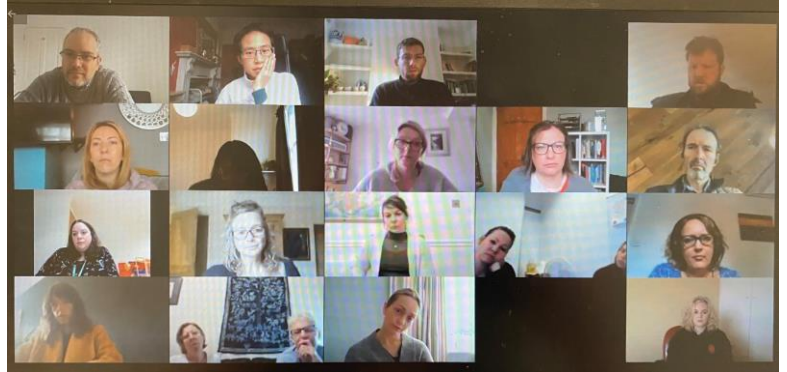


The 41st Arts Therapies Forensic Conference

Monday 12th October 2020 – 9am to 1pm
Online via Zoom Video Conferencing

The Forensic Arts Therapies Advisory Group (FATAG) was established in the late 1990's to assist Continuous Professional Development and networking of arts therapists working in prisons and secure hospitals.



Welcome and Introduction

Lorna Downing began the day welcoming attendees to a new online format for this conference using the video conferencing application 'Zoom'. This format has become all too familiar this year in light of the Covid-19 pandemic. Following some housekeeping and online introductions, Lorna started with an experiential opening to help us arrive together in the virtual space.

We were encouraged to take a few moments to close our eyes, breathe, gather ourselves and begin attuning our attention to the most distant sounds we could hear from the space we were occupying. Following this, we moved our listening focus closer inwards, starting with the building inhabiting us, and further (or closer) moving to the sounds inside the body. The process of *zooming in* seemed to help “make space to be in today”, as Lorna had suggested, a space that we could be in “together, and apart” despite the physical distance.

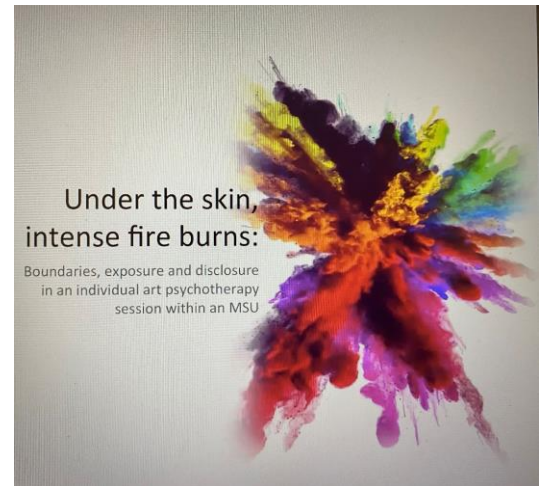
Lorna then guided us through a physical exploration of the boundaries of the screen. This encouraged some movement and stretching to start the day and explored our body's need for physicality. It also brought us together and encouraged close connection at a distance. This physical distance was noted, when Jess Collier and Lorna, welcomed attendees from overseas, including the Netherlands, and as far as Australia.

Jess warmly introduced Aimee Parker's case study presentation, and acknowledged how exceptional it was to meet online. She did also bring attention to what is lost in not being able to meet in person; the connection in the presence of each other, our bodies being physically in the room.

Case Study Presentation – by Aimee Parker

‘Under the skin, the intense fire burns: boundaries, exposure and disclosure in an individual art psychotherapy session within a Medium Secure Unit’

Aimee Parker is a registered Art Psychotherapist specialising in forensics, and more recently, in attachment work with children and families. Since qualifying in 2014, Aimee has worked as an Art Psychotherapist with a variety of client groups, including eating disorders, brain injury, acute services and forensics. Her clinical interests include trauma and early relational trauma, culture and identity and their links with offending behaviour.



Aimee’s rich and engaging presentation gave an insight into the challenges and possibilities of individual art psychotherapy on a rehabilitation ward within a Medium Secure Unit. With reference to moving case material around issues including boundaries, exposure and disclosure with one individual patient she has been working with, Aimee shared images they had made and her own art to give a closer sense of the therapist-patient dyad in the clinical work.

Skin, which Aimee described “both as a barrier and a communicator”, was explored and referred to throughout the presentation; the theme of boundaries seeming prevalent throughout the conference. Aimee gave a broad overview of the patient, both clinical and non-clinical, in an attempt to give a sense of his personality, and highlighted the relevance of how some of these details played out in (and out) of sessions.

Using a forensic history timeline, looking into early and adolescent years and relational trauma and relationships, Aimee discussed the significance of applying attachment theory to the work with the patient. Aimee shared some of the challenges of working with an individual with complex diagnoses, disorganised attachment and sexualised offending behaviour, bringing to light her strong countertransference responses to their defensive, controlling strategies and feelings of shame and rejection through exposure and disclosure. Aimee expressed some of the challenges that she had to withstand and bear. She pointed out the risk of not being aware of these countertransference feelings, and the need for using supervision, to avoid re-traumatising the patient by presenting a vulnerable attachment figure and re-enforcing the pain of a fragmented and disorganised attachment.

The presentation further explored the patients need to push and pull in the dyad and the need to be “playing with the relationship”. The sharing of artwork, both the patient’s and some of Aimee’s response work, helped to visualise and make sense of the patient

seeking to “reveal” and then “retreat”; to be exposed and to disclose, and to find ways of making the boundaries murkier. Aimee referred to the likelihood of boundaries being breached in-between the ward and session, and how this can often be where a significant part of the work can take place in forensics.

Aimee further noted Esther Bick’s exploration of the primary skin function to hold things together, as a sort of ‘psychic skin’. Often referenced in arts therapies as providing a container, this helped expand on the possibilities of ‘skin’ as boundary – both creating a barrier and as a communicator. The artwork gave a closer insight into some of the patient’s shame, disgust and powerlessness and his need to split staff and make others feel how he was feeling within his own skin. Some references to specific skin sensitivities and tattoos also came into this thinking. Aimee explained that she had made art alongside the patient, as exposure was a recurring theme coming up in the work. She told us how this helped ease his anxieties around this, making him feel less “watched”.

The presentation finished with Aimee exploring considerations of the patient’s identity, drawing on the context of the artwork shared. Particularly poignant was the image Aimee shared of her own artwork, portraying a predator and prey figure. She spoke about the possibility of both individuals being represented through the vulnerable and dangerous, but that the patient identified with the ‘small creature’.

Aimee went on to consider further support for the patient in the future, particularly with the clinical work having been disrupted by covid-19. An image made by the patient of transition, and potentially hope, was shared. It showed buildings he had referred to as “safe and happy memories.” Aimee wondered if there was potential for work with a focus on mentalisation to be done, where there might be “a way of being in the world that is bearable, maybe even enjoyable.”

Questions following the presentation

Below is an outline of the questions that came up following the presentation –

Power, privilege and difference. How was race depicted in the artwork?

Aimee spoke about these all coming up within the work, but not explicitly – more through the covering up and revealing, and in the exploration of exposure and shame.

There was a question about liminal space / transitional space in-between, particularly when Aimee mentioned the boundaries becoming murky and tested in the corridors and stairwells etc. on the way to and from the therapy sessions.

Aimee spoke about the risks of small talk and these spaces as being often ‘where the crux of therapy happens.’ There may be a need to breach the boundaries to communicate not feeling safe.

There was also mention of “our own hostility towards patients – shaming them unconsciously” through our inter-personal actions on the unit. This also related to some of the maternal shaming exposure and shaming from a gang in this clinical work example.

There were more questions in the chat feature. One comment noted the relation between the ‘blurred boundaries’ being discussed and the precision in the images.

Business Meeting

Lorna initially gave a summary from feedback and data gathered from the survey earlier in the year, with particular emphasis on the effects of Covid-19. Visual representations of the data were shared on the screen so it was clear to all attendees. Questions related to necessary changes that staff have had to make within their particular areas and how people have had to adapt to working in the height of a pandemic. It was interesting to see the ways in which therapists have responded to the situation, in particular through alternative modes of communication with both peers and patients.

Positive adaptations were noted such as some individual work being more positive, rather than group work, finding creative ways of working online and alternative methods of communication even with the necessity of PPE. However, Lorna did also highlight the potential associations with gang affiliation wearing a mask may trigger for some patients.

From the survey the following feedback was identified in regards to accessing the FATAG conference virtually;

- There was a comment about allowing us to access a “space to think”
- Allowing “coherent guidelines”
- Giving the possibility of “interactivity”
- Helping explore ways of working with physical distancing
- There was also a comment about the main body members being a “clique”. This was discussed later in the conference and some members explained how this might be perceived. The family feel of the conference was noted by some members, but also the need to come together and for this network to exist.

Lorna offered an opportunity to do a live interactive poll in regards to the FATAG website, and the prospect of a re-vamp. Lorna asked for any suggestions with this and encouraged contact regarding any ideas about a makeover.

Finance information was shared revealing an annual loss as things stand, but Lorna re-assured us that this was not currently a concern.

The next **FATAG** conference is planned to take place on **Friday January 22nd** to coincide with the launch for the new book 'Arts Psychotherapies and Sexual Offending' edited by Simon Hastilow and Marian Liebmann. It is likely the conference will take place online, or at least will be a blended conference to make sure it is more accessible.

Break out groups: An opportunity for smaller group connection

Attendees went into 'breakout' groups on Zoom and giving an opportunity to meet new people.

This chance to meet on a smaller scale gave time to connect in a more personal way. It allowed groups to get to know each other and the different areas we may work in, to discuss key themes raised from today's presentation, or even to be creative together.

The whole group met at the end to share feedback from these small groups.

Speaking on behalf of our group, members presented a varied level of experience and an opportunity to meet and share their insights or ideas about working in forensic services.

Boundaries were a key topic raised in our discussions: boundaries being broken, becoming murky and unclear or their highlighting issues around trust arising in organisations. As a trainee, this was my first experience of a FATAG conference. I was struck by the holding and containment that coming together as a community like this gave. One member of the group also commented on the presentation's richness and relatability to their own experience of working in a different secure unit. They commented on how helpful this was in realising some of how their own work may take shape, including countertransference and consistent attacks on the boundaries. I was reminded of a comment made earlier where a FATAG member explained that the organisation was set up to give a "chance to connect and survive with colleagues."

Feedback to larger group and closing words

Some key points mentioned in the large group are noted below;

- Barriers of wearing masks and the effect on boundaries.
- A music therapist shared some insights in their practice and some specifics about the modality in forensics. They also asked if there were other music therapists to connect with attending the conference.
- The iceberg analogy was referenced in terms of how much we decide to show and how much is held underneath.
- The 'box' of a zoom tile was mentioned and the importance of playfulness and creativity.
- Identity as an art therapist was questioned, and the potential for losing and re-gaining this.
- Others commented on the possibilities having smaller breakout groups gave, especially to connect in an intergenerational way with such varied levels of experience in the field and the cross-modality connection made possible with different people from different professional backgrounds.

Experiential Ending – Lisa Griffiths

Lisa Griffiths finished the conference with an engaging experiential ending, which is hard to summarise, and I wish not to do it an injustice, such was the playfulness it brought to the space. Exchanges of gifts offered and received using “octopus hands” was a personal strong highlight for me.

Having an opportunity to connect through movement allowed a greater sense of connection to book end the day. There was a real reminder of ‘touch’ with encouragement to give ourselves a tight hug - giving well-deserved love to ourselves both outside and inside the body.

Final Comments

There was a final request from Jess Collier to encourage any professionals or trainees to submit articles to the International Journal of Forensic Psychotherapy co-edited by Jess Collier and Carine Minne. The editors are eager to include original arts psychotherapies papers on clinical work and research and international submissions are particularly encouraged.

<https://firingthemind.com/product/ijfp-2-1-2/>

The day finished with a comment on how enriching and nourishing the connection between people had been, despite the challenges of meeting online. As a trainee, I can vouch for this. There were so many elements to take away from this experience and I look forward to the next conference on **Friday January 22nd**

Written by Lloyd Smith, Art Psychotherapy trainee.

