



## A study on the perception of art therapy among mental health professionals in Korea<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate how mental health professionals in Korea perceive art therapy and in what way they can improve it. The study's participants were 152 mental health professionals at 58 institutions in Seoul and the Gyeonggi area.

The results showed that different health professions had different perceptions of art therapy. Most professions were aware of art therapy and reported its effectiveness; however, psychiatrists relatively underappreciated its helpfulness and effectiveness, as well as the qualifications of art therapists. In terms of how to improve art therapy, respondents, as a whole, ranked securing qualified art therapists the highest, followed by securing more scientific data, developing more art therapy programs, engaging in team approaches, and promoting art therapy. These research results suggest that, with regard to art therapy, the establishment of systematic certification, development of a training curriculum, and future studies can extend the recognition of art therapy. This will improve art therapists' abilities to perform their professional role and further develop art therapy.

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The therapeutic power of art is well known in many cultures. However, clinicians have only recently perceived it as a form of therapy. In Korea, art therapy was first introduced around 1990 (Chung, 2003). Since then, many people have become interested in this therapeutic technique and begun to apply it in their clinical settings, which is very encouraging. Nonetheless, clinicians as a group retain some doubts and skepticism concerning art therapy's effectiveness and legitimacy.

Korean art therapy has great potential to develop into an important profession in Korea's mental health fields (Kim, 2009). In Korea, art therapy was implemented in mental hospitals during the 1990s and is now used in many other settings, such as welfare centers and private counseling centers, which indicates how art therapy's applications have grown.

Educational institutes, such as graduate schools, are introducing an increasing number of art therapy courses; however, clinicians' lack of understanding regarding this therapeutic technique's effectiveness remains a challenge. For example, art therapy is rarely used in treating children or the mentally ill. Moreover, mental hospital staff regards art therapy only as a part of occupational therapy (Chung, 2005). Such an understanding of art therapy can distort

clinicians' perceptions of it and diminish its therapeutic value, thereby preventing it from developing in clinical settings.

Thus since the early days in Korea, art therapy has mostly been employed by volunteers who received only basic training, in the field. Because of potential therapists' lack of information and insufficient academic support, it is difficult to foster art therapists under any form of structured system. In addition, Korea lacks a national certification program recognizing art therapists.

Despite the social interest in art therapy in Korea, there are fewer art therapy resources regarding theories and clinical cases compared to other academic fields, likely due to art therapy's short academic history. Recently, more resources, including many books and research materials on art therapy, have become available in Korea. However, there are still not enough to accommodate the wide interest in art therapy. Educational institutions limit dissertations to case studies, meaning most research conducted in Korea focuses either on preventing psycho-pathological problems (i.e., anxiety, depression, and stress relief) or showing meaningful results regarding social relationships and/or the development of social skills (Choi, 2004). However, there have been no significant studies on how mental health professionals understand and perceive art therapy in Korea. The only research available is a study by Chung (2005). In her research, Chung aimed to determine how to apply art therapy along with medical treatment, using data on the current perception of art therapy, and the important treatment factors seen by health and medical workers. However, because her study's participants were limited to doctors in general hospitals,

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she could not conduct a comparative analysis on the perception of art therapy among other professionals, including staff members at psychiatric hospitals.

Mental health professionals' opinions and knowledge regarding art therapy would be a useful reference for the development and future direction of art therapy.

This study, therefore, aimed to provide basic, helpful resources to professionals working in therapy and related areas in order to reveal the usefulness of art therapy. In it, I examined the level of art therapy awareness among professionals in institutions that use it or have the potential to use it. In addition, this study aimed to provide background information to reinforce art therapists' quality standards and enhance their professionalism.

The research questions were as follows:

- How does each profession perceive art therapy?
- What is each professional group's past experience with using art therapy (direct application/indirect application/no application)?
- Which type of people does each profession think should be performing art therapy?
- How does each profession perceive that timing applies to art therapy?
- How does each profession perceive the effectiveness of art therapy?
- How does each profession perceive art therapists' qualifications?
- What improvement in art therapy does each profession perceive as desirable?

## Method

### Participants

All participants (psychiatrists, nurses, counselors, and other types of therapists, such as speech, cognitive, or play therapists) in this study were employed by welfare centers (13.7%), hospitals (62.1%), and professional counseling centers (24.2%), which among them have the majority of Korea's art therapists.

I restricted the study to hospitals that were legally accredited—in particular, to neuropsychiatric and psychiatric departments at general hospitals and private hospitals that were registered with the Korean Hospital Association. "Welfare centers" refers to social welfare centers and to institutes registered as either Social Welfare Corporation or nonprofit corporations with the Ministry for Health, Welfare, and Family Affairs. Likewise, I limited the counseling centers considered to those registered with the National Tax Service, as some private counseling institutes are not registered with it.

This study took place within Seoul and Gyeonggi province. I randomly distributed 320 survey documents to the 58 participating organizations, which account for 5% of the 1163 organizations in the area, and received back 161 (50%) completed surveys. Of these, 9 were in some way inappropriate for inclusion in the statistical analysis; therefore, the statistical analysis used data from 152 completed surveys (see Tables 1 and 2).

### Measurements

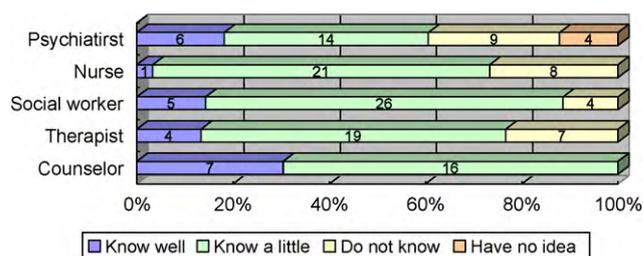
To develop the questionnaire, I made use of precedent, over-all studies in counseling and psychotherapy (Chung, 2005; Kim,

**Table 2**  
Objects and detailed information.

Items	Contents	Note
Region of study	Seoul, Kyeonggi province	Central city of Korea
Amount of study paper distributed and collected	320 copies distributed/161 copies returned	A total of 58 organizations

**Table 1**  
Participants.

Objects	Classification	Numbers (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	28	18.4
	Female	124	81.6
Age	Under 25 years of age	8	5.3
	25–30 years of age	66	43.4
	31–40 years of age	42	27.6
	41–50 years of age	30	19.7
	Over 51 years of age	6	3.9
Occupation	Psychiatrist	34	22.4
	Nurse	30	19.7
	Social workers	35	23.0
	Counselor	23	15.1
	Therapist	30	19.7
Period of work	Less than 1 year	33	21.7
	1–2 years	35	23.0
	3–5 years	47	30.9
	Over 5 years	37	24.3



**Fig. 1.** Perception of art therapy among professionals\*.

2004; Moon, 2006) and verified the questionnaire's contents with a professional art therapist.

The collected data were analyzed using SPSS 12.0 (Statistical Package for Social Sciences, Version 12.0) for Windows. Descriptive statistics were used to obtain frequencies. To determine the perception of art therapy among mental health professionals who worked in areas that may use art therapy, and also to determine whether art therapy was in use or not, I utilized chi-square tests.

This study presents, not only all results showing a statistically significant difference, but also results suggesting possible areas for improvement, even if they were not statistically significant.

## Results

### Perception of art therapy among professionals

Fig. 1 shows the results regarding the perception of art therapy among professionals. The breakdown of those who answered, "Know well," was as follows: counselors (30.4%), psychiatrists (18.2%), social workers (14.3%), therapists (13.3%), and nurses (3.3%). When also including those who answered "Know a little," the highest-awareness group was counselors (100%), followed by social workers (88.6%), therapists (76.6%), nurses (73.3%), and psychiatrists (60.6%). Meanwhile, 12.1% of psychiatrists answered, "Have no idea," which indicates art therapy awareness was lowest in the psychiatrist group ( $X^2 = 32.16$ ,  $df = 12$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

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