Art therapy and risk: What is it about the discourse of risk in art therapy that could harm people? – a response to Neil Springham’s Inscape paper on art and risk.

Dr Sheridan Linnell

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Abstract

This seminar paper explores how the simultaneously individualising and totalising tendencies of risk discourse tend to shape art psychotherapists’ relationships with our clients, each other and ourselves. I begin by responding, from the perspective of a critical, poststructural analysis, to Neil Springham’s (2008) Inscape paper, ‘Through the eyes of the law: what is it about art that can harm people?’ Many of my art therapy colleagues have commended Springham’s focus on the serious risks that can be associated with the use of art in therapeutic contexts, and have read his work as an endorsement of their expertise. While acknowledging the salience of this problematisation of art and risk, I propose that it is also important to question the implications of risk discourse for art therapy. Springham’s paper can be seen as a performance of expert knowledge, rather than simply a description of events. My paper draws attention to the politics of representation in Springham’s paper, particularly in relation to the concept of coauthorship, and raises questions about the generalisation of his findings to the field of arts and health. I also attempt to deconstruct the slippages between legal and therapeutic discourse in Springham's text, thereby disrupting what might otherwise become an accepted truth about art therapy and its relationship to risk. In the second part of the paper, I turn to the artworks and narratives that emerged from a recent research project that explored art therapists’ and counsellors’ work with young people considered to be ‘at risk’. I propose that the mode of arts-based, narrative enquiry that I took up in this research produced a nuanced account of risk, opening up possibilities for an ethics of therapeutic practice that moves beyond the current binary of professional regulation or its lack.