



The effects of art therapy on male and female inmates: Advancing the research base

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Art therapy
BDI-II
ANS
FEATS
Corrections
Depression
Locus of control
Female inmates
Male inmates
Prison

ABSTRACT

Since the summer of 2003, several studies have been conducted to quantify the benefits of art therapy with prison inmates. These studies demonstrated a marked improvement in mood, behavior, and problem-solving [Gussak, D. (2007). The effectiveness of art therapy in reducing depression in prison populations. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 5(4), 444–460; Gussak, D. (2006). The effects of art therapy with prison inmates: A follow-up study. *Arts in Psychotherapy*, 33, 188–198; Gussak, D. (2004). A pilot research study on the efficacy of art therapy with prison inmates. *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, 31(4), 245–259]. The results of this study encouraged an ongoing quantitative study to ascertain improvement in depression, locus of control, and behavior in both a men and women's prison population. The Formal Elements Art Therapy Scale (FEATS), the Beck Depression Inventory-Short Form (BDI-II), and the Adult Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale (ANS) were administered as pre- and post-test assessments. A control group pre-test/post-test design was implemented for this study. Although the results from the FEATS did not yield supportive data, the results of the BDI-II and ANS supported the assumption that art therapy was effective in reducing depression and improving locus of control in the adult male and female inmates. Despite the results of the FEATS, it was concluded that art therapy was effective. This article concludes with a brief discussion of how the research has been instrumental in developing a statewide Florida Arts in Corrections program.

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Introduction

Since the summer of 2003, several studies have been conducted to quantify the benefits of art therapy with prison inmates. The initial pilot study (Gussak, 2004) yielded data that supported its effectiveness with this population. The quasi-experimental study used the Formal Elements Art Therapy Scale (FEATS) (Gantt & Tabone, 1998), and a pre-test–post-test behavioral observation tool designed by the prison counselor and primary researcher as the measurement tools. The results indicated that over 4 weeks, two sessions a week, the inmates who participated in the pilot study demonstrated significant improvement in mood, attitude, and interactions with peers and staff. These results warranted an experimental follow-up study (Gussak, 2006).

The pre-test–post-test control group follow-up study used the FEATS and the Beck Depression Inventory-Short Form (BDI-II) to quantify the effectiveness of art therapy in reducing depression, and increase problem solving and socialization. The results indicated

that over 8 weeks, one session a week, although the FEATS yielded no significant results, the BDI-II indicated significant decrease in depression in the experimental group as compared to the control group. The results of these two studies justified continuing these studies over the next 2 years. The subsequent research focused on both female and male prison populations, and evaluated the effectiveness of art therapy with not only reducing depression but also its effect on locus of control. This report will present the research methodology used, the results, and a discussion of these results. The article will conclude with a brief overview of future research goals and plans for art therapy in the Florida prison system.

Literature review

The prior study publications (Gussak, 2004, 2006, 2007) found support from the literature for art therapy in men's correctional settings. The responses published in these previous studies suggested that future research should also investigate the benefits of art therapy with female inmates as well.

One of the earliest articles that presented the benefits of art therapy with prisoners focused on a case study conducted with a female inmate (Levy, 1978). Day and Onorato (1997) stressed

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that art therapy helped the female inmates in their groups address the trauma that they were more prone to experience. However, no study quantitatively ascertains any benefits that art therapy has on a women's prison population. Until recently, studies that focused on the female inmate were rare (Harris, 1993), and yet the rate of female incarceration has been steadily increasing.

Although a minority of the entire prison population in 2004 – 12% of the total prison population was women – the population had actually increased since 1993 when the female population was 7%. The number of women incarcerated in local jails also increased in the same period by 468% (Elias, 2007). As the numbers increased, the initial observations within the correctional arena were that female inmates have different issues than male inmates, and diverse techniques need to be developed to address gender differences (Chesney-Lind, 2006; Elias, 2007; Sydney, 2005; Whitaker, 2000). Thus, although there has been a tendency to consider the female inmate similar in disposition and criminal intent to the male inmate, in other words an inclination to “masculinize” the female criminal, the rationale behind the women's illicit actions are believed to be quite different (Chesney-Lind, 2006). Women are more likely to offend in response to domestic or sexual abuse, trauma or drug dependence. They may be provoked to violence by a loved one or simply for feeling disenfranchised (Bloom, 2000; Chesney-Lind, 2000; Whitaker, 2000). Similar to the men's population, however, is the susceptibility to mental illness, such as depression.

Female inmates are believed to be more prone towards mental illness than their male counterparts (Butterfield, 2003). According to the Bureau of Justice statistics, 16% of the men's population and 20% of the women's population have been treated for various mental disorders (Blitz, Wolff, Pan, & Pogorzelski, 2005). While the stressors that exacerbate poor mental health may be similar in both genders, some have argued that female inmates may be even more disposed towards depression or stress-related illnesses than male inmates. This may be due to “the struggle to maintain intact families, the effort to sustain the parental role and care for children, and the need to deal with unresolved conflictual marriages or relationships. . . all from the confines of prison” (Negy, Woods, & Carlson, 1997, p. 225). This may result in a search for empathy and affiliation among women inmates. Thus, how the two genders respond to the prison environ differ.

Whereas survival of the fittest is the truism for the men's facility, and individual power is what is desired, the female inmates have a tendency to work together and develop strong associations. “Incarcerated women openly demonstrate needs for affiliation and support. . . [P]lay' mother, sisters and aunts are identified within the group. . . Sometimes several 'families' combine to form a large extended family. . . [they] treat their cell or dormitory like a home” (Day & Onorato, 1997, p. 134). Developing familial-like relationships inside the prison may be the inmate's way to cope with the loss of outside affiliations.

Along with mental illness, both genders have exhibited difficulties with locus of control (LOC). Locus of control is the term assigned to the degree of control that someone feels he or she has over their environment. External LOC indicates more of a tendency to believe that outside forces controls one's behavior, whereas internal LOC indicates a sense that one can control his or her own destiny (Bayse, Allgood, & van Wyk, 1992). In general, it is believed that prison inmates have more of a tendency towards external LOC than an internal LOC (Griffith, Pennington-Averett, & Bryan, 1981; Hunter, 1994; Love, 1991). A strong internal LOC is a deterrent to criminal behavior, and indicates an acceptance of one's responsibility for his or her actions. There is a direct relationship associated between LOC and depression—the more internal LOC that an inmate has, the less depressed they are (Reitzel & Harju, 2000).

The previous art therapy studies indicated positive change in behavior and depression for those who have participated. The intention of this study is to determine if art therapy can be instrumental in reducing depression in not only another men's prison population, but also with female inmates as well. Previous theories indicated that art therapy enabled participants to increase their sense of control, problem-solving and socialization skills (Gussak, 1997; Gussak & Cohen-Liebman, 2001). This study will determine if art therapy will help improve mood, socialization, problem-solving, and internal locus of control in both the male and female inmates.

Method

A pre-test–post-test control group design was implemented for this study. To address the question of the effectiveness of art therapy with prison inmates, two hypotheses were developed:

- If male inmates receive art therapy services, then they will exhibit marked improvement in mood, socialization, problem-solving abilities, and locus of control within the correctional environment.
- If female inmates receive art therapy services, then they will exhibit marked improvement in mood, socialization, problem-solving abilities, and locus of control within the correctional environment.

Participants

This study was conducted in two medium to maximum adult correctional facilities – one female and one male – in rural sections of Florida's panhandle. The men's facility was managed by the state's Department of Corrections, whereas the women's institution was managed by a privately owned corporation, yet was contracted by the state Department of Corrections to house female inmates. After approval was received from the University and the prison institutions' internal review boards, an announcement was made on all of the units in both facilities for volunteers to participate in these studies. Participants who volunteered for this study were randomly assigned to either a control group or the experimental group by the psychology and correctional staff of the respective facilities. Although the majority of the inmates have received Axis I diagnoses by the chief psychologists of both facilities, specifically depression, not all of the participants received medication. Table 1 presents a breakdown of the demographics of these four groups. As the table reflects, there was consistent distribution of those who received medication between the experimental and control groups. The crimes for all of these inmates ranged from narcotic possession to murder.

Two graduate art therapy internship students offered sessions in the women and men's facility during both research periods, with supervision from the primary researcher and staff psychologist. The control group participants continued their regularly scheduled daily activities without art therapy treatment. They were placed in art therapy treatment sessions the semester following the end of the study.

Measures

This research project used three measurement tools. After completing the informed consent forms and requisite paperwork, each client completed a drawing using standardized materials of a person picking an apple from a tree (PPAT) the first day and last day of the sessions. These drawings were compared as pre- and post-project, and were evaluated using the Formal Elements Art Therapy

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