

Riikonen, E. and Smith, G.M. (1997). *Re-imagining therapy: Living conversations and relational knowing*. London: Sage, 180 pages.

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“What is a word? It is an action, a social act; a weapon, a symbol, a caress, a threat, a gesture, a promise. What is a conversation? It is a place to live in, a game to play, enjoy or survive, a common reality, a small kingdom with its own rules. It can be a harsh place, it can be bliss” (18).

When participating in academic conversations on the topic of psychotherapy, where issues such as process, effectiveness, theoretical perspectives, or empirical agendas are manifest, we often find ourselves talking in objectified scientific terms. While this way of talking is meaningful in the sense that it constitutes sense-making, coordination and progress in our work, our meetings with full-time practitioners (particularly in educational contexts) can lack a certain aesthetic quality. Yes, practitioners are often intrigued by the theoretical perspectives that we have to offer (and indeed express that they have ‘missed’ this contact to academia) but there is something about the terms we employ that can omit the experience of the *artistry* (including relational connectedness) of therapy. In my own experience, I have learned that contact to practice provides a tremendously enriching exchange and compilation of my theoretical input and their artistry.

Yet, Riikonen and Smith’s *Re-imagining therapy* tends to capture theory, artistry, and more. Central to the authors’ understanding of therapeutic practice is a focus on the transformative power of ‘living’ conversation. In their view, “...words are never harmless. They are gates to all kinds of things. They are music. They are tools to affect people” (18). Riikonen and Smith do not only apply their belief in the power of words to therapeutic practice, but employ in their book a polyvocal writing style (including theoretical presentations, dialogues, fictional material, and therapeutic conversations) that grant the reader the aesthetic experience of their use-based account of language. The authors are so effective in their efforts that the reader is drawn into conversation with the text, rather than remaining a passive recipient.

Riikonen and Smith apply a therapeutic approach that in many ways is informed by Shotter’s (i.e. 1993) rhetorical-responsive version of social constructionism. Taking an angle somewhat different

from other social constructionists (for example Kenneth Gergen), Shotter focuses on words *in* their speaking or living moments in dialogue, thereby attempting to illuminate social constructionism from experiences within (rather than outside) conversational processes. Riikonen and Smith take many of Shotter's ideas into therapeutic practice, which they describe as "...a continuous development and reshaping of providential realities" (170), and write about their use of concepts such as: the ambiguity of meaning and the transformative power of 'living' conversation, the complexity of shared social worlds and the possibilities for discursive variation, moral positioning as opposed to objective determination, the requirements for good interaction, and emotions as "embodied understanding" that reflect moral and relational orientations. As a reflection of inspiration drawn from narrative therapy (i.e. White and Epston, 1990) and the solution-focused therapies (i.e. de Shazer, 1991) Riikonen and Smith include considerations of politics and power in therapy and the generative potential of a focus on resources (or "signs of shared promise"). Deliberation on the possibilities for research and training practices that can capture their participatory, in-the-moment views on therapeutic processes is also included.

Riikonen and Smith's emphasis on the relational and dynamic nature of therapeutic interaction renders *Re-imagining Therapy* relevant to readers in the psychotherapeutic profession with diverse theoretical interests. Even further, the relevance of Riikonen and Smith's conversational focus extends beyond therapy and into other forms of social action.

The book is poetic, playful and theoretically stimulating. Riikonen and Smith's ability to successfully pull off their polyvocal writing style is impressive. In fact, as the writing style offered in this review does not offer a similar polyvocal content, I can only suggest that you read the book.

References

de Shazer, S. (1991). *Putting difference to work*. New York: Norton.

Shotter, J. (1993). *Conversational realities: Constructing life through language*. London: Sage.

White, M. & Epston, D. (1990). *Narrative means to therapeutic ends*. New York: Norton.