

Book review

Rethinking research and professional practices in terms of relationality, subjectivity and power

Art psychotherapy and narrative therapy: An account of practitioner research

Author: Sheridan Linnell,
Series Editor: Bronwyn Davies
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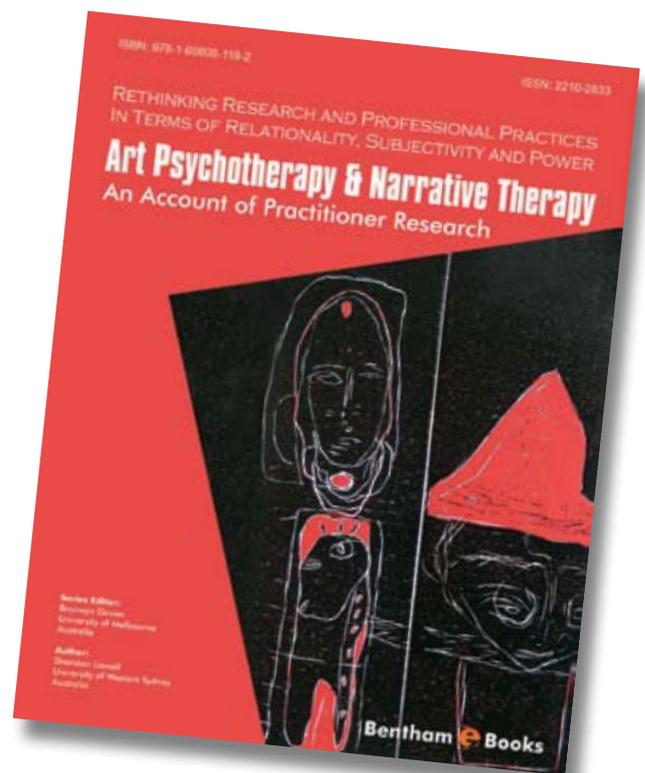
Reviewed by Dr Jan Allen

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Art psychotherapy and narrative therapy: An account of practitioner research, by Sheridan Linnell, is not for the faint-hearted. Having said that, and with my head still spinning as I attempt to stay with Sheridan's excursions into the "wonderland of philosophy" (p.88), I find myself excited by what I read/have read – and I confess to shouting a big YES to Circa (approximately a wolfhound), my sole companion today. I LOVE THIS '?...e-book?'

I say it's not for the faint hearted, as Sheridan has taken us on a whirlwind shopping spree (in a foreign country for some of us), inviting us to try on the fabric and explore the fabrication of post-structuralist theory, narrative therapy and art therapy practices and research, and how all these approaches might inter-relate. In her deep indigo 1960s jacket labelled 'Experience' as per Michel Foucault, and her more feminist soft silk opera jacket (perfect for cool summer evenings) selected from the 'girl theorists' range as per Kristeva, Clement, Cixous and Butler, she shows us the value of clothing ourselves in philosophies that can underpin, enhance and constrain arts therapy practice.

Sheridan suggests that her aim is to upset the applecart – or rather the medication trolley – and to challenge the taken-for-granted-ness of the status of the individual case study within art therapy literature. She also clearly states that she wishes to, and does, move



beyond the divide of "differing certainties of objective science and subjective experience" (p.95). A further aim is to find ways to bring psychoanalysis and narrative therapy to a place where each is far less at odds with the other.

In the first three chapters, Sheridan challenges a number of assumptions that are so often taken for granted in our work as arts therapists. If for no other reason than to scrutinise our values in practice, this book is a 'should read' for every arts therapist... I think!

The challenges particularly resonant for me concern Sheridan's view that the relationship between the artwork, the person coming to therapy and the therapist are mutually

constitutive rather than simply representational. For example, art-making can initiate the maker into a new place of being in, and of, the world. She cautions us to maintain critical scrutiny about how we look at art, as much as what we look at in the art. Art-making can be viewed not only as an expression and refinement of the maker's interiority, but it may inform us more about how we might better be in relationships with others, or how we might reconstruct and 're-story' our once firmly-held assumptions in entirely new and creative ways. This leads us to the possibility posited by Sheridan, that rather than understanding the authentic inner self as a goal of therapy, a primary goal might instead be to negotiate our interactions more fruitfully, and to direct therapy in ways that no longer reinforce positions of power and powerlessness, while remaining a vulnerable practitioner/ researcher.

In addition to shopping for and with philosophies, and the invitation to try on different philosophical garments, and to take up these and other challenges offered to the practice of art therapy and research, Sheridan also invites us into her poetics, sometimes written in the third person, in an alternative font, always colourful, evocative, moving and sensuous.

After-images burn into a blood red screen. She is swaying a little, allowing herself to be led. A madness in her methodology must eschew logical steps, seize her in its death-defying embrace and dance her to another beginning... (p.100)

The shift between styles is crafted beautifully. These shifts give us readers a breathing space, and an opportunity to feel connected to the author. There is, as I have previously noted, a great deal of dense and complex material here, but also poetry which is at the heart that opens us. As Sheridan notes: "...the heart does not precede the poem; it is embodied through the poem" (p.105).

In Chapters 5 and 6, Sheridan grounds the theoretical in the practical and offers us a showing of how to illuminate practice without resorting to the case study model.

In 'Close to home: The poethics of therapy with a young girl and her family' (Chapter 5), we are offered a series of interacting stories about the girl, the therapist, the therapist's daughter, the mother, Groovy Gran (the grandmother) and other people managing violence in their lives. Here the author draws attention to the processes of working with the young girl, as well as processes related to the telling of stories in different modalities and how the reading of these stories informs the mutual constitution of ethics and aesthetics in the service of enacting freedom, supporting us all to become other-than-what-we-were.

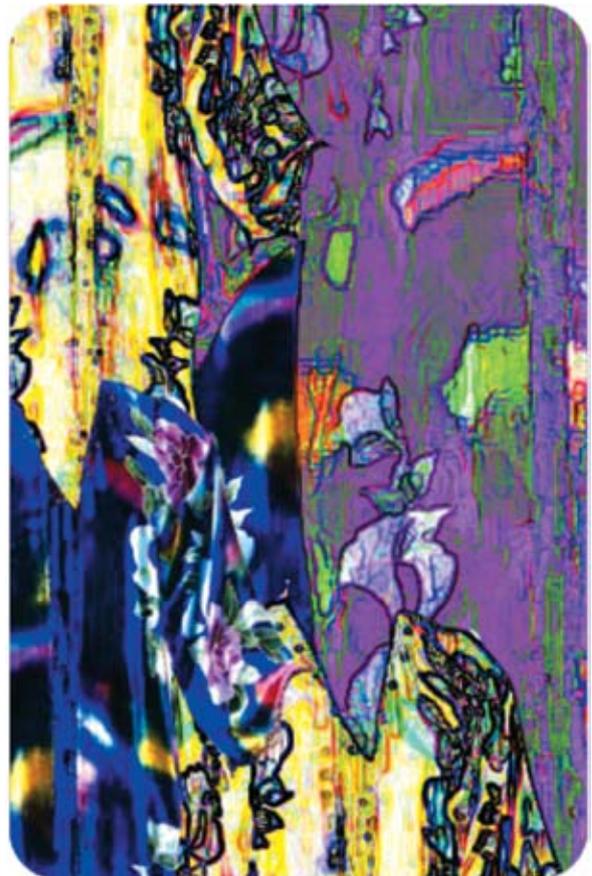
In Chapter 6, 'Becoming other-wise: A story of collaborative and narrative art therapy with two Indigenous kids 'in care'', Sheridan invites us to question the issues related to working with those who have been 'othered' through the processes of colonisation. She writes poetry and stories related to her work with two Indigenous community workers and two children who had been removed from their families. Again these stories intertwine with her stories, and those of Galiindurra's mob and broader cultural stories influenced by the legacies of Australia's stolen generation. Sheridan makes the point early in this chapter that Indigenous people are best positioned to work with their 'own'; however, in the situation she describes, there were no such workers available within the community. Thus the indigenous community workers became her close collaborators, partners and consultants in an attempt to reshape the dominant discourse of the 'expert white helping professional' that might affect such a diagnosis as: "she's ADHD and oppositional. Her mother is disordered. Her foster mother needs to provide more boundaries ..." (p.156).

In contrast to "they called that 'seeking attention' She told me not to give into that 'manipulation' That's not the Koori way..." (p.157).

Her interactions with the two children took place at bus stops, walking along streets, in the art studio, at others' places of work

and sometimes with Moonam Chomper, the therapist's blue cattle dog. What became therapeutic throughout these meetings varied from hand printing to talking with the dog and wondering what Moonam might say back. Alongside this therapeutic work, Sheridan calls for collective political action to address the effects of government policies and practices that continue to perpetrate injustice for Indigenous people.

We read how the 'I' of the author is also transformed, and in the final chapter, called 'Inconclusions (Where will it end?)', Sheridan explores different possibilities for thinking and doing ethical 'arts of existence'. This is a fine text where the tensions and connections between philosophy, theoretical traditions, the personal, the political, the narrative, the poetic and art are made explicit through the author's experiencing. And it doesn't have the last word...



*Opera jacket,
deep indigo,
silky – reminiscent
of the neighbouring women

Reviewer Jan Allen's visual response to the text.