Right brain psychotherapy

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One of the core reasons for the continued interest of the neuroscientific research community in laterality is its strong link to psychopathology. Reduced or reversed hemispheric asymmetries have been observed in several developmental and neuropsychiatric disorders such as schizophrenia (Hirnstein & Hugdahl, 2014), autism spectrum disorder (Markou, Ahtam, & Papadatou-Pastou, 2017), and dyslexia (Eglinton & Annett, 1994). Large numbers of scientific papers investigating laterality in these disorders have been published. For example, as of May 2019, the scientific search engine PubMed lists well over 1900 papers for the search term “schizophrenia laterality”.

Given this ubiquity of studies investing the relation between laterality and psychopathology, it is somewhat surprising that comparatively few researchers have tried to systematically integrate laterality research with psychotherapy. Therefore, it is refreshing to see that Allan N. Schore, the author of “Right Brain Psychotherapy”, wrote a book that aims to do exactly that: outlining how our knowledge of the specific functions of the left and right hemisphere could help make psychotherapy more efficient.

So what is the book about? In 1983, John Banmen from the University of British Colombia wrote in the International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling (pp. 99):

This article […] recommends that therapists become more aware of the potential role that the right hemisphere can have in the therapeutic process. (Banmen, 1983)

The author of “Right Brain Psychotherapy” took this advice to heart, as his book is centred around the importance of right-hemispheric brain functions for successful psychotherapy. I am not aware of any previously published book on the topic of laterality in psychotherapy. A book that is somewhat akin in spirit (and gets cited in “Right Brain Psychotherapy” quite often) is “The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World” by Iain McGilchrist (2012), the first edition of which has been reviewed by Lesley Rogers in Laterality (Rogers, 2011). Like Schore, McGilchrist also reviews a wide range of laterality findings and puts them into a new perspective. However, unlike Schore, McGilchrist focuses on how laterality has affected personality, culture and society in general and does not primarily apply these findings to psychotherapy. Thus, “Right Brain Psychotherapy” has a unique perspective within the larger laterality book canon.

Overall, the volume consists of nine chapters and an extensive reference list on 356 pages. In Chapter 1 (“Implications of Recent Advances in Neuroscience for the Interpersonal Neurobiological Paradigm of Psychotherapy”), Allan N. Schore
describes his basic idea of so-called “interpersonal neurobiology”, e.g., using neuroscientific findings to gain a better understanding of emotional relationships between two individuals. He specifically highlights recent neuroimaging studies investigating activities in two brains at the same time and how this research reveals a critical role of the right hemisphere for social interactions. Chapter 2 (“The Right Brain is Dominant in Psychotherapy”) reviews empirical evidence for a dominant role of the right hemisphere in emotion processing, social interactions, the self and unconscious processing, and how these hemispheric specializations make the right hemisphere critical in psychotherapy. Chapters 3 and 4 (“The Growth-Promoting Role of Mutual Regressions in Deep Psychotherapy: Part One and Part Two”) focus on the role of regression, e.g., returning to the mental state of earlier stages of development during psychotherapy. The author cites evidence to demonstrate “that the right hemisphere is the psychobiological substrate of the human unconscious mind” (p. 45) and that due to differential developmental trajectories between the hemispheres, the right hemisphere is “dominant in human infancy” (p. 45). Indeed, there is a widely cited 1997 paper by Chiron and co-workers published in Brain that is entitled “The right brain hemisphere is dominant in human infants”. It showed stronger right- than left-hemispheric cerebral blood flow in children aged one to three years (Chiron et al., 1997). So while there is some empirical evidence for the idea that the right hemisphere is dominant in infancy, from a laterality researcher’s perspective, any claim that one hemisphere is generally dominant during a whole life phase almost certainly is exaggerated and oversimplified. Indeed, there is clear evidence that there are also cognitive systems that show a left dominance in infancy. For example, Vannasing et al. (2016) showed a clear left-hemispheric dominance for language processing in one-day old infants. Thus, a more balanced view of hemispheric asymmetries in infancy would have been a great addition to these chapters. In the remaining parts of chapters 3 and 4, the author develops the idea that regression represents a switch towards right-hemispheric networks and that mutual regression of both patient and therapist can be utilized in psychotherapy. Chapter 5 (“How Love Opens Creativity, Play and the Arts through Early Right Brain Development”) outlines the hypothesis that the relational capacity to engage in mutual love is generated in the developing right hemisphere, due to faster early development of this hemisphere.

The remaining chapters are comprised of two conference keynote transcripts (Chapter 6 “Moving Forward: New Findings on the Right Brain and Their Implications for Psychoanalysis. Keynote Address to the American Psychological Association Division of Psychoanalysis 2017 Conference”, and Chapter 9 “Looking Back and Looking Forward: Our Professional and Personal Journey. Keynote Address to the 2014 UCLA Conference “Affect Regulation and the Healing of the Self”) and two interviews with the author (Chapter 7 “On the Same Wavelength: How Our Emotional Brain is Shaped by Human Relationships – Interview with Daniela F. Sieff”, and Chapter 8 “Allan Schore on the Science of the Art of Psychotherapy – Interview with David Bullard”). While interesting to read, these later chapters felt a bit disconnected from the rest of the book to me, as they read like more of an appendix than an integral component of the main part of
the book (especially Chapter 9 which is more or less an autobiography of the author).

So who should read “Right Brain Psychotherapy”? It is mainly a book written by a psychotherapist for other psychotherapists, and as such, it certainly provides an interesting new perspective for any clinician who is interested in laterality. Not a psychotherapist myself, I needed to look up a few terms, e.g., “transference” and “countertransference”, but in general I found the book enjoyable to read and easy to understand with some basic psychology knowledge.

Beyond that, I think the book also has a lot to offer to anyone with a general interest in laterality research. Being interdisciplinary in the best sense of the word, it is quite remarkable how Alan N. Schore connects psychotherapy research with neuroscientific laterality research, two fields that rarely interact and have very different scientific traditions. The book gives a lot of food for thought – I found myself more than once seeing a familiar laterality paper in a new light, after reading which implications the findings of this paper may have for psychotherapy. “Right Brain Psychotherapy” has an extensive reference list that includes lots of up-to-date neuroscience literature, but a few assumptions taken from the literature felt a bit oversimplified. For example, the author equates “the right brain” with “the emotional brain”, not discussing substantial evidence for left-hemispheric contributions to emotion processing. Also, some statements like “At this moment in time, the present current leadership reflects the imbalance, reflecting increased left hemisphere power motivation at the expense of or disregard for right-hemispheric communal welfare.” (p. 210) seem rather farfetched from a basic neuroscience perspective, but these are minor issues in an overall thought-stimulating and elegantly written work. One thing I thought was curious is that the book has a strong focus on basic neuroscience literature on lateralized brain functions, but almost never mentions the literature on atypical laterality in psychopathology. It would have been interesting to read the author’s opinion on why so many psychopathologies share an increased prevalence of reduced or reversed hemispheric asymmetries – but maybe that is a topic for another book altogether.

The large majority of laterality papers at some point in the introduction or discussion mention the great relevance of the field for the understanding of psychopathologies. Also, many grant applications that involve laterality research state that the proposed project can somehow benefit the understanding of these disorders. The implication here is, of course, that the research in the long run somehow could help in aiding therapeutic treatment and increase the well-being of patients with mental disorders. However, finding actual applications of laterality research findings in clinical practice is very rare. For that reason, “Right Brain Psychotherapy” is an important and timely addition to the laterality literature as it suggests such application. I hope that it inspires more researchers to investigate possible applications of laterality research in psychotherapy, as this highly relevant field certainly deserves much more exploration.
References


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