

Martha Stark - Modes of Therapeutic Action

(Published by Jason Aronson, 2000)

A wonderful book - well worth reading for all advanced psychotherapy trainees and experienced psychotherapists... I found this to be a powerful collection of clearly thought through theoretical constructions and clinical applications - There are many wonderful clinical vignettes as well as thought provoking insights...

The book is written by a psychoanalyst for psychoanalysts - however it is very easy to translate the major themes into TA and I imagine other forms of depth psychotherapy. It has become famous for the idea Stark presents of one / one and a half or two person psychology as descriptors of 3 different approaches or models of psychoanalysis - It is very clear to me that the same descriptions can be used to describe TA psychotherapy... She describes in depth the roles of model one / two and three psychotherapists and describes wonderfully how each approach can be used in the many case vignettes used throughout the book.

Stark's contention is that one form is not better than the others - and at different times a psychotherapist will need to use each approach with all their clients... depending on their assessment of what is needed by the client at any given time.

From my perspective as a TA psychotherapist I found myself believing there must be a better way of describing this... Thinking about the core values of TA - people are OK and the desire to promote open communication and OK - OK relationships I found myself asking how can any therapist be half a person - or worse not count at all - While not liking this as a simple descriptor for the 3 approaches I was both excited and intrigued by the detailed descriptions of these 3 approaches / models which I believe will contribute greatly to our understanding of the therapeutic work.

My criticisms of the book are relatively minor compared to the contribution I believe Stark is making and the delight and interest I had while reading the book. Only rarely did I find myself disagreeing with her approach such as when she refuses to touch the client who so needed / wanted to be held. In one short section I was annoyed by her description of the "need for patients to be recognised" and wondered why she has not read Berne's description of stroke / stimulus hunger which was published some 20 years prior to the author she refers to. Finally a drawback for me was that the book became very repetitive, Stark uses the same approach to understanding many slight variations of psychoanalytic themes a recapitulation of the major theme - and several times I wanted to say = "Yes I have got it - I understand!" This repetition might be more relevant to a variety of psychoanalysts who might describe themselves as being in one or another psychoanalytical school such as being object-relationalists or followers of Kohut etc but began to be too detailed an argument for me which distracted from the major theme of the otherwise excellent book.

One Person Psychology - (Model 1 psychotherapists)

The therapist is focussed on the insight and knowledge of the client and uses interpretations to increase the clients awareness of their internal worlds and intra-psychic process. Stark relates this approach to classical psychoanalysis - I would relate it clearly to many TA approaches which seek to increase the clients awareness and so facilitate Adult functioning and understanding.

One and a half person psychology - (Model two psychotherapists)

The therapist is focussed on the client's experience - the internal experience of the client is recognised through empathic transactions and acknowledgement... This is described as one and a half as the therapist seeks to enter the client's world to empathically understand and attune to provide an effective corrective experience for the client.- Stark refers to self psychology or object relations theory - where in TA we can reflect on the many writings and approaches to the client emphasised by writers such as Erskine. The therapist is described as half a person in this description by Stark as the therapist seeks to enter the client's world rather than bringing her / himself fully into the relationship... In my view this is only subtly different from the model 3 TA psychotherapist - and will only work if the therapist is indeed fully aware of their own experience and can use this to understand the client's experience - so from my view the difference between model two and three therapists is their intention and therefore their different interventions. I found myself thinking of Carl Rogers as well as the core values of TA which emphasises the importance of the genuine / real relationship in which the client can experience their therapist being empathic - and how this has greatly influenced the humanistic psychotherapy. I wondered if the psychoanalysts are beginning to acknowledge the importance of these approaches - including the section of Stark on the importance of the client seeking recognition - which was very much like TA's basic assumption of the stroke and stimulus hunger.

Two Person Psychology - (Model 3 therapists)

Stark refers to the importance of relationship including a real relationship between the real psychotherapist with their own subjective experience and the client's own subjective experience and the understanding of how this relationship is co-created... a theme very familiar to contemporary TA psychotherapists. Here the emphasis is on the living relationship rather than the therapist "moving into the client's world to empathically understand the client"

Stark then wonderfully provides many clear vignettes and theoretical descriptions of how these three approaches lead to different styles of interventions - each of which an effective therapist must master - as at times the client will require a therapist using a model one / two and three approach.

Other highlights:

Projective Identification: However overall this is a wonderfully readable and helpful analysis of how to be an effective psychotherapist - With perhaps the best description of the how to understand transference and counter-transference I have read. I was especially helped by the repeated descriptions and clinical vignettes demonstrating the importance and use of projective identification - I certainly have not come across a better description of the process including clear and understandable case examples... I believe that this itself would make the book a must read book! for all psychotherapists.

Unwittingly seductive psychotherapists... a wonderfully written and very challenging section - which I would recommend as essential reading for all psychotherapists!

To conclude this is a wonderful book which I would encourage you to read!

Dave Spenceley TSTA - March 2011....