



Breaking barriers: Evaluating an arts-based emotion regulation training in prison



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ABSTRACT

Creative arts therapies have long made use of the interconnection between body, emotion, and mind. Movement is intimately intertwined with emotional and cognitive functions, and role play promotes perspective taking, empathy, and interactive competencies. In this pilot study, with a pre-/post-test waiting-group design of male prison inmates in three German prisons ($n=47$), we conducted an evaluation of the movement- and drama-therapy based, anti-violence training e|m|o processing® (Lutz, 2008). The training is an action-oriented and neuroscience informed method, including movement therapy interventions for handling rage and promoting respectful interaction by means of Aikido stick fighting practice, perspective taking, and enactments. Upon completion of the training, the experimental group reported an increase in body awareness and social competence, experienced distance to their own aggression, and experienced a higher degree of closeness to the group and trainer. No changes occurred on anger and on explicit as well as implicit aggression measures. Movement analysis from behavior observations indicated a decreased immediate aggression potential and an increase in expression of needs upon termination of the training. Statements from focus groups after the training indicated improved empathy, respect, and perspective taking, both among participants and in relation to victims.

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Introduction

Arts therapies can directly touch our essence (Cruz & Feder, 2013; Koch, 2008). At their basis, body, movement and play are a primary source of our identity (Stern, 1985) and embed humans into primary interaction systems (Kestenberg, 1975). They can impact the inner as well as the outer life of each individual, particularly the implicit processes of movement and movement repetition from our functional (physiological, sensory, mnemonic) as well as our interpersonal relations (emotional, agentic) – as increasingly also shown by research from cognitive sciences and neurosciences (e.g., Gallese, 2005; Gibbs, 2006) and discussed by phenomenology (e.g., Fuchs, 2012). In the context of psychiatry and psychosomatics, therapy therefore has adapted creative elements of body movement such as dance or rhythm. Beyond clinical contexts, creative therapies are also used in schools (Hervey & Kornblum, 2006; Karkou, 2010), with refugees (Harris, 2007; Koch & Weidinger-von der Recke, 2009; Reka, 2011), or in the penal system (Smeijsters & Cleven, 2006), which is the target context of the present study.

In 2012, there were 195,143 violent crimes committed in Germany (Bundeskriminalamt, 2012). Aggressive behavior is tightly bound to the tendency to experience quick and intense anger in response to provocation (e.g., Watt & Howells, 1999). This tendency as well as the difficulty to control one's anger are predictors of factual violent behavior (Novaco, 1997). The treatment of aggressive behavior is difficult and particularly so, if the person has reached the stage of violent social action (Guerra & Slaby, 1990). In Germany as in many other European countries, the principles of re-socialization and reintegration are the prevalent ideas (Paragraph 2, Strafvollzugsgesetz) of bringing prison inmates back to their own social responsibility and at the same time efficiently protect the public.

Out of the necessity to provide effective means for the reduction of violent behavior, several approaches to forensic interventions and trainings have resulted (Moon & Eisler, 1983; Rokach, 1987; Watt & Howells, 1999). However, none of these cognitive-behavioral-based approaches has an explicit action-, arts- or resource-oriented focus. In this context, a dance/movement and drama therapy-based training in a workshop-format of a limited time frame (one week) has been developed by drama therapist Ingrid Lutz, M.A. and dance/movement therapist Fabian Chyle, M.A. (Lutz, 2008). Their concept – e|m|o processing® – is specifically tailored to address the increased readiness for conflict- and aggression potential in prison inmates and is conducted in the trainer constellation of a female and male dance/movement therapist and drama therapist (Lutz, 2008).

The main objective of this study was to evaluate whether this training is effective for emotion recognition and regulation, increase in body awareness, reduction of aggression, development of empathy and/or improvement of interpersonal

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relations related to the re-socialization process of prison inmates. We also wanted to investigate whether the format of the training was suited to produce changes and which outcome variables were particularly affected by the training. Therefore, we assessed the following emotion regulation related outcome variables: affect, anger and aggression reduction, body awareness, and social competence.

The intervention

e|m|o processing® is an acronym for emotion, motion, and organization. Based on neuroscientific findings (Bauer, 2004; Hüther, 2005), it assumes that through physical experiences (motion), emotional competences are promoted (emotion), and behavioral patterns can be re-organized (organization). The anti-violence-training of e|m|o processing® strongly focuses on the individual's attitudes towards violence rather than re-educating or superimposing models of alternative behavior. In the core of the prevention idea of e|m|o processing®, is the possibility to establish a "buffer", which separates emotion (aggression) and action (violence).

Traditional anti-violence trainings in German prisons are mostly based on confrontation principles and combined with cognitive-behavioral approaches in order to increase personal control and self-esteem. As neuroscientific research has shown (Bauer, 2004; Hüther, 2005) it is crucial for learning and change processes that anxiety is decreased to a minimum, trust is installed, experiences are connected to physical processes, and that the clients are confronted with challenges, which are manageable for them. Goals of the training are decreased aggression, and increased body awareness on the personal and interpersonal level, better emotion regulation, and the development of healthier interpersonal boundaries as well as non-violent strategies that generalize across situations.

One cornerstone of the e|m|o processing® training is the constant change of the role of the inmates ("being the perpetrator" versus "being the victim") in order to reactivate individual situations where violent behavior was executed or encountered. Therefore, the anti-violence and emotion regulation training of e|m|o processing® incorporates elements of Aikido stick-fighting techniques. The work with the 110 cm long wooden stick allows for a variety of physical experiences in relation to establishing interpersonal boundaries: attacking, defending, retreating, empowering, stopping, or redirecting are some of the core actions which are experienced in the training. The long Aikido stick has some advantage to shorter ones (e.g., those used in Escrima): it provides more physical distance between clients, and at the same time enlarges the individual's actions. Additionally, stick fighting is a way to involve inmates more easily into movement or drama-therapy interventions, because it is closer to their (movement-) culture/subculture. Those movement- and body psychotherapeutic techniques sensitize inmates to the perception of psychosomatic changes in their own as well as the other's body.

Through the constant change of role (perpetrator versus victim) the inmates are confronted with critical situations (e.g., "a weapon in my hand"; "a weapon against me"), which promotes experiences on three levels: On the *individual level*, clients become more aware of their own bodies, their internalized automatic reactions and their individual dispositions to violent behavior. On the *interpersonal level*, clients are sensitized to the body of the other, communication patterns, role-preferences, and perspectives (dyadic interactions), and on the *collective level* of group behavior, clients become aware of their social standing and strategies in groups. On all three levels, participants dive into the relations among aggression, communication, and violent behavior. They do so in a quite different way as they commonly do in a cognitive-behavioral training, much more body-, action-, and self-regulation related. They directly dive into situations related to aggression and aggressive behavior. By practicing alternative behaviors throughout the training, the development of a constructive handling of emotion regulation and aggressive energy, and an improvement of social skills and empathy is assumed to be facilitated. These predictions were tested in the present study. More information on the intervention can be obtained from the second author, who was the organizer of the trainings and the main therapist in all three settings of the study.

Hypotheses

In a pretest–posttest waiting group design, we tested 47 male prison inmates taking part in either the training group (EG) or a control group (CG) with multiple methods. Dependent variables and hypotheses were generated from the set of goals of the e|m|o processing®-method, resulting in the following hypotheses.

The experimental group was expected to show increased anger control, higher internal and lower external control beliefs, higher body awareness, decreased aggression on explicit and implicit measures, and a more realistic self-perception after the training. The control group was expected to show no pre-/post-test change in the according variables. The training progress questionnaire was expected to show an increase in body awareness, social competence, experienced distance to one's own aggression, and closeness to group and trainer. Regarding the behavior change we expected a decrease in mixed fighting rhythms (indicating a high immediate aggression potential on the body level) assessed with the KMP. Both of the latter measures were conducted without a control group. The focus group was supposed to convey a more differentiated picture regarding the causes, motives, and backgrounds of the results obtained.

Methods

Sample

Fourty-seven male inmates from three German prisons participated in this matched waiting list multicenter pilot study. Their mean age was 34.0 years ($SD = 10.3$), and 91.5% were German native speakers, 6.4% Russian, and 2.1% Turkish (Russians are the top immigrant population in Germany, and Turks the most numerous group of foreign workers, with many second generation young adults). Twenty-nine participants were allocated to the experimental group (EG) and 18 to the control group (CG). Inmates of the control groups received their training three months after those of the experimental group. Table 1 provides an overview of the distribution of socio demographic parameters in both groups. While mother tongue (German vs. other), education, and prison were almost equally distributed in both groups, age slightly differed from control (37.1 ± 10.1) to experimental group (32.0 ± 10.2), without being significant. Based on confidentiality regulations, the trainers and researchers had no access to further data, such as the criminal history of the participants.

Procedure

The assessment with the questionnaire and IAT took place three days before the training (pretest) and on the last training day after lunch time. The training lasted 5 days, Monday to Friday from 9 to 16 h with 1½ hours of lunch break. Participants were not scheduled for other therapies during the week of the training and in between pre- and post-testing. We assured informed consent of the participants obtaining their signature. Then participants were administered the pre-test, starting with either the questionnaire or the IAT (controlling for sequence effects). The post-test was administered with the identical instruments after the training on the last training day. After the training, the participants of the EG had the opportunity to add anything they felt was left out in the assessment or they wanted to say in the focus groups led by a female researcher without the presence of the trainers. During the training, participants were administered an additional (one-page) self-report training progress questionnaire assessing body awareness, social competences and their experienced degree of distance to their own aggression. On the first and the last day during the initial and the final round with the inmates, the helpers conducted the behavior ratings, while the group was sitting in a chair circle and talking.

Assessment instruments

The assessment instruments consisted of the main self-report questionnaire and the IAT (both administered within the control group design), a training progress questionnaire assessing progress during the training, pre–post behavior observations, and a focus group after training and tests with the training group only.

Self-report questionnaires

The self-report questionnaire was administered in a German and a Russian version and consisted of the following scales:

- State-Trait-Anger-Expression-Inventory (STAXI; Schwenkmezger, Hodapp, & Spielberger, 1992; Spielberger, 1991),
- Control Beliefs Questionnaire (Fragebogen zu Kompetenz- und Kontrollüberzeugungen; FKK; Krampen, 1991), distinguishing internal and external locus of control,

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