

# Asperger's in the therapy room

Following a packed workshop generating a huge amount of interest, **PETER FLOWERDEW** introduces the first in a series of articles about working with clients who have been, or may be, diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome.

**A**S I WRITE this it is exactly three years since I started working with my first client who had a diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome. This client was referred to me because of my interest in people on the autistic spectrum. Much of my skill in tuning to their experiential world is due to my relationship with my grandson, and my desire to help other children on the autistic spectrum with whom I have come into contact through the work of my charity which provides counselling and psychotherapy to young people between the ages of 9 and 25.

I currently have five private clients who either recognise themselves, or have formal diagnosis, as having Asperger's syndrome and four others who have strong enough traits that they need to be taken into account. I also have two teenage clients and supervise therapeutic work with three others.

When I began this work I approached it in the same way I would working with someone of different ethnicity and culture: making no assumptions; asking the client to educate me about their relational and experiential world. As I worked more with the adult clients I realised that I was dealing with such a difference of relational experience and subjective meaning and perception that I found the task of entering their subjective world far more challenging than any cultural difference. One of my clients was able to convey to me his perceptions, thoughts and feelings (somatic reactions) in a variety of situations and relationships with such clarity as to reveal to me what was more like a parallel universe, and that is my current state of conceptualising the relationship between the subjective reality of neuro-typicals (NTs) and the subjective reality of those with Asperger's syndrome (Aspies). The NTs think that they understand what the Aspies are communicating, but they don't; and the Aspies do their best to understand what is going on around them in a world defined by social dynamics that are invisible to them. There is misunderstanding, misattunement, hurt and grief for all concerned.

This has at times been a very uncomfortable ride. I had to question what psychotherapy has to offer this client

group; what is the form of the therapeutic relationship; and in particular the ethical issue of what is actually up for change and what is beyond change because of the neurobiological basis of Asperger's. The question of an appropriate style and appropriate objectives for therapy is far from being an academic issue because, unfortunately I have now met a number of Aspies who have had very negative experiences of Rogerian style counselling, and I now have a clear insight as to why this modality is fundamentally unsuitable for Aspie clients.

What I have heard from many Aspies is that of all the psychological and therapeutic models available it is Transactional Analysis that is most accessible and most useful to them. I was extremely fortunate in that, that first client had many years of TA training and used TA to make sense of the behaviours of the people around him and to manage relationships in his private life and at work. We have not only been able to use TA models and concepts in the therapy sessions, my client has also been able to reframe some elements to express the differences in the experiential world of the Aspie and the neurotypical.

I presented a workshop at this year's conference entitled Asperger's in the therapy room: working with a different kind of mind. The greatest problem I had in preparing the workshop was condensing the information I had into such a limited time while still delivering something coherent and useful. This was hugely enhanced by my TA-trained Aspie client offering to assist me. We endeavoured to create an experience that combined a didactic presentation with a dialogue between representatives of the NT and the Aspie universes, which would also be a demonstration of the 'What I have heard from many [clients] is that of all the psychological and therapeutic models available it is Transactional Analysis that is most accessible and most useful to them.'

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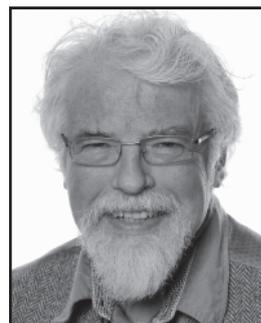
‘It is a regular experience for me to feel privileged and humbled by the courage and generosity of spirit that [a person with Asperger’s syndrome] brings to the therapeutic relationship.’

communication style and the pacing required in any therapeutic dialogue. The attendance for the workshop, the number of people identifying that they had either a private or professional relationship with an Aspie, and the response from those attending to what we offered them was beyond our expectation.

We are developing an Aspie 101, a parallel to the standard TA 101 where core theory is re-presented in a way that describes Aspie personality and communication; games and scripts from an Aspie perspective and the stroke economy and relational needs of Aspies. We intend to present the TA101 and Aspie 101 in parallel; two projectors two screens two commentaries, with a dialogue between the two presenters, in a manner similar to that we used at the conference. The hope is that the NTs will gain a greater insight into the world of Aspies and be more skilled in creating relational space in which they can experience being welcome and safe and Aspies can gain some insight into the inner world of NTs and gain some control of how NTs perceive them. Because of the challenges of creating this channel of communication between the Aspie experience and the NT experience this parallel presentation will truly represent an ‘I’m OK – you’re OK’ collaboration between me and my clients and it is a regular experience for me to feel privileged and humbled by the courage and generosity of spirit that they bring to the therapeutic relationship.

In addition to this, I wish to share with the TA community what I have learnt about identifying and working with Aspie characteristics and I intend to present a series of articles in this magazine on the nature of Asperger’s syndrome, its basis in neurobiology, the childhood experience and adaptations of children with Asperger’s, which is often not diagnosed until adulthood, the implications for therapeutic work with people with these characteristics, and the adaptation of classical TA to provide concepts and tools to empower Aspie clients.

These articles will capture the emergent and tentative nature of my attempts to capture the Aspie experience within a TA framework. It seems to me that it is probably also the emergence of a process whereby neurobiology and psychological tests, which allow us to identify different kinds of minds, are assisting the development of different kinds of therapy for these different kinds of mind. I hope that the articles will be both interesting and useful to the TA community.



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