

David Winter

Book Review

PERSONIFACTION: USING THE DIALOGICAL SELF IN PSYCHOTHERAPY AND COUNSELLING

by John Rowan

Oxford: Routledge, 2009, Paperback, 168 pages, £ 19.99

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The notion that there are multiple aspects of the self, albeit described in different ways, has been put forward by authors from a range of theoretical traditions, including psychodynamic, humanistic, cognitive-behavioural, constructivist, and narrative schools. For the personal construct psychologist, perhaps the best known example of this approach is Miller Mair's (1977) metaphor of the person as a community of selves. John Rowan provides an integration of these various perspectives, attempting to move beyond arguments about the different definitions, and consequent reifications, of parts of the self, which he regards as "any aspect of the person which can be personified". His concern is not with the relative validity of the alternative views but primarily with their utility, particularly in therapy. This book represents a development in his own thinking, in which he discards the term subpersonalities, the title of one of his previous books, and replaces it by the notion of I-positions. This transition reflects the influence of work on the 'dialogical self' (Hermans, 2003).

The book provides the reader with a background to, and illustrations of, the use of personification in therapy, as well as a vision of an integrative approach to psychotherapy drawing upon this concept. Although covering a wealth of material in a relatively small number of pages, it could have been written more carefully in that there is a certain amount of repetition and some

approaches appear to be considered under inappropriate headings (e.g., Jeffrey Young's schema theory under the heading of assimilation theory and person-centred and Gestalt therapy in a section on the dialogical self). The terms constructivism and constructionism tend to be used interchangeably (so that, for example, the first sentence under the heading of 'The varieties of social constructionism' refers to 'the basic case of social constructivism'), and perhaps a clearer distinction between these two positions would have enabled the tempering of such statements as "Constructivists have a bad habit of making an excellent case for the primacy of discourse, and then letting themselves down by denying the importance of realism." The writing itself seems to reflect different I-positions, ranging from the more academic and impersonal to the more conversational and less precise (e.g., "The thing about questions deserves some further words here.")

In its final chapters, the book considers ways forward, including moving beyond the individual person to group work and the transpersonal realm. The latter section, continuing the author's previous work in this area, is perhaps the most innovative part of the book, and points to such intriguing possibilities as that the real self, the soul, and the spirit might be treated as I-positions. The chapters on group work and the transpersonal are sprinkled with such statements

as “Personification can be very useful here”, but the reader might at times be left wishing for more details of exactly how, and for clearer connections between the ideas described in earlier sections of the book and those on which these chapters focus.

In conclusion, this book provides a brief and tantalising glimpse of the integrative potential of the notion of the multiplicity of the person, and the therapeutic possibilities of personification.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Winter is Professor of Clinical Psychology and Programme Director of the Doctorate in Clinical Psychology at the University of Hertfordshire and Head of Clinical Psychology Services for Barnet in Barnet, Enfield and Haringey Mental Health National Health Service Trust. He has worked in the British National Health Service for 35 years, applying personal construct psychology in his clinical practice and research, and has over 100 publications in this area and on psychotherapy research, including *Personal Construct*

Psychology in Clinical Practice: Theory, Research and Applications (1992/4; Routledge) and *Personal Construct Psychotherapy: Advances in Theory, Practice and Research* (with Linda Viney; 2005; Whurr/Wiley). He is a Fellow of the British Psychological Society and has chaired its Psychotherapy Section. He is registered as a personal construct psychotherapist with the UK Council for Psychotherapy and chaired the Council’s Research Committee. He is also a Director of the Centre for Personal Construct Psychology.
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