



“A coat of many colors” Towards an integrative multilayered model of art therapy

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a theoretical model for conceptualizing art therapy through an integrative multi-layered prism that ecologically “layers” dynamic, humanistic, systemic, and social understandings of art, therapy, and people. The result is a systemic but multifaceted model for the teaching of art therapy and the implementation of its theory. The “depth” of art therapy is the multifaceted character of art that enables multiple interpretations simultaneously, concurrent with the eclectic and complex realities of today’s clients. This paper presents a theoretical model and also demonstrates different systems of its application.

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Introduction

Art therapy is a highly effective therapeutic medium that can contribute “hands on” skills to therapists, educators, nurses, psychologists, and psychiatrists. However, art therapists constantly struggle with the theoretical base of art therapy. Each theoretical prism on its own seems to reduce other elements of the art: for example, when it is used as a projective tool, it loses the value of the process and of the context of art making (Brooke, 1996; Kacen & Lev-Wiesel, 2002; Koppitz, 1984), and when it focuses only on process, it loses the value of an analytical and projective theory (McNiff, 1992; Moon, 2002).

In order to overcome this, we end up moving haphazardly between dynamic, humanistic, and systemic outlooks, or we give up completely on theory and becomes a “recipe book” of cute tools or a new age general revival of creativity as “good for one.” On occasion, we experience the art and the words as fragmenting, or even competing, along the “art as therapy”–“art as psychotherapy” continuum (Allen, 1995; McNiff, 1992). This theoretical struggle of us the art therapists is apparent in art therapy literature, which is divided into books based on working with different populations (for example, Hiscox & Calisch, 1998; Kaye & Blee 1997), books structured around a single theory, be it biological, or humanistic, or feminist (for example, Hogan, 2003; Silverstone, 1993), and those that present multiple theories in separate chapters (for example, Rubin, 1999). Additional examples are addressed in the literature survey below.

The aim of this paper is not to downplay the huge advances and importance of the different strands of art therapy, but to suggest that such a fragmentation of theory and population, while creating diversity and richness, also complicates the forming of a unified theoretical base: should I, as an art therapy educator teach endless different theories, creating a superficial tool box, or stick religiously to the most fashionable one at present, creating depth but reducing the art’s potential? Should I focus on fine art lessons and on aesthetic intuition, or should I teach therapy techniques, alongside which the art is juxtaposed? Or should I teach how art affects the brain? And how can all this be done in depth? More specifically, what methods, if any, of analyzing the art should be taught? How does one create a student capable of taking a critical stand vis-à-vis his/her profession and developing it further theoretically? If we refuse to address the above complexities theoretically, then art therapy can turn into a superficial “fit for all” activity or be limited to a single psychological theory. Neither option, however, seems to encompass the richness, effectiveness, and wholeness that art therapy can provide.

This paper proposes the authors’ attempts at a solution to the above problem, through trying to create an integrative theoretical base. Using an ecological model, an individual is understood as comprising the interaction between temperamental, childhood, family, communal, cultural, and national realities that ripple out in ever-enlarging circles, as in the ecological model of Bronfenbrenner (2004). Each circle leans toward a different theory, from dynamic, to humanistic, to systemic, to socially critical. The layering of different theoretical positions – like different shades of cellophane paper, one on top of the other – enables the creation of an individual “mix” of a new, indefinable color, deeper and more dynamic than any single shade of cellophane. This concept represents the author’s understanding of the real depth of art therapy, which, like art itself, has

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the flexibility to encompass and to contain different prisms of personality within a single page or art process. This provides a complex and encompassing narrative of an individual as both the product of her unique combination of circumstances and also as having inherent agency and creativity to counteract them. This frames the above problem as the solution based on the assumption that art's inherent ability to layer multifaceted levels of meaning – its multiplicity – makes it a medium capable of encompassing multiple levels of theory simultaneously. Likewise, the art medium is particularly relevant to the postmodern, eclectic era we live in, where problems cannot be explained using one “grand narrative.” People's problems are analyzed and understood by concurrently drawing on a variety of different theories that derive from the interaction between the constantly shifting, world.

The literature survey that follows elaborates the points made above, after which examples are offered as to how this theoretical stand can be implemented in art therapy practice, both with regard to different populations and within art therapy teaching.

Literature survey

The complex, triangular relationship between client, therapist, and artwork is the differentiating factor between art therapy and verbal therapy. Different interpretations of this triangular relationship have evolved, each stressing different elements of art as the therapy (Rubin, 2001). As such, the literature examines the methods and searches for the meanings that the arts give to therapy, but the current literature does not create an integrated, theoretical whole. The following is a non-exhaustive sample of some of the central, theoretical approaches used in art therapy that are incorporated in this paper.

Art therapy through the dynamic prism focuses on the patients' transference relationship with the art and on the art as an additional way to access unconscious and archetypal contents and the projective relationship (Brook, 1996; Dalley, Gabrielle, & Terry, 1993; Furth, 1993; Neurenberg, 1966; Rubin, 1999; Schaverien, 1992). More current dynamic approaches, based on Winnicott's transitional space (Winnicott, 1958), address the art as an expression of the inter-subjective spaces created between therapist and client (Skaife, 2001). The creative activity that occurs between art therapist and client on the art page can be seen as mirroring the transitional space between mother and child according to dynamic theories: A development of the above is the concept of art as projective, as in the use of diagnostic tests in art therapy (Brooke, 1996; De Lio, 1973; Goodnow, 1977; Silver, 1983). Art through a dynamic lens is thus understood primarily as a regressive, universal, and projective language, analyzed by psychological meta-theory, and as such, it is seen as connected to fantasy and to desire (Rose, 1988). The dynamic approach, however, can be based on meta-theories of man that are culturally invalid, and that reduce art to a projective element, neglecting its interactive and social realities.

The humanistic prism, in comparison, sees the creative engagement in art's reflective, expressive, and integrative processes as the focus of art therapy, enhancing emotional and cognitive insight and development and promoting health. Betinsky stresses phenomenological interaction with the art product (Betinsky, 1995). McNiff suggest that the arts are a type of “medicine,” that works independently of the therapeutic relationship (McNiff, 1992). Within this theoretical framework, the art is understood by the client with the help of the therapist, whose role is that of the catalyst and witness of this reflective process (Allen, 1995; Devi, 1984; Moon, 2002). Gestalt, narrative, and developmental theories of art therapy; (Carlson, 1997; Rhyne, 1996; Riley, 1997) all incorporate the arts within this humanistic perspective of man as the creative fixer of his own life. However, the limitation of this perspective is its lack

of both unconscious and also social and cultural parts of the client's reality.

The systemic prism is concerned with changing relationships and the roles within social systems as catalysts for personal change. The arts are used to enhance communication within the system, to distance conflicts, to foster reflection and communication, and to help one experience the symbolic changes of roles (Riley & Malchiodi, 1994). The focus here is on art as a process. A drawback of this position is its failure to enable individual reflection, or its underlying assumption that “instant” solutions are possible merely by changing the experience in the present.

The community or social prism focuses on the ability of art to define a group's identity on a more encompassing level, to humanize institutions, and to provide the unheard minority groups, which constitute the majority of art therapy clientele, with a voice. This theoretical stand assumes that people's problems are often the result of social, financial, and cultural realities rather than the reflection of a personal or pathological disorder (Campanelli, 1991; Campbell, 1999; Dosmantes-Beaudry, 1999; Hiscox & Calisch, 1998; Huss & Cwikel, 2005). The aim here is not to elucidate a single, exclusive meaning of the art, but to understand the discourses that it presents (Dokter, 1998; Hogan, 1997; Liebman, 1996). The social and community orientations, however, do not discern individual experience and agency, or individual difference, within the social context.

The above theories assume different uses of the same art process, product, and discussion, either understanding art as a projective, diagnostic tool that can be “decoded,” or understanding art as a personal form of self-expression that can be explained only by the creator, either claiming that art does not need to be “understood” but rather experienced, or understanding art that is a social and political comment that needs to be contextualized within its social reality. We see that each stands alone, by definition, omits elements found in the others, and reduces the potential of therapeutic insights that the arts can provide when all of these levels are layered systematically as in an ecological perspective that moves from the individual to society (Kvale, 1992). This differs from a postmodern stand that sees man's multiple identity as fragmented into a haphazard string of “identities,” due to an incoherent social reality (Canclini, 1996; Hermans & Kempen, 1998). While the postmodern stand may be true politically, it is hard to apply within the framework of therapy.

For therapists, in contrast to philosophers, the ecological model seems more helpful (Bronfenbrenner, 2004; Engle, 1977) as it provides a coherent “map” of man that can be utilized systematically while still accounting for all the elements of a complex identity. As Smith states: “It is always possible to locate individual agency without submitting to either extreme interpretations of Foucault's views of power as disembodied, or to naïve formulations of individualism. . .” (Smith, 2002, p. 34).

This paper is built on the premise, as stated, that art is a medium that enables the multifaceted, hybrid, or fragmented elements of modern identity to be held together within a single creation. Indeed, Lippard, an art critic, declared, “. . . Art is able to contain. . . hybrid and emotionally complex stories derived from both tradition and experience, old-new stories, challenge the pervasive ‘master narratives’ that would contain them. . . It has become clear that the hybrid is one of the most authentic creative expressions in the United States” (Lippard, 1990, p. 57).

The visual form's many-sidedness can help explain the authenticity of the hybrids (Devi, 1984). Arnhiem (1996) and Lowenfeld and Brittain (1987) define symbolic language as simultaneously internally and externally focused, cognitive and emotional, and communicating with the self and with the environment. Observing a picture (either by the creator or others) and talking about it creates additional dualities, as it is both a reflective and an expressive

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