a disorder. Indeed Elaine Aron suggests it can in fact reap great rewards for the individual. The concept and intention of this book are clearly stated in the Preface when the author tells the reader that he or she will quickly learn about high sensitivity and be able to separate it from other personality traits; in psychotherapy the practitioner will be able to validate the trait in their clients, separate it from what is going on in their lives and gain trust from under-

standing the client. Whilst this outcome is probably also dependent on additional reading and experience, these aims are met.

As discussed throughout the book, highly sensitive people have an innate temperament which is described as 'an awareness of subtleties in stimuli as well as a potential to be overwhelmed by too much stimuli' (p. 20) and occurs in 15–20% of the population. The extended title suggests that this minority makes up at least 50% of clients, highlighting the importance for psychotherapists to identify the trait and to learn the different set of issues which it presents.

The background to the book is an initial series of studies by Aron and Aron (1997) which looked at sensory processing sensitivity in psychology college students and mature non-students. This is detailed in an appendix which is best read prior to the main text. The products of this qualitative research were a greater insight into the characteristics of sensitive people and the creation of a measurement of high sensitivity (Highly Sensitive Person (HSP) Scale),