

ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

Book Review by Nicki Wentholt

For

**Arts Therapies and the Mental Health of Children and Young
People: Contemporary Research Theory and Practice.**

Edited by

Hermann, U., Hills de Zárata, M., and Pitruzzella, S. (2021)

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Edited by Uwe Hermann, Margaret Hills de Zárate, and Salvo Pitruzzella this book is the first of a series to be published on the Arts Therapies and Mental Health of Children and Young People. The editors have carefully compiled contributions from England, Scotland, the Netherlands, Germany, Spain, Italy, Israel, and Trinidad Tobago. The book consists of an introduction followed by nine chapters with all the Arts Therapies disciplines represented.

The relevance and urgency of the book's theme, the mental health of children and young people, is immediately illustrated in the introduction, which is written by two of the three editors, Margaret Hills de Zárate and Uwe Hermann. The editors sketch the global context, the effects of globalisation, and the necessity for the Arts and Arts Therapies to be employed in the support of vulnerable and underprivileged children and young people.

Their introduction begins with a quote from Nelson Mandela taken from his speech at the launch of the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund, Mahlamba'ndlopfu, in Pretoria. Mandela stated that *"there is no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way it treats its children"* (Mandela, 1995). The introduction continues by telling us that a quarter of a century later a report published by the WHO-UNICEF-Lancet Commission (Clark et al., 2020) reveals that the social, physical, and psychological health of children and young people is more at risk than ever. By citing clear evidence the report advocates that *"early investments in children's health, education and development have benefits that compound throughout the child's lifetime, for their future children, and society as a whole"* (Clark et al., p 605)

We know that the problems children and young people face in our current society are numerous; child poverty, globalisation, racism, war, learning disabilities, physical conditions are named in the book as important contributing factors to their mental health. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) November 2021 Factsheet of Adolescent Mental Health, it is estimated that globally 1 in 7 (14%) of 10-19 year-olds experience mental health conditions, yet these remain largely unrecognised and untreated. Depression, anxiety, and behavioural disorders are among the leading causes of illness and disability for adolescents. The factsheet

states that the consequences of failing to address adolescent mental health extends into adulthood, with both physical and mental health impaired and opportunities limited for adults to lead fulfilling lives.

Even though the introduction and subsequent chapters are rewarding to read the content is often disturbing. A significant discussion is given to how too many children and young people across the globe find themselves in situations that offer no reason for joy or the opportunity for personal growth. The fact that this occurs in impoverished or less economically affluent societies or populations is not a surprise. Hermann and Hills de Zárte, again supported by well-informed research and statistics, name the impoverished socio-economic conditions that many children all too often find themselves in, and how this frequently results in a multitude of psychological difficulties that are detrimental to their lives in the short and long term.

Interestingly, the authors also point out that in societies and populations that are more economically affluent there is ample reason to also be concerned. They discuss how current childhood, in all these contexts, is becoming increasingly filled with highly controlled activities such as continuous digital developments and social media. Unquestionably these activities are detrimental to the building of resilience as they lack the essential aspects found in non-structured, creative play that builds healthy mental growth. Additionally, we are left to wonder what new statistics will emerge about the mental health of children and young people after two years of Covid-19 worldwide.

The introduction continues with careful underpinning and research from a range of reliable sources such as UNICEF and Children's Defense Fund. Their discussion creates a sense of urgency while indicating the reason to publish additional volumes in this series. They acknowledge the scope of the book is limited, both in the topics that address the mental health of children and young people but also because the cultural focus has primarily been on Western Europe. They intend to provide wider and new cultural perspectives in subsequent volumes and invite writers from countries in Asia, Africa, and South America.

As one reads it becomes clear that the editors have written from a place of deeply felt compassion and understanding of society's challenges for children and young people. Thoroughly informed by their own extensive clinical experience they impart an understanding of the potential impact the Arts and Arts Therapies can have for change. Reading their introduction is a must, a pleasure and a substantive preparation for all subsequent chapters. Here, Hermann and Hills-de Zarate have managed to create a wonderful holding for the nine following chapters that not only leaves one with a sense of urgency but an eagerness to continue reading.

The following is a short overview of the subjects the nine chapters cover and an impression of the diversity of settings and approaches. All the chapters show evidence of writing well embedded in theory and research. This makes for rich and diverse reading.

- In the first chapter Di Gammage from the UK describes a play psychotherapy approach and action-based pilot study for vulnerable children to build emotional resilience, set in a primary school at a point just before children transition into secondary school.
- Tali Gottfried from Israel, in chapter two, introduces a system of parallel Music Therapy sessions for children with autism and their neuro-typical caregivers to help strengthen the child-parent relationship. An evidence-based clinical model.
- Chapter three, Daniel Stolfi, from the UK & South Africa, draws on his expertise from Dramatherapy, Medical Anthropology, and puppetry to explore the role of puppetry and puppet-craft in clinical Dramatherapy practice. Included are aspects of the animating intelligence, inter-objectivity/subjectivity, therapeutic space, and 'spatiality' of puppetry.
- Rosemarie Samaritter, from The Netherlands, presents a research-based Dance Therapy model, considering DMT concepts with findings from neuropsychology and developmental psychology, to address the developmental problems of children and adolescents in psychotherapeutic care. She analyses and illustrates the shared corporal practice, dance-

informed core themes, working procedures, and relational modes and weaves these into clinical case examples.

- Situated in a high school in Trinidad and Tobago, Sarah Soo Hon looks at the impact of violence and, using participatory ethnographic research, investigates whether cultural arts practices might be relevant for improving the psychosocial wellbeing of adolescents.
- In the setting of an 'Education Centre' for young offenders in Spain, Maika Campo and Heidrun Panhofer describe a Dance Movement Therapy approach that is grounded on attachment theory and DMT concepts. This is illustrated by a case study of a young offender, dealing with his inner structure, attachment patterns, and trauma.
- From emptiness to symbol: a Ph.D. study researching the congenitally young blind child in Music Therapy by Heike Wrogemann-Becker from Germany, seen through a psychodynamic lens. Looking at delayed ego development and abilities to communicate and symbolise.
- Salvo Pitruzzella, from Italy, one of the three editors, presents us with a case study of an adolescent girl in a Dramatherapy group at a day centre for young people with personality disorders. He makes use of psychotherapy and neurosciences, carefully describing the adolescent brain which is at the height of its plasticity while grounding his practice and research on the hypothesis of the dramatic self.
- The ninth and last chapter is written by Sheena McGregor, Karen McLeod, and Michael Morton and exemplifies the development from an Art Therapist's pilot study (working with a young girl with a life-threatening cardiac condition) into an interdisciplinary programme at the Cardiac Art Therapy Clinic in Scotland. The disciplines are Art Therapy, Cardiology, and Liaison Psychiatry. It shows us how effective clinical practice in collaboration with other professionals can benefit many.

Naturally, with contributions coming from all four Arts Therapy disciplines and diverse cultures the theoretical frameworks differ; psychodynamic theory, attachment theory, arts-informed concepts, neurosciences, medical anthropology, to name a few. Also, when applicable, methods of research vary, such as action-

based, evidence-based, participatory ethnographic research, or arts-informed research.

Considering the historic background of the Arts Therapies and how after their emergence in the 1940's artists sought confirmation and understanding in psychological and psychotherapeutic theory for their work with complex clients, this book shows evidence that in the last decade, supported by new developments in neurosciences and neuropsychology, the focus in the Arts Therapies is coming back to the arts themselves, with their complex use of aesthetics and symbolism, and to elements of the specific arts forms that can effect change ((Koch 2017, Samaritter 2018, Samaritter 2019). Some writers emphasise this. For instance, in chapter three Daniel Stolfi pleads for a more arts-based practice approach whereby, to quote "*it is the art form and the art practice itself that is the therapeutic catalyst and evidence rather than aspiring or conforming to over-determined empirically grounded medical exploratory models.*" (pp. 57-58). And in chapter 4 on page 60 Rosemarie Samaritter, who states "*All interventions employed by a dance/movement therapist are derived from dance activities as are found in dance as socio-cultural practice*", informs us about dance-informed core themes and working procedures as basic therapeutic interventions. Hopefully, this development will continue to show in the next volumes.

Not only is this book of importance because it is extremely relevant in addressing the problems children and young people in our current societies encounter and how Arts Therapies can play a role in these, but also because this book offers a great platform for all the Arts Therapies, helping us keep an eye open to how other disciplines approach the same themes.

Some chapters might make one reflect how working in-depth in one discipline may potentially induce a tunnel or limited view. For instance, claiming a specific way of working - even claiming it as innovative and not seeing or knowing the similarities of that approach in another Arts Therapy discipline - shows how sadly compartmentalised the Arts Therapies sometimes can be. Surely, especially when writing and doing research, it should be advisable to strive to have a better overview of the whole arts therapies field, or at least to just look over the wall a bit? And even

better, to learn from the shared inherent characteristics from across the arts themselves!

To conclude, this book composed of input from the various arts therapies is an important and valuable addition and one does not need to be an arts therapist to read this book. The chapters are informative and well written and provide readers across the health and social care disciplines with insight into clinical practice, theory and research. And of course, it will be of particular interest for students of arts therapists and professionals as it will enhance their knowledge and broaden their professional and clinical horizons.

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About the author

Nicki Wentholt trained and worked as a dancer, later as a dance educator, coach, and choreographer at the Rotterdam Dance Academy training future dancers and dance educators. She recently retired from Codarts, University of the Arts in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, where for the last fourteen years she was head of the Master of Arts Therapies. Here she set up a Music Therapy Master alongside the already existing Dance Therapy master. She was also the representative from Codarts' Arts Therapies Master for ECArTE.