

Autism and Personality: Findings from the Tavistock Autism Workshop

Anne Alvarez and Susan Reid, Eds.

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This collection of essays considers autism from a psychodynamic perspective, and makes a rare but welcome link between ideas around attachment and resilience and autistic spectrum disorder. It does this through the authors' reflections on their work in the Autism Workshop of the Tavistock Clinic, provided through numerous case vignettes.

The book is split into two parts; theoretical and clinical developments, and case studies (although the first part includes shorter integrated case studies for illustrative purposes). Throughout this book the authors make links to areas such as transference and counter-transference; containment; projection; the importance of relationships and attunement; the impact of trauma and loss (on the family as well as the child); neurobiology; internal worlds; developmental models; reciprocity and the development of eye contact; the impact of puberty; the importance of communication and inter-agency collaboration; sub groups of autism; echolalia; mindlessness; attachment to objects and obsessions; sensory stimulation; and the significance of repetitive behaviours.

The case vignettes are engaging, and there is sufficient variety in these to sustain interest throughout the book. The authors skilfully avoid the use of jargonised language, and this along with the narrative style in which it is written make the book accessible and easily readable. This does not, however, compromise the quality or content. The authors' findings have implications for all parents of, and professionals involved with, children with autistic spectrum disorders. The book does not provide any easy answers or 'quick fixes,' but its critical style and ability to attach meaning to observations of the children makes one think deeply about one's own practice.

The psychoanalytical lens is a useful one through which to view autism, and yet little has been written on the matter. In this book the authors provide fascinating insights into the behaviours of the children observed by them, while making much-needed links to attachment theory. 'It often seems as though ordinary attachment processes have gone horribly awry. The child may be attached to his autistic object for social needs, for comfort, and a secure base.' (Alvarez, 1999, p.72) The authors consider what the children's attachment needs are for their levels of development, and it is this aspect of the book that I found most useful in relation to my practice. Thinking about attachment needs has encouraged me to assign meaning to children's behaviours that

would otherwise appear 'meaningless', and has in turn positively affected how I respond to these behaviours.

The only weakness I found in the book was that it is now over ten years old. While the evidence provided is still relevant, and indeed forward-thinking, many of the references are somewhat outdated. A small amount of the language used in the book also reflected its age, and words such as 'ordinary', 'ill', and 'cope' made me feel somewhat uncomfortable.

While this book is not specific to residential child care, that is not to say that it does not have something to offer residential practitioners. I would recommend this book to any professional working with children with autism and / or learning disabilities, in particular those seeking to develop their practice to a more advanced and meaningful level.

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