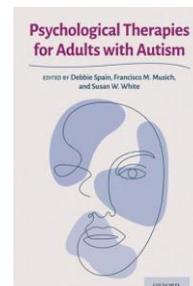


BOOK REVIEW

Psychological therapies for adults with autism (Spain, Musich & White, eds.)

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Psychological Therapies for Adults with Autism is an edited volume which provides a comprehensive review of various different styles of therapy, and their particular application for autistic adults. As the book points out, this is an under-researched area of practice: approaches to working therapeutically with autistic children have received much more attention, including in music therapy research. Music therapy is not one of the approaches included here, but regardless, there are plenty of insights which could be interesting for music therapists to consider.

It is heartening to see the prominent inclusion of autistic voices in Chapter 2 (Mason, Stark, Musich & Spain): five autistic adults and some of their parents write about their own experiences of a range of therapies, providing some valuable insights about the lived experience of therapy from an autistic perspective. However, other autistic perspectives, such as those of autistic therapists and researchers, were not highlighted in this volume.

The majority of the book consists of chapters which each describe a different therapy or therapeutic approach, along with illustrative case studies and suggestions for adapting each therapy for work with autistic adults. Examples include “Systemic Therapy”, “Cognitive Behavioral Therapy”, “Dialectical Behavior Therapy” and “Compassion Focused Therapy”. Some chapters examine therapeutic work with particular sub-groups within the autistic adult population, such as “University-Focused Interventions” and “Offender-Focused Interventions”. As might be expected, the individual chapters in this volume represent a range of approaches and attitudes towards working with autistic people, reflecting not only the inherent epistemologies of particular therapies, but also the theoretical stance of different authors.

There are some chapters which remain centered within older pathology paradigm / medical model approaches, i.e. the idea that there is one “right”, “normal” or “healthy” kind of human brain,

and “something wrong” with neurological configurations, such as autism, that differ from this (Walker, 2012). For example, autistic adults are described as “patients” (p.78) with “core difficulties in communication” (p.80) (Chapter 7, D’Agostino & Musich), and “limited insight or awareness” (p.122) (Chapter 10, Beck). Applied Behavioural Analysis (ABA) is advocated in Chapter 6 (Schall, Carr, Avellone & Wehman) and Chapter 10 (Beck), despite the fact that ABA has been widely criticised and described as harmful by autistic adults who received it as children (Bascom, 2012).

Other chapters take a more forward-looking approach which is more in line with the neurodiversity paradigm, i.e. the idea that neurological diversity is a natural, healthy and valuable form of human diversity, with no such thing as a “normal” kind of human brain: autism is situated as an aspect of identity rather than a disorder (Singer, 1998; Walker, 2012). For example, Chapter 9 (Chew et al.) describes autistic characteristics as “strengths and differences, rather than deficits” (p.116), and Chapter 14 (Acland & Spain) suggests daring “to be different” and appreciating “each other’s neurodiversity” (p.187). Music therapy discourse, in line with recent trends in autism research, is increasingly moving towards a neurodiversity-informed approach (Davies, 2022; Leza, 2020; Pickard et al., 2020).

In some chapters there is a welcome focus on the impact of societal perspectives and prejudice on the mental health of autistic individuals, such as Chapter 14 (Acland & Spain), which recognises that autistic adults often experience high levels of “peer victimisation, rejection and ostracism” (p.178), leading to underachievement and high levels of anxiety disorders and depression. Chapter 15 (Fisher & van Diest) points out that the social exclusion experienced by many autistic people can cause difficulty with coping with what might be considered a “typical life”, and the formation of “trauma memories” (p.194). Music therapists working with autistic adults may find it helpful to consider that some of the trauma experienced by autistic people may be related to their experience as a neurominority in a majority-allistic (non-autistic) society.

Moving the focus away from situating the “problem” of autism within the autistic individual provides room for a more holistic view of social communication, which places the responsibility for effective communication onto both autistic and allistic people, rather than simply blaming autistic people for failures in communication. In this volume, there is still a tendency to privilege allistic forms of communication, rather than regarding autistic forms of communication as equal but different. The book could have benefitted from a greater exploration of Damian Milton’s “double empathy problem” (Milton, 2012), which is mentioned only once in Chapter 2 (Mason, Stark, Musich & Spain) by Eloise, in relation to the fact that she “did not feel understood by the therapist” (p.10). The double empathy problem proposes that challenges in social communication between autistic and allistic people are in fact due to a compatibility problem between different communication styles, rather than an autistic deficit: adopting this perspective could have a radical influence upon music therapy practice, and would bring it more in line with contemporary perspectives in autism research.

In keeping with the range of views and approaches represented in this volume, the use of language around autism is equally varied, with some authors choosing to use person-first language (“adult with autism”) and others identity-first language (“autistic person”). The introduction to the book acknowledges the current debate about terminology to describe autistic people, correctly stating that both identity-first and person-first language have their advocates, before making the confusing assertion that “person-first” language is therefore “more inclusive” (p.3). It is true that the opinions

of non-verbal autistic people may be difficult to ascertain, however, since many autistic people have stated a strong preference for identity-first language (Walker, 2021) it is therefore inaccurate to claim that using first-person language is more inclusive. It is advisable, where possible, to check with an autistic individual about their preferred use of language, as preferences do vary.

Overall, I believe that this book makes an important contribution to contemporary discourse about therapy for autistic adults, with a great deal of information of potential interest to music therapists, including concise explanations of different forms of therapy, clinical examples and suggestions for adaptations to practice. Although some outdated concepts remain in parts of the book, and the presence of more modern theories of autism with relevance to therapeutic interaction (Milton, 2012) is significantly lacking, the overall breadth and thoroughness of the book makes for an interesting read.

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