The Arts in Psychotherapy 36 (2009) 13–18

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

The Arts in Psychotherapy

Therapeutic attunement: A transpersonal view of expressive arts therapy

Mitchell S. Kossak, PhD*

Expressive Therapies, Lesley University, 29 Everett Street, Cambridge, MA 02138, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Expressive arts therapy
Attunement
Misattunement
Attachment
Improvisation
Play
Embodiment
Entrainment
Empathy
Intimacy
Altered states of consciousness

ABSTRACT

Arts-based practices can help individuals to stay centered, aligned, present and alert to the moment. In therapies that utilize arts-based practices, the art making itself might be viewed as a vehicle to help create a therapeutic alliance or a therapeutic attunement.

This article explores transpersonal aspects of arts-based therapy through the lens of theory and practice and the principles of play, improvisation, aesthetics, space, time, and mind/body connections. Other considerations explored here are aspects of experimentation, risk taking, discovery, and meaning making.

Introduction

In the practice of expressive arts therapy many factors are often considered, such as principles of play, improvisation, aesthetics, space, time, and mind/body connections. The term "expressive arts therapy" is used here to describe an integrated approach to the use of the arts in psychotherapy. As Estrella (2005) explains, "Expressive therapists use a multimodal approach – at times working with the arts in sequence, at other times using the arts simultaneously, and at still other times carefully transitioning from one art form to another within the therapeutic encounter" (p. 183). The overriding consideration in expressive arts therapy is a sensitivity to each client's needs, rooted in the capacity of the human imagination to reveal creative solutions to complex problems (Knill, Baba, & Fuchs, 1995; McNiff, 1981; Rogers, 1993).

Other considerations utilized in expressive arts therapy can include aspects of experimentation, risk taking, discovery, and meaning making. In addition, intersubjective relational qualities of understanding, support, deep listening, a willingness to hold and give space, the ability to tolerate chaotic or unpredictable states, and empathy are integral parts of the therapeutic interaction. There is much written in the expressive arts therapy literature that focuses on transpersonal aspects such as spontaneity, heightened sensitivity to inner states (and outer observations), deep connectivity to self and other, and awareness of energetic and embodied shifts in consciousness (Halprin, 2003; Knill et al., 1995; Lewis, 1993; McNiff, 1992; Moreno, 1959; Rogers, 1993). This article will look specifically at these transpersonal aspects of expressive arts therapy practice or what will be referred to as "therapeutic attunement."

In the therapeutic encounter it is the ability to stay centered, aligned, present, and alert to the moment that helps to create a therapeutic connection. It is in these connected moments that an alignment between therapist and client or a "*therapeutic attunement*" begins to emerge. This can be thought of as "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) or "therapeutic presence" (Robbins, 1998) or simply "play" (Winnicott, 1971). It is this kind of mutual resonance experienced as connectivity, unity, understanding, support, empathy, and acceptance that can contribute greatly to creating a sense of psychological healing.

The art of being with another person and listening to what is said and what is implied becomes an act of "tuning in." In similar ways artists, musicians, dancers, poets, and actors are trained to open and tune their senses toward an authentic expression of the human condition in order to effect a kind of awakening in the witness, audience, listener, or reader. In similar ways therapists and artists are both looking to understand and "tune into" the human condition. As a therapist enters into the intimate world of the patient the artist enters into the intimate world of material, space, sound, and a deep connection with other participants.

Before a therapeutic alliance can be established a therapist must become centered and aligned within him or herself (Robbins, 1997). As Robbins states, "As the process unfolds, I try to listen to my centre. This is the most authentic place that I can engage with another. It is the essence of myself and the source of my energy" (p. 32).

If a therapist can establish a centered alignment then they can begin to engage with another individual on a deeper and more

* Tel.: +1 617 349 8167.
E-mail address: mkossak@lesley.edu.

0197-4556/$ – see front matter © 2008 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.
doi:10.1016/j.aip.2008.09.003

connected level and enter into a therapeutic attunement. Therapeutic attunement involves a kind of transpersonal, interpersonal, and intrapersonal connection. This article will look at the ways artistic engagement can facilitate this kind of connectivity through embodied awareness, improvisation, and play.

Attunement

Attunement is defined here as a felt embodied experience that can be individualistic as well as communal, that includes a psychological, emotional, and somatic state of consciousness. Attunement can also be thought of as "bringing into harmony" or a feeling of "being at one with another being" (Attunement, 2007). Attunement is most closely referred to in transpersonal psychology as a "unitive" experience, sometimes amounting to a felt sense of union with other people, other life forms, objects, surroundings, the divine, or the universe itself (James, 1902/1982).

Attunement can also be compared to peak experiences, which have been defined in the transpersonal psychology literature as sensory and perceptual experiences that are typically short-lived, yet profound, and are accompanied by a sense of enhanced perception, appreciation, or understanding (Maslow, 1964). In this framework one may feel lifted out of oneself, in the flow of things, self-fulfilled, engaged in optimal functioning, and filled with a sense of connectivity to self, others, and the world. Episodic peak experiences have historically been reported in the anthropological literature regarding ritualistic arts experiences and specifically documented in trance dances and drumming (Eliade, 1964; Harner, 1980; Rouget, 1985; Tucker, 1972; Winkelman, 2000).

The psychologist Richard Erskine (1998) calls attunement "a kinesthetic and emotional sensing of others – knowing their rhythm, affect and experience by metaphorically being in their skin, and going beyond empathy to create a two-person experience of unbroken feeling connectedness [sic] by providing a reciprocal affect and/or resonating response" (p. 236).

The literature of attachment theorists (Erskine, 1998; Gallese, 2001; Sonkin, 2005; Stern, 2004) is where the term attunement most often shows up, such as "affect attunement," "intersubjective attunement," or "misattunement." It is interesting to note that the term "misattunement" is associated with negative states or negative consequences in human development. This interpretation will be discussed in more detail below.

Embodiment

The term "embodied" or "embodiment" refers to a body-centered intelligence that informs how one knows and experiences the world. This is in contrast to a Cartesian view, where knowledge is primarily of the mind. John Dewey viewed bodily experience as the primal basis for meaning, thinking, knowing, and communication (as cited in Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. xi). Embodied intelligence includes information coming through viscerally from the proprioceptors related to the nervous system (Cohen, 1995), bringing meaning to and informing the conscious mind. Embodied intelligence has been referred to in the work of Howard Gardner (1993) as a bodily-kinesthetic intelligence or the ability to use one's body in highly differentiated and skilled ways for expressive as well as goal-directed purposes.

Embodiment can include awareness of breath, movement impulses, sensation, and associative emotions. Dance movement therapist Mary Whitehouse (1995), says that "the kinesthetic sense or the sensation which accompanies or informs us of bodily movement which is developed in athletes, dancers, and actors if never developed or seldom used becomes unconscious and leads to distortions and a cutting off from instinctual functionality" (p. 245). The term "embodied" can also be traced in psychology to Wilhelm Reich (Reich & Carfagno, 1980), Alexander Lowen (1994), John Pierrokas (1990), Stanislav Grof (1976), Ron Kurtz (1976), Stanley Keleman (1981), and body movement therapists Mary Starks Whitehouse (1995), Joan Chodorow (1997), and Janet Adler (2002).

In Western philosophy, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962) laid out a philosophical foundation for a non-dualist ontology of the body, stressing an inter-corporeal nature of being in the world. Merleau-Ponty (1962) reminds people that we live in the world through "a union between the psychic and the physiological" (p. 80). He takes this one step further by proposing that intersubjectivity involves physical bonds that exist between embodied human beings.

All of the arts by nature affect the body, where meaning-formation is created from the corporeal rather than the cerebral (as opposed to a disembodied approach, which sees artistic meaning making as an analytic structure). Painting, sculpture, music making, dramatic enactment, poetry, and of course movement all involve the body in one way or another. From a transpersonal perspective music educator Emile Jaques-Dalcroze developed a system of improvisational music and movement called Eurhythmics. Dalcroze believed that the body is a vehicle, or a source of sensations, that fuels and guides expressive impulses. "It is a doorway from the physical realm into the imagination and spirit" (Schnebly-Black & Moore, 1997, p. 36).

Improvisation and play

Freud (1930) introduced the importance of free association, which uses spontaneous word play to free up unconscious energies. Jung (1962) used sand play and other free improvisational art forms that included dance and music to release unconscious materials and resistance.

Another free form of improvisation, called authentic movement, can be found in the literature of expressive arts therapy. This form of improvisational movement practice is viewed as a free flow of spontaneous energies toward achieving an experience of unitive consciousness to self and the world (Whitehouse, Adler, Chodorow, & Pallaro, 1999). Authentic movement is a practice of active imagination with focus placed on internal body sensations and feeling. An embodiment practice of bringing awareness to the moment, this therapeutic process calls for a tuning in to and following unconscious impulses as they emerge in the moment.

Psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott has become most known for his insistence that the therapist and patient find a way to play. Winnicott (1971) referred to the connective moments that can occur in free play as authentic, while developmental psychologist Jean Piaget (1926) referred to these spontaneous moments as symbolic play where the child begins to form an interpersonal sense of self. In this kind of free-flowing improvisation, learning occurs through investigation, curiosity, risk taking, exploration, and experimentation of the unknown or what Piaget termed assimilation and adaptation.

Developmental theorist Erik Erikson (1955), along with Piaget, also suggested that free spontaneous improvisational play begins in the body, "it begins before we notice it as play, and consists at first in the exploration by repetition of sensual perceptions, of kinesthetic sensations, of vocalizations, etc" (Erikson, 1955, p. 233). According to Piaget, the origin of this trial and error experimental play lies in the body's response to its being in the world of natural forces, animals, spiritual energies, family relationships, and social impulses, all of which can be transformed through the body into symbolic acts. This kind of playing involves relinquishing a certain amount of inner control that may be a similar mechanism to what research psychologist Mihály Csikszentmihalyi (1990) calls "flow," and reflects one of the important qualities inherent in the defi-