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Moments of change in the art therapy process

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Introduction

“How does art therapy work? What factors are responsible for the effectiveness of art therapy?” (AATA, 1999). These fundamental questions about the art therapy process were recently raised by the Art Therapy Research Initiative. Surprisingly, there is still a lack of systematic observations that would allow us to understand better how clients change and learn in the process of art therapy. There is a need to develop a deeper understanding of the therapeutic action of art therapy based on the study of art therapy in action. Therefore, I decided to study the art therapy process by observing an art therapist in her sessions with several emotionally disturbed children. This research gave me the opportunity to experience the art therapy process from an unfamiliar perspective, as an observer, and to document and analyze in great detail what happened in sessions. I interviewed the art therapist to learn how she understood the unfolding therapeutic process. One of her remarks about a profound experience in working with a 6-year-old girl caught my attention and eventually focused my inquiry:

We are in a high swing right now. I see progress. Sheila is more organized and focused on the art process. And she expresses herself symbolically through the art and play. I see her smile a lot really getting satisfaction from the artmaking. Both of us get more out of the sessions. Oh yes, I feel a change, but I don't know why.

When I listened closely to the art therapist's words I was struck by the contrast between the concepts that were useful to her in framing and explaining the process, and the sense of mystery that surrounded the profound experience of change. The theories of artmaking as practicing organization and symbolization guided her approach to treatment, however, these theories did not seem to account sufficiently for the change that she experienced. She understood intuitively that there were other important processes at work that she could not fully describe or control, perhaps because she was a participant herself. Here, the presence of an observer seemed particularly important to examine the exchanges between the art therapist, the client, and the artmaking and to discover what changes and how.

The research method

In my quest to discover what changes in the course of art therapy sessions and how these changes occur I entered uncharted territory. Therefore, I examined research methods that have been explored in psychotherapy process research and in art therapy process research. My goal was to design a research protocol that would resonate with the creative and interpersonal processes that are at the core of art therapy.

Trends in researching the psychotherapy process

In the past decade psychotherapy researchers like Greenberg (1994) have suggested that “we should not be in too much of a hurry to rush to our theories for answers to the question of what carries the therapeutic action. . . . rather, we should turn to the therapeutic process itself in order to discover *what*

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actually changes and *how* this occurs” (p. 115). Opening up the therapeutic space for an observer and researcher is a decisive step towards critical investigation of the psychotherapy process and further theory development. “The process of documenting more carefully what actually takes place in therapy is in and of itself a tremendous mark of progress in the field” (Safran & Muran, 1994, p. 225). Indeed, we rarely learn in a public forum what actually happens in therapy sessions. As a result our theories about how and why therapy works may be questionable. In a discovery-oriented approach, research is viewed as a recursive process beginning with observation and interviewing and leading to model-building and theorizing, which is refined and verified by further observation (Greenberg, 1994; Rhodes & Greenberg, 1994). Rhodes and Greenberg urge researchers to remain open and discover new phenomena by asking therapists and patients what they are experiencing and to focus research investigation on real and practical concerns of the participants. The experiences and perspectives of each participant in the therapy and research endeavor need to be honored.

Furthermore, in psychotherapy research there has been a shift away from large-scale studies of process-outcome variables toward the intensive analysis of actual sessions, or a small number of significant episodes. These microanalytic studies allow researchers to examine the subtle nuances of client–therapist interaction, to explore the meaning of particular behaviors in their immediate context, and to better understand productive and unproductive exchanges (Elliott & Morrow-Bradley, 1994; Rhodes & Greenberg, 1994; Safran & Muran, 1994). “Implicit in this approach is the belief that the process of psychotherapy can be examined in terms of a series of small-in-session and post-session outcomes resulting from specific patient–therapist interactions” (Rhodes & Greenberg, 1994, p. 227). The intensive analysis of significant episodes may lead to a deeper and more specific understanding of change processes and treatment effectiveness.

In the past, researchers have tended to equate intensive research of a small number of cases with the uncontrolled case study. However, more recently alternatives for methodologically rigorous intensive analysis have been explored. Qualitative approaches to psychotherapy process research (e.g., Rennie, 1992) highlight the subjective experience of the participants and the necessity to view the therapeutic process from multiple perspectives. They focus on questions of meaning and interpretation, which are at the heart of any therapeutic process. Careful observation and listening, systematic analysis and theorizing grounded in observation are the hallmarks of qualitative approaches that address some of the

methodological challenges identified by psychotherapy researchers.

Trends in researching the art therapy process

In art therapy various innovative approaches to studying the art therapy process have been developed in the past 10 years spurred by the increasing popularity of qualitative approaches to research (Junge & Linesch, 1993). Interviewing clients offers an opportunity to hear the clients’ voices and to arrive at a deeper understanding of their experience in art therapy (e.g., Dalley, Rifkind, & Terry, 1993; Quail & Peavy, 1994; Spaniol, 1998). McNiff (1998) urges art therapists to focus on the artmaking as object of inquiry, as well as mode of investigation. The pictures are the data in Schaverien’s (1993) retrospective review of the art therapy process. A facet that is missing in current art therapy research is a systematic study of the complex ways in which art therapists and their clients interact and use the artmaking. Art therapists emphasize the power of nonverbal communication and the power of images. These nonverbal processes are only accessible to an observer of art therapy sessions. Researchers and supervisors point to the difference between listening to a therapist “talking about” the course of a session and “living the process” when directly observing sessions (e.g., Riley, 1996). Therefore, “observing” and “living” the art therapy process seemed essential to my goal of studying the mystery of change.

The research process

Drawing on these experiences in research and supervision a qualitative approach to studying the art therapy process seemed indicated. Participant observation and interviewing, methods originating in ethnography, have more recently been explored in educational and therapeutic settings (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Ely, 1991). These methods offer an opportunity to examine the interactions between art therapist, client, and art and to learn how an art therapist and her clients perceive change.

Selecting participants

The major criterion for selecting participants was the possibility to observe individual and group art therapy sessions over an extended period of time. An art therapist—who I will call Ann—expressed interest in participating in this study. She was registered with the American Art Therapy Association and worked in a residential treatment center for severely emotionally disturbed children. After the research was approved

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