David Malan and Patricia Coughlin Della Selva

Lives Transformed: A Revolutionary Method of Dynamic Psychotherapy


Don Meadows

Most readers of this journal will be familiar with the name of David Malan, either through his widely used textbook Individual Psychotherapy and the Science of Psychodynamics or through his work on brief psychotherapy. The full impact of the present book is graphically shown by reference to some words of Malan’s, written nearly thirty years ago, which he describes as a fantasy. They are worth quoting in full.

‘A method of psychotherapy is developed that is based entirely on psychodynamic principles; it is applicable to a high proportion of non-psychotic patients; therapeutic effects appear within the first few sessions; and the whole neurosis disappears, so that termination comes smoothly, sometimes within 15 to 40 sessions, or within 70 with some more difficult patients; at termination no trace of the original disturbances can be found; long-term follow-up shows that this position is maintained; moreover, certain adverse phenomena that bedevil traditional dynamic psychotherapy and psychoanalysis—such as regression, intense sexualized or dependent transference, acting out, and difficulties over termination—do not become a problem. Finally, it is possible to train other therapists in the required technique, leading to the hope that the efficiency of therapeutic clinics is greatly increased, and waiting lists are much reduced.’

The authors then add these words: ‘The above passage is adapted from an article that appeared more than 25 years ago … and the present book is concerned with evidence that this fantasy has been fulfilled.’ (p. 3)
This is the most extraordinary book on psychotherapy I have ever read. Having said that, I suspect it would only strike someone in that way if they had been trained in one or other of the varieties of psychoanalysis and/or psychodynamic psychotherapy. This is not surprising when the style of therapy, Intensive Short Term Dynamic Psychotherapy (henceforth ISTDP), originated with Habib Davanloo who was originally trained as a psychoanalyst. The co-author of the present book, clinical psychologist Patricia Coughlin Della Silva, is one of Davanloo’s most outstanding former trainees and is currently Adjunct Professor of Psychiatry at Albany Medical College, Albany, NY. Malan was championing Davanloo’s work decades ago in its earlier stages, and has now seen it come to fruition.

The first of the book’s four parts is taken up with a brief overview of the process of ISTDP, including a discussion of the authors’ deliberate move away from attempting random clinical testing, complete with double blinds, etc. Then follows a chapter introducing the theory and technique of ISTDP drawing heavily on the work of Davanloo. This first part concludes with a discussion of the literature and empirical support for the procedure.

The heart of the book, full of quite astonishing moments for practitioners and trainees in psychodynamic and psychoanalytic psychotherapy, is a series of four fairly detailed case studies of clients treated by Coughlin Della Selva. They include excerpts of dialogue (Coughlin routinely videotapes her sessions with clients), with special attention paid to the first session. On the basis of this session David Malan and Jennifer Malan, an educational psychologist, each give a formulation that comprises a dynamic hypothesis, prediction of issues to be dealt with and of issues likely to lead to therapeutic effects, and criteria for a successful outcome. At this stage the two assessors were blind to subsequent therapy and its outcomes.

The case studies include people who would previously have been judged as unsuitable for brief psychotherapy. They present with, variously, a marked narcissistic personality disorder, extreme childhood abuse and an intransigent somatic disorder of long standing. For anyone used to dealing with such clients in a psychodynamic mode, the results of the therapy for once merit the use of the term ‘stunning’.

The third part of the book is four chapters of general discussion looking at the correlation between predictions and outcomes; key aspects of the initial evaluation; aspects of the process, especially the focus on affect; important items of technique; and significant details of the outcomes.

Part four is a recapitulation and summary of the discussion followed by a coda added after the initial publication that draws out the parallel between the sequence of the pathology and the sequence of the therapy.
A relatively brief review cannot do justice to the detail in the case studies and the discussion following, but it may be helpful to pick out some of the key similarities with and differences from more conventional psychoanalysis and psychotherapy.

The biggest single contrast for me was the intense activity of the therapist. This will ring alarm bells for some practitioners, but the authors are clear that this is deliberate, carefully structured and essential to the work. The focus is on unconscious feelings and the defences used to avoid their emergence into consciousness. The theory behind it is standard psychoanalytical thought, including defences, transference, unconscious thought and feeling, internal dynamics and the links between past, present and here-and-now. It is worth emphasising this because the initial impression among more traditional practitioners is likely to be that the book is an attempt to sell snake-oil. Nothing could be more wrong: as the authors point out, ‘These phenomena go back to Freud, who observed them all.’ (p. 319)

The biggest differences in approach are two: free-floating attention is replaced by focussed activity, and interpretation is replaced by inquiry into the patients’ actual feelings and the dismantling of the defences used to avoid them. One of the key elements of this approach is the use of the alliance with the patient to join against the defences, which usually originate in childhood and while helpful then have since become the problem.

The margins of my review copy are studded with comparisons with Freud (especially on the dynamics of the psyche), Anna Freud (defences), Kohut (empathy and the transformations of narcissism), Fairbairn (the alliance), Reich (bodily experience), Bowlby (attachment and its vicissitudes) and Klein (fantasy, and yes, spelt so, for these come from childhood rather than infancy).

Dreams do not figure in the treatment or in the discussion. Instead the authors draw attention to an experience Davanloo has called ‘dreaming while awake … a vivid experiencing of buried feelings, timeless and often near-hallucinatory, as befits any kind of feeling just emerging from the unconscious.’ (p. 274) The authors go beyond Davanloo in giving this experience a particular significance in the therapy, needing elaboration by the patient at the encouragement of an alert and experienced therapist. This is a form of making the unconscious conscious which, the authors believe, is often not made explicit because the therapist does not pursue the living detail of the hidden fantasy. The authors see this experience as possibly ‘a hitherto unrecognized state of consciousness’; in the light of such comments other practitioners may well reflect and re-examine some previously puzzling moments in therapy.

If dreams do not fulfil their traditional psychoanalytic role, is there some other royal road to the unconscious? The authors don’t put the question in these terms,
but the answer has to be yes; the role is taken on by affect, and reaching the hidden affect is the goal of joining with the patient in the task of seeing, understanding and finally dismantling and reshaping the defences of childhood.

Can any client work in this way? The authors place great emphasis on the importance of the first session and the trial approaches the therapist makes to the patient’s defences. In addition significant weight is given to the traditional issue of ego strength and its indicators: relationship history, work history and so on. The answer seems to be no, not just anyone can work this way, but the number of those who can may be larger than anticipated.

The authors are also aware that when therapists see such results, it may give the impression that they are not hard to achieve. Malan and Coughlin Della Selva go to some trouble to emphasise the level of skill required and the sheer hard work and experience needed to achieve it. They are offering not a panacea but a change in standard psychoanalytic technique that could see more clients treated more successfully in much less time. They are well aware that ‘among some therapists trained in traditional methods, there is considerable resistance against even hearing about this technique. Perhaps they can be forgiven, because these results taken out of context do seem to be almost unbelievable.’ (p. 320) Hence no doubt the insistence on the careful way the outcome of the therapy is verified, with the changes taking place and the increased robustness of the patient holding well and even growing up to 10 years after the original therapy.

This is an exciting and disturbing book. Its detailed exposition needs to be given a full and fair reading. The patients may not be the only ones who might appreciate a change.

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