



## Building bridges with institutionalized orphans in Ukraine: An art therapy pilot study<sup>☆</sup>

Olena Darewych, MA, RCAT\*

Lesley University, Cambridge, MA, USA

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### ABSTRACT

This pilot study used the art therapy Bridge Drawing assessment to measure if institutionalized orphans in Ukraine, isolated from society and without a secure parental attachment base, have the capacity to visualize and draw their future life, goals, and hopes. For this cross-sectional quantitative research, the Bridge Drawing directive was modified by means of including a path to encourage psychological and image response. Participants ( $N = 258$ ) from 32 Ukrainian orphanages between the ages of 8 and 20 completed the Bridge Drawing while attending a life skills camp in Ukraine. Less than half (44%) of the orphans drew a path in the right quadrant of the paper leading towards a future life. Not surprisingly, 86% of future comments were written by adolescent orphans who at the time of the study were psychologically preparing for their departure from orphanage to society. The results of this study confirm that institutionalized orphans have the ability to find meaning in life and are goal-oriented however, only a small proportion.

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### Introduction

On August 24th, 1991 the Ukrainian Parliament proclaimed Ukraine an independent state from the Soviet Union (Magocsi, 2007). After months of public celebrations, reality finally settled in. Ukraine's first few years as an independent state were challenging. Its economic and political landscapes were extremely bleak. As a result, 75% of Ukrainians lived below the poverty line during the 1990s struggling with a shortage of food, clothing, and housing (Malarek, 2003; Tartakovsky, 2010; Yekelchik, 2007). With the rise of unemployment, many poverty stricken families no longer were able to financially and emotionally care for their children and handed their offspring over to the state.

Currently, of the 8 million Ukrainians under the age of 18, approximately 100,000 are orphans. Ninety percent are social orphans due to alcoholism, prostitution, or imprisonment of parents (Unicef, 2010; World Orphan Project, 2008). The abandoned children live and study in state run orphanages known as *internats*. In 2009, there were over 200 orphanages in operation across Ukraine (HUHTC, 2009). For many of the orphans; especially those arriving from abusive environments, the orphanage is considered a safe-haven which they eventually identify as home. Marcus (2006) defined home as a place which “fulfils many needs: a

place of self-expression, a vessel of memories, a refuge from the outside world, a cocoon where we can feel nurtured and let down our guard” (p. 2). As the orphans reach their 18th birthday, they are state mandated to vacate the orphanages. Regrettably, due to minimal to no psychosocial programmes in the orphanages, a large proportion of the orphans are mentally and psychologically ill prepared for their bridge crossing from orphanage to society. Upon dismissal, only 27% find employment; while the remaining become homeless youth. Sixty percent of the girls end up in prostitution, 70% of the boys enter a life of crime, and 20% commit suicide (World Orphan Project, 2008).

Throughout the years, development theorists have underscored that a secure parent–child attachment is an essential foundation for the formation of a child's cognitive, emotional, physical, and social well-being (Ainsworth, 1979; Bandura, 1977; Bloch, 1995; Bowlby, 1982). Collectively, their work highlighted that deficiencies in early sensory-motor stimulation and social-emotional experiences are associated with developmental delays and long-term behaviour problems in children. Previous studies have concluded that growing up in a Russian or Eastern European orphanage has a profound negative impact on a child's cognitive, physical, behavioural and social development (Ames, 1997; Collins, 2008; Kaler & Freeman, 1994; Maclean, 2003; Rutter, Kreppner, & O'Connor, 1998). The degree of impact on an orphan's development and emotional experience is dependent on variables such as age of parental abandonment, length of separation, institutional care, and a child's genetic disposition (Gindis, 1998; Magid & McKelvey, 1987). Studies in Africa have reported that orphaned children possess negative opinions of their lives and possess minimal hope for a good future (Atwine,

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\* Correspondence address: 57 Hampshire Heights, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M9B 2K5. Tel.: +1 647 889 7753.

E-mail address: [oledarewych@rogers.com](mailto:oledarewych@rogers.com)

Cantor-Graae, & Bajunirwe, 2005; Cluver & Gardner, 2006; Germann, 2002).

Logotherapist and Nazi concentration camp survivor Frankl (2006) on the other hand, asserted that individuals under a limited nurturing and nutritional setting and separated from society have the ability to find meaning, hope, and a future in their life. However, not all have the inner capability. In his book *Man's Search for Meaning* (2006) he stressed that "it is a peculiarity of man that he can only live by looking to the future . . . and this is his salvation in the most difficult moments of his existence, although he sometimes has to force his mind to the task" (p. 73). What was difficult was that prisoners of WWII concentration camps were unaware of the duration of camp and humans cannot "live for the future or aim at a goal without knowing the exact day of liberation" (Frankl, 2006, p. 70). Unlike the prisoners, institutionalized orphans in Ukraine are fully aware of their entry day into society and based on Frankl's theory, have the ability to change, live for a good future and aim for personal goals.

Research studies have demonstrated the need and importance of exposing orphans of all ages to psychosocial support services and psychotherapeutic treatments such as art therapy for developmental growth, psychological well-being and resiliency (Adams, 2005; Arrington & Yorgin, 2001; Darewych, 2009; Gruendel & Anderson, 1995; Ivanova, 2004).

#### *Art therapy in Ukraine*

While the field of art therapy continues to flourish in the United Kingdom and the United States of America, art therapy is in the infancy stage of development in Ukraine. The integration of art therapy as a psychotherapeutic treatment; especially for individuals with mental illness is still frowned upon in Ukraine (Tuchynska, 2010). Contrary to Tuchynska, art therapist Stoll (2005) asserted that art therapy interests in countries such as Ukraine is high. However, due to minimal financial and educational resources the development of the field of art therapy is sluggish. Art therapy is one Western school of thought founded in psychotherapy which can be transferred to Ukraine in view of the fact that art is a universal language (Arrington, 2005; Councill, 2003; Rubin, 1999; McNiff, 2009) and "in any age and in any country, is humanity's first model for sharing experiences and communicating meaning" (Arrington, 2001, p. vii). Furthermore, Ukrainians throughout history have been passionate about art. Currently, "the entire country seems overtaken with a creative buzz that appears limitless in its outreach . . . everything seems touched by art and experimentation" (Evan & Di Duca, 2010, p. 91). Until the field develops and obtains formal professional acceptance, art therapy in Ukraine will most likely continue to be implemented by Western art therapists.

Recent brief art therapy missions to Ukraine assert the need and importance of exposing institutionalized orphans to a creative and therapeutic environment in order to assess their needs as they prepare to transition to adult life outside the orphanage (Arrington & Yorgin, 2001; Darewych, 2009). Due to the limited time frame in brief therapy sessions, a focus on clients' present strengths and future goals is practical (Winbolt, 2011).

Art therapy may benefit institutionalized orphans in Ukraine for a number of reasons. First of all, unlike the bleak, minimalistic and sensory deprived orphanage environment (Human Rights Watch, 1998), art therapy exposes institutionalized orphans, to a creative and sensory-stimulating space where they are able to explore art materials and gain a sense of mastery and competence. Secondly, art activities themselves offer a unique opportunity for institutionalized orphans to develop cognitive, physical, and social skills. Thirdly, the therapeutic environment allows institutionalized orphans to gain awareness of self-worth and value. Fourthly,

the therapist–child relationship provides institutionalized orphans the opportunity to express their emotional difficulties as isolation, anxiety, and concerns around their future entry into society. Germann (2002) in his study with orphaned children concluded that interventions focusing on a child's development of hope and goals for the future are a necessity. In art therapy, the Bridge Drawing art-based instrument allows clients to verbally and visually reflect in a safe and therapeutic environment their past, present, and future life.

#### *The Bridge Drawing instrument*

The bridge is a universal symbol of transition from one space or mental state of consciousness to another (Chetwynd, 1982; Cooper, 1978; Fontana, 1994). The Bridge Drawing art-based instrument, designed by American art therapists Hays and Lyons (1981) is theorized to have the potential to generate an image which represents a client's perception of his or her past and present life experiences, as well as future goals and wishes. Secondly, the Bridge Drawing may provide the therapist insight into the client's perception of developmental movement or stagnancy (Councill, 2003; Hays & Lyons, 1981; Teneycke, Hoshino, & Sharpe, 2009). Thirdly, the Bridge Drawing allows clients to recognize strengths and weaknesses as well as explore personal life conflicts and barriers (Stepney, 2001). And finally, the Bridge Drawing may assess for client suicidal ideation. Assessment for suicide thoughts and intent may be made if the client draws themselves standing in the middle of the bridge looking down (Hays & Lyons, 1981).

In recent years, a number of American art therapists and international mental health professionals have found the Bridge Drawing an effective art-based instrument with their clients (Betts, 2008; Ferszt, Hayes, DeFedele, & Horn, 2004; Martin, 2008; Stepney, 2001; Teneycke et al., 2009; Yedidia & Itzhaky, 2004). However, several art therapists have emphasized the need for amplifying the validity and reliability of the Bridge Drawing instrument as an assessment and expanding the global Bridge Drawing database (Betts, 2005; Councill, 2003; Teneycke et al., 2009).

#### **Method**

The purpose of this cross-sectional pilot study was to introduce the American Bridge Drawing art-based instrument to institutionalized orphans in Ukraine. For this particular study, the Bridge Drawing directive was modified by means of including a path to encourage image and psychological movement. The Bridge Drawings completed by the orphans were compared to Bridge Drawings completed by American adolescents and adults.

#### *Hypothesis*

The hypothesis of this pilot study was that institutionalized orphans in Ukraine isolated from society and without a secure parental attachment base have the capacity to visualize and draw their future life, goals and hopes.

#### *Population*

Four hundred and forty six female and male institutionalized orphans (446) from 32 orphanages across Ukraine who attended Help Us Help the Children's summer life skills camp were the target population for this pilot study. Help Us Help the Children (HUHTC) is a not for profit organization located in Toronto, Canada dedicated to enhancing the quality of life of children and youth living in Ukrainian orphanages. The primary mission of HUHTC's camp programme is to provide a supportive environment where orphans can

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