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Introducing Winnicott

Book review

Jacobs, M (1995) **Winnicott.** London: Sage. 163 pages. ISBN 0-8039-8596-7.

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This little book on Winnicott, by Michael Jacobs, is part of the Sage series - "Key figures in counselling and psychotherapy". It follows the same structure as other titles in the series and begins with a biographical sketch. This is followed by a review of Winnicott's major contributions to theory and practice, a chapter on criticisms and rebuttals of his work , and an evaluation of his influence. The book ends with a select bibliography of Winnicott's works.

The book strikes me as a good introduction to Winnicott's key ideas. It provides a survey of the scope of his ideas, and a critical appraisal of their place and value in the context of the helping professions. Readers who are already acquainted with Winnicott's work will find little of interest by way of new interpretation of his ideas, but may be interested by the author's interpretation of the biographical context of his work, his account of how Winnicott's work has been received and of why it has been thus received.

The first chapter of the book on Winnicott's life is the one which most interested me. It is filled with entertaining anecdotal material, some of which is presented here for the first time (there has to date been no major biography of Winnicott). This material throws light on various personal and intellectual influences on Winnicott's work. His ideas and clinical practice are subjected to a kind of psychoanalysis, as if they were his symptoms. A half credible account begins to emerge of why Winnicott thought the things he did, or at least why it is not surprising to find these ideas emerging out of his life story. It is not uncommon to find ideas being psychoanalysed in the biographies of psychoanalysts, and one may well ask what useful purpose it serves. However, in defence of the book only one chapter is devoted to this pursuit and the book does after all purport to be an introduction to Winnicott, rather than a comprehensive investigation of his ideas. Besides, the story of the person provides quite a few quotables for the psychoanalytic reading group. How about Clare Winnicott (his second wife) saying that Winnicott suffered from delusions of benignity? What about the following piece of correspondence between James and Alix Strachey in which James (Winnicott's analyst), at the time breaking confidentiality, reveals a few indiscreet details about his analysand? "James refers at one point to poor little Winnie

[suggesting] today that perhaps he pumped (urinated) over his ma at the moment of his birth'; and Alix appears to suggest that for Winnicott to end analysis he would perhaps need to fuck his wife all of a sudden'." (Jacobs, 1995:14). A picture is painted of a Winnicott of whom it is said "even his naughtiness ... is told in a way which seems intended to charm." (p5). Jacobs professes an interest in talking about that which is not well articulated in the existing biographical literature, Winnicott's darker side; but does no more than point in that direction, without ever discovering it. The Winnicott biography remains to be written and Jacobs's ideas do not pretend to be, and are no more than, a foray in this direction.

In the opening chapter Jacobs draws our attention to the influence of Darwin on the schoolboy Winnicott, and sees this influence as being quite fundamental to his understanding of human development, reflected in his concern with environmental provision and failure, survival, adaptation and creativity. Jacobs also talks about the influence of Freud on Winnicott the medical student, and the influences that accrued through Winnicott's involvement with the family of psychoanalysts. It was quite surprising to me to realise just how incestuous the psychoanalytic scene was in those early years. For example, Winnicott analysed Klein's son and Klein analysed Winnicott's second wife, and this while they were colleagues in the same small world.

The strongest image of Winnicott which emerges is of him as an independent thinker who was inclined not to need to borrow authority for his views, perhaps to the extent of sometimes not acknowledging indebtedness when it was due. His work is, for better or for worse, lacking in obeisance to received ideas. He was a clinician who saw himself drawing on his *experience* as the primary source of ideas and depicted his ideas as deriving from reflection on his therapeutic work. Jacobs's book suggests that this accounts for why he is the psychoanalyst with the widest following amongst psychotherapists outside of the psychoanalytic flock. His papers are not burdened, like so much psychoanalytic writing, with in-house terms and controversies. One can read almost any one of Winnicott's papers and understand it without having a specialist knowledge of the tradition. He is largely non-sectarian in his approach and is often thought about as the key figure in the so-called middle-school or independent tradition of psychoanalysis in Britain. He avoided getting involved in the rivalries which split British psychoanalysis at the time (Klein/Freud), and his non-aligned approach has not lent itself to becoming a movement. There certainly has never been a group that call themselves Winnicotteans and indications are that Winnicott would have disapproved of the idea of having followers, such was his belief in creativity and independence. He himself originally had strong ties to Melanie Klein and was a Kleinian training analyst, but was apparently not ambitious in an institutional sense, and was unable or unwilling to do whatever it took to rise to positions of power and influence in the psychoanalytic firmament.

Winnicott's theoretical relation to Klein is fully investigated in Ogden's (1990) book The matrix of the mind. Jacobs, on the other hand, does not go much further in understanding the similarities and differences between their work than to show that Winnicott was more inclined to speak of needs than drives and more inclined to theorise in terms of the dynamics of environmental provision than he was to talk of the achievements of infant fantasy. Winnicott's work is given a much greater theoretical significance in Ogden's book than it is in Jacobs's book and Jacobs seems to downplay his theoretical achievements. Whatever the real value of Winnicott's work , Jacobs

makes the point that it has never been given the serious reading and re-reading that Klein's work is subjected to, and Winnicott has never enjoyed the same status or influence as Klein. Although his thinking coheres into something that might well be called "Winnicottean" his legacy of writings is not presented in the form of an extended theoretical exposition or a coherent philosophy. He wrote many individual papers and for the most part his books are compilations of these. Quite a lot of these were developed in the context of public talks and broadcasts and Jacobs suggests that Winnicott wished to communicate his ideas in a way that could be consumed by a public hungry for the kind of knowledge which psychoanalysis has to offer. Winnicott's papers usually include neat, easy to grasp summaries. This practice is indicative of the general tenor of his writing, which was directed to a more general readership as compared to so much of psychoanalytic writing, written for the knowing and the initiated. Winnicott's work is characterised by a quirky, whimsical style, but which is quite masterful in conveying a general sense of issues which really deserve a much lengthier treatment, This tendency is most evident in his summaries. For example on the question of how to work with regressed patients he says: "The analyst would be there, on time, alive, breathing." (Jacobs, 1995:82). This is a good example of the effectiveness of Winnicott's non-technical style of communication. Any interested reader would get the basic message and Winnicott is effective to this extent. But, as Jacobs points out, the ideas contained in this kind of writing are not always fully developed in the preceding text, and in many instances not ever.

I would have liked to have read more in this book about Winnicott's public health involvement. Winnicott had his own public service consultancy and in the war was involved in designing programmes for the care of child evacuees. Being both a paediatrician and a psychoanalyst he was subjected to a different set of demands than are most analysts. He was faced with questions which he could not but answer directly, he had to give advice and he had to find ways of communicating to an ill-prepared (in terms of background understanding) public. As a paediatrician he was in constant communication with primary care givers (mostly mothers) and needed to develop ways of speaking which could be used in these contexts, that is, in dealing with a public with an appetite for useful information about mental health and child-rearing. Here the arcana of psychoanalytic theory were as good as useless, and his contributions in making psychoanalysis more accessible must be regarded as an important achievement. In his development of the "spatula" and "squiggle" games he adapted the epistemological intricacies of psychoanalytic practice/interpretation into practical communication methods. His language lends itself to practical appropriation and this may account for his popularity amongst psychotherapists, counsellors and child care workers.

The second and third chapters in Jacobs's book are devoted to understanding Winnicott's contributions to theory and practice. In the chapter on theory the author provides succinct summaries of Winnicott's major ideas which are probably useful for those wanting to get an overview of his work, or those wishing to check if they have grasped the basic ideas. The concepts of illusion, transitional phenomena, guilt and the capacity for concern, the ability to be alone, and a number of other central concepts are well described. The chapter on practice describes the "spatula" and "squiggle" games and describes Winnicott's approach to therapeutic regression. Winnicott's caseload included many deeply disturbed patients and in this context he developed novel contributions to our understanding of the holding and containing of regression.

Comments on Winnicott's views about touch in therapy, speaking his mind in therapy, and answering questions directly are addressed in Jacobs's book, and make for appreciation of Winnicott as an original thinker and pioneering therapist.

The final two chapters of Jacobs's book consider criticisms and rebuttals of Winnicott's work and evaluate his influence. It seems that his work has not attracted much attention by way of criticism. However, there are areas which have attracted some criticism and one of these, as Jacobs points out, is Winnicott's overriding concern with the maternal parenting function. His preoccupation with mothers and his overvaluing of their role in development is one of the few areas of controversy associated with his work. Some feminists have not taken kindly to the functions he has ascribed to mothers or to his statements to the effect that only one person can properly care for the infant. His work is said to show little appreciation of the sociology of mothering and particularly the social reproduction of mothering.

Winnicott has been accused before of running with the hares and hunting with the hounds. It may be said that his beguiling way served to divert attention from, or smooth over theoretical inconsistencies and tensions. Jacobs says that he made little attempt at integrating his ideas into a single edifice and has possibly avoided tackling contradictions in his own work, and between his work and the work of others. Most of his work is presented in the form of compilations of papers. The book **Human nature** was incomplete at the time of his death and was an attempt to bring together his various contributions into a single theoretical framework. Whether or not Winnicott developed a distinctive masterplot of human development is a moot question.

The final chapter is devoted to Winnicott's influence. Winnicott is cast as having had little influence on wider intellectual culture, that is, outside of the field of psychoanalysis, psychotherapy, counselling and child-care work. Although he did write on democracy and various social issues, he is not regarded as being an important writer outside of the psychological domain. There has been very little philosophical scrutiny of his work. The one piece of philosophical attention which was paid to Winnicott's concept of transitional objects, found his work wanting. There has been a good deal of criticism of this concept, but it has not been subjected to much research attention, in spite of lending itself to empirical scrutiny (eg. the question of the universality of transitional objects).

Winnicott's ideas have had some influence in America and Europe and there has been some exchange of ideas with Lacanians about the mirror stage, but finally the interest in and influence of his work has been a piecemeal affair. However, one doesn't have to be a follower to find his work valuable and his ideas can be taken in bits, that is, one does not have to buy into a theoretical framework before one finds his work useful. Jacobs suggests that Winnicott's work has been seen by psychotherapists as a liberating affirmation of the need to find one's own way of working. Winnicott's work is strongly characterised in this book as championing the value of creativity and originality. However, the book shows that many of Winnicott's ideas, such as the transitional object and even the spatula game (compare Freud's *fort-da* game) are not entirely original. Jacobs suggests that Winnicott's work encourages therapists to make ideas their own, and Winnicott's creative application of received ideas is seen as a good example of this.

The book might be compared to another introductory book also titled **Winnicott**, written by Adam Phillips as part of the Fontana Modern Master's series (Phillips, 1988). I would say that the books are more or less on a par. Phillips's book is more of an insider account. He obviously subscribes to many of the ideas himself, whereas Jacobs's book gives the impression of an outsider looking in. Another difference is that Phillips gives a more thematic treatment, which is intellectually more stimulating, but is probably not as handy as Jacobs's book with respect to finding reference to a particular facet of Winnicott's work.

Finally, Jacobs's book makes for easy reading and does not require one to have a psychoanalytic dictionary on hand. I imagine that social workers, psychologists and child-care workers who are curious about Winnicott's contribution, but not sure where to start, would do well to start here.

REFERENCES.

Ogden,T (1990) **The matrix of the mind: Object relations in the psychoanalytic dialogue.** Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson.

Phillips A (1988) **Winnicott.** London: Fontana.