

## Book Review

# Face to Face with Children: The Life and Work of Clare Winnicott

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*“From conception onwards, the ways in which living creatures are treated affect the ways in which they treat others of their species.”*  
Dorothy Lewis (1992, p. 383)

While a careful search of used and out-of-print volumes will unearth a collection of Clare Winnicott's papers written between 1954 and 1963 (Child Care and Social Work, 1964), Joel Kanter has recently made the details of her life and work widely available to social work audiences. His book is a comprehensive effort to orient Clare Britton Winnicott's (1907-1984) work within the context of her own life, beginning with her family of origin and extending through her role as the curator of her husband's legacy. While American audiences know her almost solely in these roles of daughter, sister, analyst, and wife, Kanter's book allows us to study her as one of the social work matriarchs in our history, placing her in the company of Addams, Richmond, Towle, and Reynolds. It is perhaps Kanter's identification as a social work practitioner that provides the resonance of Clare's own identification as someone who wanted to be “in the thick of things.” He has brought someone from our social work past across the Atlantic into our collective American consciousness.

Joel Kanter's Face to Face with Children: The Life and Work of Clare Winnicott will be appealing to readers from different backgrounds and with differing motives for reading. It fills out chapters in the history of social work, child welfare, social work education, and psychotherapy. As attention to the globalization of social work becomes more and more necessary to the field, it is appropriate that we in the United States should understand more about England's social work history generally, and Clare Winnicott specifically. She was a social worker in the midst of a national child care crisis due to the relocation of so many children during the blitz of World War Two. In her lifetime she transformed child welfare services, received the Order of the British Empire, trained scores of social workers in her capacity as teacher, maintained a successful clinical practice after being trained by Melanie Klein, and carefully looked after the well-being of both the person and theories of D.W. Winnicott.

Kanter divided the book into sections that address the biographical and professional information that he has amassed through years of comprehensive research. He includes the viewpoints of people who knew Clare Winnicott well, from a perspective of respect and high regard. After the first section written by Kanter, he offers 16 of the 32 letters, interviews, lecture transcripts, and other published works of Clare Winnicott. While the format may provide a somewhat disjointed experience for the reader, and the presentation of Clare Winnicott may strike the reader as a mild case of hero worship, the appeal of Kanter's book goes beyond social work history, or even child welfare, because Clare Winnicott's contributions are arguably valuable to any helping professional who comes “face to face with children.”

One of the most valuable contributions that has been made available through Kanter's book is Clare Winnicott's understanding about how social work can be practiced with children as a separate and unique population. We know that the welfare of children is dependent on the interaction between parents, children, and society, yet these groups often have conflicting needs and goals. In the United States we had a society for the prevention of cruelty to animals long before there was any such provision for children. When not viewed as their parent's property, children often have been seen as a protected population with decisions being made “for their own good,” often without regard to their rights to self-determination.

Clare Winnicott was a powerful force in her own right, and arguably a facilitative, complimentary change agent in relation to D.W. Winnicott's work. It is impossible to know exactly how Clare and Donald Winnicott influenced each other's work. It is likely she had more influence than can be known for sure in the generation of important ideas such as *the holding environment* and *transitional objects*.

What made Clare Winnicott a quintessential social worker was her grounding in reality. Avoiding

professional jargon, her writings and lectures get to the heart of an effective service delivery during a unique and challenging period of England's history in a way that is still accessible on this side of the Atlantic today. Kanter suggests the reason it took so long for us to have access to her ideas was because Clare didn't seem to envision her work extending beyond her here and now. The bulk of her writings are derived from texts of lectures and presentations. People who knew her described her as academically brilliant, tireless, and wise. Kanter adds that she was a bit of a rebel. During her early association with D.W. Winnicott she developed a unique and effective supervisory procedure with him in his role of consulting psychiatrist, learning from his comments vis-a-vis process descriptions of the staff's challenging moments of the week.

Early in her career Clare Winnicott didn't want to be a psychiatric social worker. She wanted to be in the "thick of things" but she recognized how important it is for child care workers to have many of the same skills as child psychotherapists. She might very well have supported the assertion of Martin & Sugarman (1999) that a client who benefits from treatment is potentially capable of altering her environment through the new ways she can contribute to it. Clare Winnicott's ability to integrate clinical and generalist practice resonates when one reads Mitchell's (2000) discussion of how interpersonal processes generate intrapsychic processes, and how they in turn re-shape the capabilities for interpersonal interactions in an endless interaction between the external and the internal. Sixty years ago, Clare Winnicott was applying the essence of these concepts in a very real way with the children in Oxfordshire who had been evacuated to the countryside out of London because of the war. While recognizing the magnitude of the trauma they were undergoing, she stressed an understanding of the uniqueness of children, an avoidance of pathologizing them, and concerted efforts to attend to their physical as well as psychological needs.

Face to Face with Children shows us that Clare Winnicott understands that whatever children's needs may be, they include first and foremost a need for a relationship. Imre (1982) believes that in the process of existence, humans can know life only through relationships. We recognize that the social work relationship is not mutual; the interest of both participants center on the needs of one, that the worker's intention to be helpful in a meaningful way is immediately and intuitively recognizable (Bruner, 1986).

This book helps us understand that Clare Winnicott believed that being willing to try and understand is therapeutic. Imre (1982) refines this concept further by associating the helping professional's work with a will or desire to be present to another in order to help that person and discusses Polanyi's conception of how we can know the mind of another, calling it "dwelling in." This is the act of observing and grounding the client's behavior as a meaningful part of an integrated whole. In 1963 Clare Winnicott wrote:

Our task is quite a specific one, and that is to create a situation in which children can be themselves. The social worker is perhaps the only person in the child's life who represents his real self, and who tries to be in touch with the whole of him, and not just with the part that shows. But the child will only allow this to happen on his own terms and in his own time, and in order to let in happen at all he must have the chance to see the social worker as a real person and to assess his or her attitudes and intentions toward himself (p. 167).

One of the strengths of social work is its recognition of a person-in-environment approach to intervention. Some of the major issues in evaluating social work practice with children are that often children have not been consulted about their opinions of the treatment, and evaluation takes place in relation to treatment goals and standards for good practice that are theory-dependent, and so findings about child treatment vary considerably. Children have consistently been the population whose mental health needs have not been met, and Clare Winnicott, like contemporary social workers, recognized where help was most needed, and advocated for it to be available.

Adultcentrism (Petr, 1992) has been defined as a bias that causes adults to consistently misunderstand children and disregard their experiences and opinions. Like any bias, it is hard to recognize. Adultcentrism causes adults to think of the child in adult terms, regards children's subjective experiences as irrelevant, and often leads to moralistic, punitive behavior towards children. Petr (2004, p. 91) suggests social workers use four principles for combating adultcentrism. One indication that Clare Winnicott was ahead of her time is that Petr's principles (which came decades later) are apparent throughout her writings:

1. Take time to learn about and value children as children.
2. Routinely conduct individual interviews with children.

3. Involve the child as fully as possible in decisions that affect the child's life.
4. Support changes in social work research and education that understand and respect children's perspectives.

Advocacy for children's perspectives and needs is especially important when we consider the kind of trauma most of our child clients, like the children in the hostels that Clare Winnicott administered, have been exposed to. In writing about chronically traumatized children, Katherine Ryan (1996) talks about how the child that has experienced significant trauma has difficulty understanding the intentions of others, and how difficulty with relationships is often the arena for many of their symptoms. Russell (1998) believes that trauma reverberates through the life of the client who has experienced it both in the way s/he is compelled to respond to events and how s/he remembers and relates those memories of past events. He goes on to say that significant trauma can be a lens that organizes all the clients' experiences. Understanding these experiences, and how the child client chooses to relate them, helps the social worker develop appropriate interventions.

This book is a valuable resource for understanding what Clare Winnicott had to say about these interventions. For example, she was aware of the dangers of interpretation, and advised against doing so out of theoretical knowledge rather than the child's lived experience or readiness to deal with the affect aroused by the adult's verbalization. Our current literature supports this view; Gabbard (2000) asserts that a client will be more likely to accept interpretations from a therapist who understands their subjective experience. We now know narrative therapy is a way of enriching and healing the inner life of the client through reliving shared experiences that build the narrative of the person's history. In 1977 Clare Winnicott wrote, "An experience shared can be a complete experience and a permanent possession" (p. 207).

In these writings we see Clare Winnicott's profound understanding of the transactional nature of social work. Clare applied herself to the task at hand with all of her considerable talents and energies, and thanks to Joel Kanter we can finally study and benefit from the example of her life and contributions.

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