



Cinematherapy with preadolescents experiencing parental divorce: A collective case study

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ABSTRACT

A multiple-case study of the use of cinematherapy in six sessions of individual therapy each with three preadolescent aged children who were experiencing parental divorce was conducted. Questions to facilitate discussion and expressive activities including art, creative writing, story-telling, and/or drama were used. Multiple themes emerged across the cases including the usefulness of films to help children identify and express emotions, increased sharing, and increased coping. Interactive viewing was a new concept to emerge and involved a child spontaneously interacting with a film and/or the therapist through narrating, sharing thoughts and emotional responses, or interacting expressively while viewing providing therapeutic opportunities. Furthermore, all the children shared the plots from films or television shows they watched outside of therapy which can be viewed as a form of story-telling which conveyed their concerns and contributed to healing. Through their expressive responses, children experienced catharsis and created therapeutically relevant metaphors.

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Introduction

Cinematherapy, an extension of biblio/poetry therapy, is a creative approach to therapy in which films pertaining to clients' issues are assigned to clients to watch during or between sessions with the opportunity to discuss the films with a psychotherapist afterward. Films can be used to engage the imagination, enable discussion of difficult material by decreasing resistance, allow for emotional release and expression, help clients view problems from different angles, and provide role models or alternative solutions.

The purpose of this collective case study which was the subject of the author's recent dissertation was to explore the use of cinematherapy in a six-week individual therapy intervention with three preadolescent aged children who were experiencing parental divorce. Film clips from six films which have been recommended in the cinematherapy literature were shown in individual therapy with each child. Follow-up questions were used to promote discussion about the children's reactions to the film clips. Each child was given the opportunity to select expressive activities, including art, creative writing, story-telling, and drama to explore his or her own responses to the films creatively. Each child was interviewed about his or her thoughts about the intervention one to two weeks later. Themes were developed within and across cases; and then compared with the existing literature.

Providing therapeutic opportunities to help children grieve the losses associated with divorce, increase accurate and adaptive beliefs about divorce, and develop coping skills is crucial. However, children are often unable or unwilling to express their thoughts and feelings verbally in therapy, therefore creative approaches to treatment can be helpful (Berns, 2003; Pardeck, 2005; Tyson, Foster, & Jones, 2000).

Biblio/poetry therapy has been used to facilitate communication with children about transitions in the family, including divorce (Berns, 2003; Hames & Pedreira, 2003; Pardeck, 2005; Sargent, 1985; Tussing & Valentine, 2001). For the purposes of this article, the term biblio/poetry therapy will be used as recommended by Hynes and Hynes-Berry (1994). Hynes and Hynes-Berry proposed the term biblio/poetry therapy to encompass both bibliotherapy and poetry therapy. Likewise, the National Association for Poetry Therapy defines the term "poetry therapy" as encompassing both bibliotherapy and the use of films in therapy: "The term "poetry therapy" encompasses bibliotherapy (the interactive use of literature) and journal therapy (the use of life-based reflective writing) as well as therapeutic storytelling, the use of film in therapy, and other language-based healing modalities" (<http://poetrytherapy.org/about.html>).

Biblio/poetry therapy can be a particularly useful intervention for preadolescents experiencing divorce, who may feel too old for play therapy, yet may not all be ready for talk therapy (Pehrsson, Allen, Folger, McMillen, & Lowe, 2007). However, like Bowen (2006), I have found that books are less popular with many child and adolescent clients, because some young clients do not

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want to invest the time required for reading, and many prefer technology, television, and movies.

Cinematherapy is an extension of biblio/poetry therapy (Berg-Cross, Jennings, & Baruch, 1990; Calisch, 2001; Hebert & Neumeister, 2001, 2002; Portadin, 2006; Sharp, Smith, & Cole, 2002) which may have useful applications in the treatment of preadolescents experiencing parental divorce. Many authors have recommended films which may be clinically useful for a variety of problems and issues including parental divorce (Berg-Cross et al., 1990; Dermer & Hutchings, 2000; Grace, 2006; Hesley & Hesley, 2001; Solomon, 2001, 2005; Ulus, 2003; Wolz, 2005). However, there remains a need to explore the use of recommended films with children in an in depth way.

Literature review

Introduction to cinematherapy

The use of films in therapy is a growing area being discussed more frequently in the literature (Portadin, 2006). In a survey of attendees at the Texas Association of Marriage and Family Therapy in 1998, the majority of therapists stated that they discussed films in therapy regularly (Hesley, 2000). However, there are still relatively few case studies of cinematherapy in individual therapy with children. The majority of the cinematherapy case studies have been with adults in individual or couples therapy (Berg-Cross et al., 1990; Hesley, 2000; Hesley & Hesley, 2001; Heston & Kottman, 1997; Suarez, 2003; Wedding & Niemiec, 2003) or with children or adolescents in group therapy (Bierman, Krieger, & Leifer, 2003; Ham, 1988; Hoorwitz, 1984). There have been two brief case studies of gifted children, and one with an adolescent considering sexual issues (Hebert & Neumeister, 2001; Sharp et al., 2002). However, only one fairly extensive case study of a child in individual therapy was identified (Christie & McGrath, 1987).

History of cinematherapy

References to the therapeutic aspects of viewing dramas have been made since early recorded history. Henry and Sawyers (1987) discuss how in ancient Greece, Aristotle proposed the idea of catharsis which occurs through the vicarious experience of watching dramas. Aristotle theorized that when dramas evoked feelings of pity or fear in response to the hero's dilemma, the viewer could be "purged by his vicarious experience" (Henry & Sawyers, p. 32). Part of Aristotle's original definition of tragedy was the therapeutic and cathartic impact for the viewer: "A tragedy, then, is the imitation of action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; . . . with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions" (Aristotle, 335 B.C./1947).

The first published reference to the use of films in therapy identified by this author was Moreno's discussion of therapeutic dramas in which he proposed the term "therapeutic motion pictures" (1944, p. 7). He defined therapeutic as capable of producing catharsis and helping audience members to understand themselves better. He suggested the creation of therapeutic motion pictures, which would be similar to psychodrama, except could be repeated for multiple audiences. Moreno specified that while the production of the film may be therapeutic, "the main object of a therapeutic motion picture is not the production process but the treatment of audiences" (Moreno, 1944, p. 13). Moreno explained that the psychiatrist could stop the therapeutic film, explain parts of it while relating the film to the particular audience, and later the audience should discuss their own reactions.

Expressive activities in response to cinematherapy

Expressive follow-up activities have been recommended frequently in the biblio/poetry therapy literature to help participants process their responses to the literature and the interactive discussion which follows (Berns, 2003; Jackson, 2001; Mazza, 2003; Mazza, Magaz, & Scaturro, 1987; Nicholson & Pearson, 2003; Pardeck, 1990a, 1990b; Pardeck & Markward, 1995; Prater, Johnstun, Dyches, & Johnstun, 2006; Sullivan & Strang, 2002–2003). Likewise, Hebert and Neumeister (2001, 2002) recommended creative activities as a way to help children process their responses to films. For example, in one therapy group, late-latency aged children drew and role-played in response to videotaped scenes about parental divorce. Later, the children created their own videos about problem situations that might be experienced by children whose parents were divorcing (Hoorwitz, 1984).

Creative activities can help children increase introspection and when done in a group can also provide opportunities for children to support and empathize with each other (Hebert & Neumeister, 2002). Hebert and Neumeister suggest the following activities as ways to process the feelings that have arisen from the films: art, collages, journal-writing, role-plays, making up slogans, creative problem solving, or self-selected activities. However, while the expressive arts are frequently suggested as responses to literature and occasionally to films, there are few studies in which children's actual expressive responses have been explored in depth. Therefore, one of the goals of the current study was to explore the participants' responses to the expressive activities in greater depth.

Children and divorce

United States has one of the highest divorce rates among Western nations (Thompson & Wyatt, 1999). Nearly half of all first marriages in the United States are predicted to end in divorce, and the rates are higher for second marriages (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001) and therefore approximately 1,000,000 children a year experience parental divorce (Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2000). Because so many children are affected by parental divorce, there is a large body of research regarding the impact of divorce on children's development and mental health (Amato & Keith, 1991).

Children's immediate reactions to separation and divorce include shock, fear, and grieving (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1996). Hetherington found in her Virginia Longitudinal Study of Divorce that all family members go through a period of "disrupted functioning" after divorce (1993, p. 40). In the first year after divorce, children showed more anxious, demanding, noncompliant, and aggressive behavior with both adults and their peers at home and school. As children adjusted over the second year, these changes typically declined.

Based on a meta-analysis of all studies of divorce between the 1950s through the 1980s, Amato and Keith (1991) found that divorce can impact children's academic performance, behavior, psychological adjustment, self-esteem, social relationships, and relationships with parents negatively. Therapeutic interventions can be a protective factor for children experiencing divorce that can assist in adjustment (Amato, 2000).

Method

Three preadolescent aged children (defined as ages 10–12) participated with parental consent. Confidentiality will be assured in that identifying aspects of the cases have been altered. Three children were selected because this was a multiple-case design, since conclusions are generally considered stronger than in single case studies (Yin, 2003). None of the cases were perceived to be rare

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