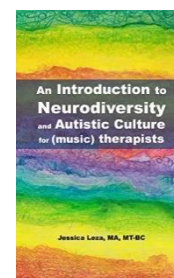


BOOK REVIEW

An introduction to neurodiversity and autistic culture for (music) therapists (Leza)

Reviewed by Bronte Arns

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Title: An introduction to neurodiversity and autistic culture for (music) therapists **Author:** Jessica Leza **Publication Year:** 2023 **Publisher:** La Migdalia Press **Pages:** 239 (pdf) 359 (paperback) **ISBN:** 979-8-218-22073-0 **E-ISBN Kindle edition:** B0C56DQ3N8

REVIEWER BIOGRAPHY

Bronte Arns is the National Director of Music Therapy for Giant Steps Australia. In her leadership role, she works across teams to develop a range of music therapy programs for autistic school students and adult participants. Her research has focused on how music therapists collaborate with other disciplines in transdisciplinary teams, supporting students with complex needs to increase engagement. She is interested in the organic development of professional language over time, and learning how changes may positively influence the ways in which we write about our work.

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Jessica Leza's book, *An Introduction to Neurodiversity for (Music) Therapists*, is a welcome contribution to the literature for anyone curious to know more about autistic culture and creating inclusive, welcoming spaces for people on the autism spectrum. It is also a timely addition, responding to the needs of therapists looking for ways to shape their practice that are informed by the voices of the people they aim to support. It is essential that autistic voices lead the way in these conversations, and this text is powerfully constructed from neurodiverse public figures, scholars, and advocates.

My first impression of this book was that the scope is enormous. Leza has done an incredible job of gathering a wide range of information for (music) therapists, drawn from both her own lived experience and the collective perspectives of autistic people from various walks of life. The text is very dense and peppered with references. However, it is worth taking the time to work through the large volume of material. If time-poor, the reader can also be selective and focus solely on the sections relevant to their needs. The book as a whole is formatted in the style of an online learning course. In this, it lends itself well to being a resource that can be dipped into as needed, or absorbed in stages alongside the reflective questions provided. Several sections conclude with a practical list of ways music therapists can make shared spaces more accessible and inclusive. This will no doubt appeal to readers looking for immediate changes they can implement to improve their practice.

Leza begins by inviting the reader to acknowledge and understand their own biases. By doing so, she encourages the reader to consider the ways in which they may improve relationships in their practice and set relevant and respectful goals for therapy work. Anyone associated with the neurodiversity movement will know that perspectives, language, and research in autism are continually evolving. Leza acknowledges that autistic culture, like all cultures, is not stagnant, and that this book only represents a snapshot of knowledge and views from this point in time. The chapters move through a long list of topics, with the final two chapters involving deep explorations of the many ways therapists may create more welcoming autistic spaces and the importance of including autistic people in all

aspects of research. At the beginning, middle and end, Leza offers a list of reflective questions to guide the reader through the material, to highlight conscious and unconscious biases, and to reflect on ways to minimise the risk of harm in our work. These could be relevant for personal or group reflection, or supervision discussions. A useful glossary of terms and an extensive list of over 400 references concludes this publication. A thoughtful touch is the list of potentially triggering subjects and their page numbers, listed at the end of the book.

One of the interesting aspects of this text is how Leza has woven historical context throughout, giving the reader a sense of how current discourse has been formed over time. To me, this is one of the strengths of this book, giving the reader the chance to reflect on the many possible factors that bring about these changes. Examples of this can be found in Chapters 1, 2 and 4, with focuses on terminology, labelling, and specifically the history of neurodivergence as viewed through an Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) model.

It is important for therapists to learn about the history of ABA and the major concerns about it raised by autistic people. Leza highlights the long-term impacts ABA may have on individuals, including the devaluing of internal feelings and the insistence on compliance, often leading to increased vulnerability through the inability to refuse adult requests. I have found this language around compliance and 'consistent' performance can still linger in therapy literature, so I welcomed the chance to hear about direct experiences resulting from this language and types of practices. It invites music therapists to look at how goals are set, the language used to craft them, how progress is assessed, and how music therapy work is communicated to others.

The deep exploration of language and use of symbols is a healthy challenge for therapists. Leza's comments around not saying anything for fear of saying the 'wrong' thing were all too familiar to me. This issue is regularly raised when mentoring both new graduates and therapists who have been in the field for some years who now question if they are keeping up with changes in language and practice. In Chapter 2, she reminds the reader of how language can even come full circle over time; for example, how initially professionals used identify-first language to describe autistic clients or participants, then shifted to person-first language, with the current preference now returning to identity-first language. In Chapter 3, she even calls therapists to consider the use of common symbols – perhaps when promoting therapy work – and to learn more about their history before aligning with them. However, it is not just about identifying the issues, as she also suggests alternatives and guides the reader to other resources for further learning. This keeps the tone forward-looking and positive.

Of special note was the chapter on intersections, a rarely explored offering to the music therapy community. Whilst the neurodiversity paradigm is complex in and of itself, considering the range of possible intersections adds another layer to providing truly holistic care. Music therapists who see their participants only during music therapy session time may not always be privy to the presence of these intersections, such as gender, sexuality, race, religion, or parenting. By bringing these potential intersections to the attention of therapists, Leza provides a good reminder that there may be other ways in which practice can naturally be adjusted to include neurodiverse people from a range of backgrounds and lived experiences.

Whilst Leza states that the book may be helpful for therapists other than music therapists, it was refreshing to read something so in-depth on neurodiversity and therapy that *did* speak in the language of music therapists, as we are so often reading about it through the lens of other disciplines. I enjoyed discovering descriptive terms, including 'samefooding,' 'stimdancing' and 'neurocosmopolitan,' and the length of the reference list highlights the range and quantity of autistic scholarship available. I would suggest approaching this book as a series of learning modules and taking time to read, absorb and reflect on the material over several sessions. I would recommend this book to

anyone wondering “am I saying or doing the right thing?” or wishing to know more about how to make and nurture relationships with autistic people, both in therapy practice and in wider social circles. I do hope that, as a first-person lived experience text, this helps pave the way for similar writing to be included wherever therapists access their professional development.