

Review of [Embracing Therapeutic Complexity](#), by Dr. Patricia Gianotti

By, Kenneth A. Frank, Ph.D.

“Patricia Gianotti’s book, ‘Embracing Therapeutic Complexity: A Guidebook to Integrating the Essentials of Psychodynamic Principles Across Therapeutic Disciplines,’ is not what I had expected. I was initially attracted to this book by the second part of its subtitle, ‘Across Therapeutic Disciplines.’ Accordingly, I expected the book to relate directly to a particular interest of mine, psychotherapy integration, or how, using relational psychodynamic theory as a baseline, we can effectively combine therapy approaches (Frank, 2020, for example).

What I found in her book was quite different from what I expected—yet quite rewarding. The content has applications for integrating different methods, as I will explain, but that is not her major thrust. Rather, Gianotti, applying her penetrating clinical grasp, does a splendid job of reducing relational psychodynamic theory, in all its multiplicity and complexity, to its basics.

Structurally, the book is very well organized and clearly and accessibly written. The reader benefits substantially from the author’s ability to convey complex ideas clearly and relatively simply in straightforward language unvarnished by jargon. To help make her points, Gianotti includes many generous quotes from leading relational psychoanalytic authors like Jessica Benjamin, Robert Grossmark, Donnel Stern, and Paul Wachtel. These quotes are carefully selected for their pithiness and accessibility. The work of these well-known authors undoubtedly has shaped Gianotti’s thinking, and she selectively quotes their words within a clearly developed, relevant, and useful context. Her writing is straightforward and concise, yet not spare; for instance, among her many useful metaphors, she likens case formulation to taking a good snapshot: ‘As a good photographer knows, creating a good snapshot requires knowledge of depth of field, adjusting the camera settings in a way that the lens can capture the right elements of both figure and ground.’ (p. 107).

Gianotti slices up the relational psychoanalytic pie in a novel fashion that is quite useful. Her intent is not to directly bring together diverse therapeutic methods, as I had expected, but rather, to develop an appreciation of relational psychodynamic therapy that is informed by its interface with attachment theory, neuroscientific findings, and trauma treatment. She shows how a relational psychodynamic understanding and method can inform and enrich virtually all approaches to psychotherapy. Although the book contains insights useful for the most sophisticated of readers, I believe its greatest value will likely be in the hands of practitioners who are untrained psychoanalytically and who feel that something vitally essential—a kind of depth, immediacy, creativity, and richness are missing from their work. Perhaps, in writing about the broader applicability of foundational elements of relational psychoanalysis, Gianotti has anticipated the long-term destiny of the earlier, immersive psychoanalysis that once was. Nowadays, analysts rarely see patients in four to five times-a-week sessions with a reclining patient and a remote, note-taking analyst—and at significant expense—as in former years. The psychoanalytic treatment model and relationship of today have indeed shifted and call on the flexibility of practice that Gianotti’s presentation supports.

Gianotti begins with a recap of her earlier work with colleague Jack Danielian (Danielian, J. & Gianotti, P., 2012; Gianotti, P. & Danielian, J., 2017). In that work, the authors presented the ‘[Four Quadrant Model](#),’ a schematic representation of the ways in which individuals can be psychically injured and their character development impaired by early experiences of caretaker neglect and lack of attunement that result in a

defensive, shame-based character structure. Through its separate but interacting quadrants, the model is employed to help us understand the patient's strengths and especially weaknesses in 'Self Concept,' 'Symptoms,' 'Relationships' and 'Disappointments,' respectively. It embraces the patient's 'character solutions,' or dynamic ways of managing stressors and affect. Here is where the book's journey begins, as Gianotti lays out the ways the personality manifestations in the four quadrants are impeded by the centrally dynamic role of shame and its avoidance.

She then proceeds to introduce a second, balancing schematic, what she calls the 'Healthy Self Actualization Model.' This two-by-two table, intended as a counterpoint to the earlier pathology-based model, represents what psychoanalysis so often neglects—healthy personality growth and development, or self-actualization. Here, she reworks the earlier table, substituting 'Self Care/Life Style Balance' for 'Symptoms.' She also modifies the earlier 'Disappointments' quadrant that emphasized 'Revenge Enactments,' replacing it with 'Response to Disappointment,' the latter highlighting adaptability and resiliency. The elaboration of healthy functioning is a welcome addition and sets a positive tone of growth for the remainder of the book that includes clinical examples in which we see student therapists develop along with their patients. The two tables are offered as 'snapshots,' or diagnostic guideposts, dynamically formulated to permit the practitioner to assess areas of deficiency or progress as the therapy pair moves along their therapeutic pathway.

Gianotti condenses insights from object relations and relational theoretical understandings into what she calls 'loyalty contracts,' conceptualized as 'an internal system of beliefs, feelings, reactions, and expectations that were created and deeply rooted in the early parent-child interactions as well as the particular experience of a person's socio-cultural context' (p. 50). She explains how these basic structures play out repeatedly in therapy as well as in relationships in the outside world, being driven by a patient's yearning for healing, yet accompanied by a dread of encountering old traumatizing events. An important goal of therapy, she explains, is to resolve these rigidly fixed, defensive patterns so new and healthier ways of relating can develop.

She also identifies several principles of treatment, among them, the importance of understanding patients' early attachment experiences; providing a safe treatment environment to allow threatening material to surface; and the significance of relationship rupture and repair within the context of patients' experiencing new and mutative relational experiences, or corrective emotional experiences, in the patient-therapist relationship. Here, she helps the reader see what is over-attended to, and what is missing, anticipating her later elaboration of what she offers as the core of relational dynamic work— healing dissociation and splitting.

The core work of therapy, according to Gianotti, addresses 'unformulated' themes that patients live out more or less automatically that can be reflected on, made explicit, and integrated. Thus, patients can be helped to recover disavowed parts of the self that have been 'lost' during their compromised developmental journey. Employing clinical illustrations, she shows how unformulated aspects of personality can be teased out and gently uncovered through processes of tracking, mirroring, reflecting, and reframing latent content. Her case examples bring these methods alive, illustrating how to apply the principles she has offered, and along the way, she gives many advanced 'tips' to practitioners, for example, showing the utility of addressing both sides of a split to facilitate integration.

It is here that I found the greatest value of the book, especially for those who work in other, nonanalytic modalities which do not benefit from psychodynamic insights. It becomes clear that an understanding of

the complexities of the therapy relationship, what analysts call the transference-countertransference interaction, and how to work with it, is more than an additional piece or add-on to other forms of therapeutic endeavor. Rather, it is the relational underpinning of all that is transacted in a therapy session of any kind. As we know from psychotherapy research, nothing predicts success like the strength and quality of the therapeutic alliance or relationship (Wampold et al., 2022). And, too, no systematic, in-depth way of understanding therapy relationships surpasses relational psychoanalysis (Frank, 2020).

A very timely and important feature of Gianotti's thinking is her recognition of the role of socio-cultural factors in shaping personality, much in the spirit of Horney's and Fromm's early work. She develops the relational psychoanalytic point of view with an appreciation of how macro and micro visions, the former including the cultural context of privilege and opportunity (versus oppression and marginalization), shape the individual's development. This cultural viewpoint is particularly critical at this moment in psychoanalytic history, a time when we are becoming painfully aware of the 'whiteness' of our theories, methods, and even training institutes.

Overall, I believe this capably conceived and written book provides a needed service. It helps non-analytically trained therapists find their way into relational psychoanalytic insights and enables them to contextualize their work usefully within the framework of today's psychodynamic understandings. It might also offer sophisticated practitioners additional and useful ways to think about their work."

Kenneth A. Frank, Ph.D.

<https://www.kennethafrank.com/>