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The Psychodynamics of Social Networking, by Aaron Balick, London: Karnac, 2014, 188pp, £23.99 (Pbk.), ISBN: 978-1-78049-092-2.

In his new book, psychotherapist and academic Aaron Balick offers a detailed, scholarly reading of the phenomenon of social networking and online lives, considered through a relational psychoanalytic paradigm. Balick himself is no stranger to the online world, as a cursory Google search shows, and his experience lends credence to his claims. This is a timely book, as headlines announce the tenth birthday of Facebook. Over six chapters, Balick develops his argument that the online social world is now as much a place where subjectivities meet as the physical world, with important and novel consequences for our psyches. Human beings have always communicated remotely about and with each other, through visual art, writing, music and the telephone, for example. What is it about websites such as Facebook and Twitter that make the latest forms of virtual and symbolic relating so compelling, as well as problematical?

Throughout the book, he draws on theories of object relations, such as Winnicott's (1969) use of an object, and contemporary relational work such as Jessica Benjamin's theory of inter-subjectivity and mutuality (Eg. Benjamin, 2004). Balick coherently crafts an argument for taking psychoanalytic ideas out of the therapeutic space, and into the non-clinical domain. This is necessary, he suggests, because the absence of 'real-life' relational cues in online meeting places creates fertile ground for phantasy, projection and splitting. On websites such as Facebook and Twitter, recognition and mutuality *appear* to be more easily accessible than the complex, messy and time-consuming reality of relating in the physical world. Instant relational gratification is available at the click of a mouse, our desire to recognize and be recognized compelling us to use social networking sites "in droves" (p22).

The problem, or potential problem, argues Balick, is that the nature of social relating is different online. Here, mutuality can be illusory. He weaves fast food metaphors with the theory of inter-subjectivity to illuminate what is different in online communication. Through the instantaneous Facebook 'Like' or Twitter 're-tweet', we can experience the other not as subject, but object. This is the core pathology, as such, and occurs as a result of the nature and difficulty in managing difference online suggests Balick. Tolerating difference, recognizing another's subjectivity, and having one's own subjectivity recognized in turn, is central to a relational theory of mutual recognition, to which Balick returns throughout.

It seems that we don't tolerate difference very well in our online lives. By engaging in online social networking, the experience of mutual relating is mediated and changed. As we experience ourselves reflected back through our own statements, and those of others, the solitary yet highly public nature of the communication provides us with a different, and not necessarily psychically healthy experience, compared with the possibilities of face-to-face interaction. This is particularly evident in the nature of the responses that we elicit online. Virtually instant, and devoid of nuance and emotional regulation

clues in the form of facial expression or tone of voice, our phantasied internal objects are given free rein.

Balick goes on to suggest that the online social network can however function as a container of sorts, a “social third” (p50), albeit one that can be experienced as unreliable. Comparing this to the analytic third, facilitating holding and a therapeutic experience of subjective relating, Balick suggests that social media may have a tendency to insert “false self” experiences (Winnicott, 1982) into what would otherwise be a private, or true-self domain. This can be rather satisfying, in a non-nourishing sense, and so a reliance on the recognition by others of what is essentially a false-self begins to develop, eliciting further false-self communication and experience; the therapeutic process in reverse. Further to this false-self elicitation, social networks can encourage in those who are susceptible a narcissistic projection (rather than “creating” narcissism as some newspaper headlines have in the past suggested). The news is not all bad though, and there are benefits to online social networks. Citing evidence from research that finds that just like in ‘real’ life, people differentiate between online friends in the level of intimacy of their communication, reserving their most personal relationships for a few who are also usually also closest offline. Balick argues that online social networks can offer a good enough facilitating environment, and one that is potentially reparative.

Balick’s ideas are persuasive; academically and clinically useful, and I have been reminded of times when clients have brought stories of being disappointed, or hurt, by something that an online ‘friend’ had, or had not done to them. Readers looking for case studies will find just one in chapter 2. Here Balick relates how our online footprints can impinge on therapy in unexpected ways if we are sought out by clients who at times may be looking for more contact than that which is possible in the therapeutic hour. His example of ‘virtual impingement’ (p31) should lead us to question much of what we may have learnt in our training about boundaries, and the importance of not disclosing information about ourselves that may distort the therapeutic relationship. If we are to have any kind of online presence, which I imagine few can afford not to these days, then we are discoverable in ways that would only a few years ago have been implausible. Although this is the only extended clinical discussion in the book, Balick draws relational parallels throughout the chapters between what happens in the therapeutic dyad, and what can be experienced through online social networks, suggesting:

Across the online social network, we are both objectified and subjectified; we seek recognition for our true selves while being compelled to present our false selves; we struggle with intrapsychic object relations while seeking the satisfaction of intersubjective interaction. The online social networking environment, alongside other operations of the Internet in general, provides a transitional space in which this work occurs. This work is occurring down to the very level of our identities, which are more and more becoming expressed both on and offline (p126-127).

Chapter 3 functions as a genealogical account, tracing the historical and cultural development of the discourses associated with social networking. Further chapters discuss the extent to which online relating satisfies our need to be held in mind by others, leading to a discussion of the implications of social networking for the construction of contemporary identities. Drawing on clinical theory, Balick compares the boundary-less nature of online relating to the highly bounded psychoanalytic session, to argue that the uncontained-ness of social networking can result in anxiety, depression and loneliness. He also critiques the fact that to date, psychoanalysis has avoided thinking about the role that social networking plays in our patients' lives. He argues that like it or not, online life is a psychic reality now for very many, particularly those generations of 'digital natives' for whom social networking is unquestioned; "...virtual relating is real and...is different" (p157).

Although our need to relate, recognize and be recognized has not changed, throughout his book Balick argues that the 'architecture' within which relating takes place has altered. And this new social space may well be changing us in turn, leading to a call for detailed qualitative phenomenological and psychosocial research. I hope that researchers will take up his challenge, and continue the useful and thought-provoking work that Aaron Balick has started.

References:

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