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Transference and countertransference from an attachment perspective: a guide for professional caregivers

by Una McCluskey and Michael O'Toole, Abingdon, Routledge, 2019, 136 pp., £29.99 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-367-34098-8

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BOOK REVIEW

Transference and countertransference from an attachment perspective: a guide for professional caregivers, by Una McCluskey and Michael O'Toole, Abingdon, Routledge, 2019, 136 pp., £29.99 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-367-34098-8

In this absorbing and engaging book, McCluskey and her co-author O'Toole set out both to provide therapists with a 'useful and simple map' to the choice of territory to explore with clients and the reasons for this and also to give a guide to identifying the many ways in which people communicate their most preoccupying concerns. This description, which is theirs, does not do justice to the originality and depth of knowledge which they bring to their material. Building particularly on the work of Heard and Lake on attachment-based exploratory interest-sharing, they in this book make a significant addition to McCluskey's earlier contributions to the rich body of work on the dynamics of attachment in adult life.

In the opening chapters, they give an inevitably condensed overview of the historical evolution of the understanding of transference, from Freud, via Fairbairn, Guntrip and neuroscience, through to the work of Bowlby, Ainsworth, Stern and others. They argue, along with Heard and Lake, that researchers and clinicians (and I would add those involved in social work education and practice) have focused on classifying a child's and adult's attachment style to some extent at the expense of exploring the dynamics of attachment in adult life. The main focus of these opening chapters is in discussing the work by Heard and Lake in extending Bowlby's attachment theory, and McCluskey's own work in building on theirs.

For the benefit of the reader who may be less familiar with their work, the authors remind us of the seven systems identified by Heard and Lake (1997). To their original delineation of the careseeking and caregiving systems as aspects of the self are added the sexual, the interest sharing, the defensive, the supportive or unsupportive internal environment and the supportive or unsupportive personally created external environment systems. With the exception (as the authors explore in chapters two and seven) of the system of the internal environment, which is not seen as goal-corrected, all these are biological and goal-corrected, and interact with each other. Heard and Lake called the theory underpinning their work 'the theory of attachment-based interest sharing', arguing that without the successful assuagement of care seeking, the individual's capacity for interest sharing with peers is compromised. In their last book, written together with Heard et al. (2009/2012), they propose that the seven different systems (or aspects of the self) work together in a single process whose function is to create as much well-being as possible for the individual. This they call the Restorative Process.

Emerging from this, and as far as I am aware explored here extensively for the first time, is the idea that one of these systems may form what the authors describe as the keystone in the functioning of the individual. This may be a source of strength: as in the example they give of the priest, who is himself aware of the significance to his well-being of interest-sharing and his externally created environment in assuaging the loneliness inherent in the lack of an intimate sexual relationship. In other instances, however, the lack of a satisfactory resolution in one aspect of self may infiltrate all other aspects of the individual's life, although this may be, and presumably frequently is, occluded from conscious awareness.

The authors argue, and through three detailed case studies convincingly demonstrate, that identifying one system as the key can guide the therapist in understanding and attuning sensitively to what is of dominating significance to the client. In the case of Rebekah, for

example, they show how it was crucial for the therapist to understand that the aspect of the self which was being presented for attention was the anxiety created by the threat to her personally created external environment, although she herself was only conscious of the experience of terror and paralysing fear and not its source.

In later chapters, they explore the ways in which these dynamics are enacted and responded to in a group context – in particular exploring the different patterns of interaction, which may occur in a group context when careseeking is aroused in one person and caregiving in another; and the ways in which the caregiver or therapist's responses will be different when it occurs in a group context rather than one-to-one therapy. A final chapter reviews McCluskey's research, and the contributions which findings from this and the work of other researchers have made to the authors' current practice of goal-corrected psychotherapy.

As with much of McCluskey's work, the book provides an exhilarating combination of a broad sweep of theory, originality of thinking and insights into the minutiae of practice. You never feel that you will be cornered in a discussion of complex issues into accepting any pat description or neat solution, and the authors' openness to engagement and further discovery is a constant. However, this breadth of ideas and sense of discovery comes at a price and is, as well as enlightening, also frustrating. You turn to the next chapter hoping that what had appeared to be central themes will be explored further, only to find that they have been seemingly abandoned and that the focus has moved on. Ideas such as that of the keystone system, introduced and fruitfully explored earlier in the text, appear to drop out of sight and are never returned to; and interesting though the two final chapters on group work and research are, they do feel rather tagged on to the main body of the text. I would have preferred instead a more detailed working out of the thinking in the earlier chapters.

This is undoubtedly a book which with its abundance of ideas and sophisticated application to practice has a great deal to offer all professional caregivers, and indeed others seeking a better understanding of the myriad challenges which we encounter in our everyday lives. On occasion, you wish that the authors could show readers the same attunement to their needs (for greater understanding or further explanation and application to practice), which they clearly show their clients and students. Perhaps in their next book – and I emphatically hope there will be one – they will achieve this too.

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