“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 become 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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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 (Bronfrenbrenner, 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 naive 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). ArmiHelm (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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