

## BOOK REVIEW

*Improvised theatre and the autism spectrum: a practical guide to teaching social connection and communication skills*, By Gary Kramer and Richie Ploesch, Routledge, 2022, ISBN: 978-1-032-07551-8

*Improvised Theatre and the Autism Spectrum* is a practical guide to using improvised theatre to improve autistic<sup>1</sup> children's social and communication skills. Both practitioners have a long history as practitioners of improvised theatre. Richard Ploesch is the expert on autistic people with his association with the Connections programme for National Comedy Theatre (named, 'Unscripted Learning'), of which Gary Kramer is the artistic director. Ploesch has a master's degree in special education and has qualified in applied behaviour analysis (ABA; as a BCBA). Kramer is the executive director of this programme designed for autistic children ('Unscripted Learning'). It should be noted that neither of the book's authors have disclosed that they are autistic themselves.

The target audience for the book is practitioners of improv professionals (i.e., teachers, producers, theatre managers, etc.) exploring new opportunities, and parents of autistic children. The authors promote developing autistic children's social connections and communication skills. The book is structured to enable readers to understand their programme and how it is constructed, beginning with their philosophy, and going through their classes' structure, example games and part of the curriculum (with terminology is explained in the last chapter to better support the reader).

The book has some positive foci of which may well support autistic people's lives. A core strength of the book is the number of games it outlines (182 pages), and it offers debriefing for each game. The games span the whole course, including warm-up exercises (e.g., Red Ball), scene work games (e.g., Blind Freeze) or storytelling games (e.g., Story), and performance games (e.g., Audience Sound Effects). The games are within sections, such as scene work and storytelling games, pantomime games, character games, emotion-based games, and quick delivery games (i.e., verbal wit). It is proposed that each of these should be included in the first six weeks of a course. Specifically, the debrief could be highly valuable for autistic people because the availability to voice their thoughts, concerns, and questions at a consistent and stated time as it may decrease worry. Another valuable asset is that the authors address mental health. They suggest that autistic people have worse mental health and well-being, which is suggested in Gotham (2020) and Roestorf et al. (in press). Mental health developments seem likely due to Felsman's et al. research (2019, 2020) on anxiety and depression. Additionally, the authors discuss the non-judgemental nature of how people are treated. One key benefit of improv is acceptance and being non-judgemental (Keates and Beadle-Brown 2022, this issue). This may relate to a remark in chapter 2 regarding the potential desire from autistic participants to complete an exercise or game 'perfectly', which becomes a problem (for them and the game). In particular, failure is addressed early to support participants to improvise without judgment.

The main weakness, of the books is how the authors frame their work. There is controversy around forms of ABA 'interventions' for autistic people (e.g., Armstrong 2021; Broderick 2011; Chapman and Bovell in press; Chown, Hughes, Leatherland and Davison 2019; Cumming et al. 2020; Kupferstein 2018). Much of their discussion of their ABA practice can be reframed as other learning strategies that are either unrelated to ABA, or semantically different and within other psychologies of learning (an educational theory such as cognitive apprenticeship matches much of what they discuss; Collins, Brown, and

Newman 2018). They use little terminology or even the meaning of terminology related to this specific field.

A core issue of the book is that the authors propose social skills training. Would not all neurotypes gain social skills through improv? In any case, autistic people should not have to comply with neurotypical system of interpretation (Keates, 2022), such as making eye contact (Trevisan et al. 2017). Furthermore, the need for eye contact does not translate across cultural groups (Kandeh et al. 2020). This begs the question of why it is deemed important for these authors. Furthermore, they state this is not from a "...lack of desire for social connectedness but a lack of opportunities and a lack of successes with these limited exposures." The authors have not considered the Double Empathy Problem. Failure at inter-neurotype social communication is due to the mismatch of salience (Milton 2012). Evidence for this in recent years has been becoming increasingly prominent (e.g., Crompton et al. 2020a, 2020b, 2020c; Davis and Crompton 2021; Debrabander et al. 2019; Gernsbacher 2017; Morrison et al. 2019; Rifai et al. 2022). Furthermore, assuming mental health issues are due to lack of social connectedness is misguided, as there are structural and systemic barriers autistic people face on a daily basis (Singh and Bunyak 2019). With reframing these attitudes to meet autistic needs, the authors could improve their course for autistic people (e.g., exploration of cognitive flexibility, and developing any other *desired* skills). Lastly, it is an ABA practice to use social validity, but as is discussed in Keates (2022) the key stakeholder is the autistic people themselves. They must be included in the evaluation of any course. The authors use parents of and not the autistic person.

Their intention seems to be in the right direction, but various academic underpinnings to their work are misplaced or wrong. The many games and exercises provide strong potential to support autistic people in their theatrical improvisation. They get to develop in a safe space with the proposed acceptance and non-judgemental attitudes. Albeit that I do not recommend the framing of this book, improv professionals may still gain from its contents.

## Note


1. This review will privilege the use of 'autistic person' over 'person with autism', following not only preference from the autistic community (e.g., Kenny et al. 2016) but acknowledgement of further stigma perpetuated through the use of person first language for autistic people (see: Gernsbacher 2017a and Gernsbacher et al. 2017).

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