

Art Therapy

Psychological Creativity in the healing of mild depression

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Abstract

Based on a Jungian approach, this article will introduce an integrative model to therapeutic change using art therapy methods as practical tools, with the aim of improving quality of life and in the prevention of depression.

In a research study involving six participants, painting, clay work and drumming were used together with imagination and personal dialogues linked to the artwork. These art therapy processes attempted to combine the participant's experience of inner and outer reality. The effect of gaining more knowledge about their inner reality using dreams and symbols, was that participants gained a new understanding about their personal life. In addition, some participants were able to continue to use art therapy experiences as self-developmental tools after the research study terminated.

Jung's description of the interactive relationship between the two living parts of the psyche: the conscious ego and the unconscious self; was used as a condition for and a core understanding of a good quality of life experience.

We applied a bricolage research methodology consisting of a phenomenological, a hermeneutic and a heuristic approach.

To reduce the collection of data about therapeutic change, four different perspectives/ attitudes were used: a) description of the therapeutic processes, b) therapeutic developments c) theoretical triangulation and d) therapeutic changes.

An integrative art therapy model emerged from the experimental part of the study as a suggestion for a future clinical model of Art Therapy with this population.

This article focuses on the psychological aspect of creativity related to mild depression with an emphasis on the interaction between the conscious and the unconscious part of the psyche.

Keywords Art therapy, Creativity, Psychological creativity, Art psychotherapy, Therapeutic change

Introduction

The art therapy research study for people suffering from mild to moderate depression was carried out in a group setting. The main question in the study was: Can art therapy improve quality of life through a conscious interaction (the ego) with unconscious content (the self) in the living parts of the psyche, thereby improving the connection between the conscious ego and the unconscious self? Art therapy directives were developed in order to activate the unconscious part and to stimulate the creative expressive process. A lack of connection in the ego-self relationship is considered to inhibit creative processing and solutions in everyday living (Edinger, 2000).

In our analysis of the first case, we discovered a transformative pattern and classified this in accordance with Rosen's (2002) model of inner change, where the person goes through the stages he refers to as egocide, initiation and return (Rosen, 2002). These stages were also found in our analysis of the following 5 cases.

Our subsequent analytical procedures were based on Abt's model (2005) where he differentiates between sensation, feeling, thinking and intuition as different psychological attitudes and ways of understanding the participant's artwork.

The findings from the study suggest a relationship between art therapy methods and improvement of the ego-self relationship

based on case analysis, comparison analysis and self-evaluation reports. These findings also pointed towards an understanding of the process of therapeutic change and of the conditions that need to be present for the creative process to operate within the human mind and beneath the surface of consciousness.

The analysis of the processes of the six participants showed that one participant did not seem to improve according to the post and follow-up tests. She expressed that she just wanted to feel better and to move on in her life, without confronting her deep grief of having lost her husband and son. Her artwork became more *compensative* to life than was found in the other five cases and positive change in quality of life could not be registered in the post and follow-up tests. Three participants had emotional problems that they needed to express and understand and they were motivated to move forward at a *psychological* level. Another participant felt lonely in *social* life and the most transforming experience for her during the therapy was to be part of a group at a social level, where she felt included and accepted. Finally one participant had a longing for a *spiritual* connectedness to her inner self, and she related deeply to the images in her artwork.

This new understanding of the therapeutic processes can add to knowledge for future art therapy practitioners. The research suggests that different clients' needs can be met through different working levels and methodological choices made by the therapist in an art therapy setting.

The depressed state

Many people vulnerable to depression are undetected, ignoring the beginning symptoms of depression such as lack of physical energy, emotional vulnerability and self-critical patterns of thinking. They often wait too long before they seek help.

This fact suggests that many more people are susceptible to depression than is generally believed. Also, mild depression often predisposes a person to the development of major depression (Rowe & Rapaport, 2006), and this is another argument for an early intervention.

Using expressive art modalities with emotional conditions differs from more traditional therapy methods applied within the field of depression, such as medical treatment and cognitive therapy (Coop-

er, 2008). These traditional offerings have as their main purpose to reduce the person's contact with emotions as a way to increase quality of life. (Sloman & Gilbert, 2000). The limitation in using these approaches is that the emotional condition in the depressive state is not transformed into more creative ways of living.

Psychological creativity

In the art therapy approach described in this paper, emotional and cognitive processes are brought into dialogue and this is considered necessary for psychological creativity and change (Siegel, 2010).

An art therapy procedure, as applied in this study, unfolds through the following steps, a) a creative and expressive process, b) an imaginative and verbal dialogue between the client and therapist based on the artwork and c) associations discussed in relation to personal life issues.

We consider that the condition for psychological creativity in art therapy practice is a conscious willingness to explore the unconscious parts of the psyche through the artwork. In order to do so, the creative process is needed as a process that transfers contents from the unconscious part of the psyche into the artwork.

We consider both the creative process and the verbal exploration of the artwork as necessary for therapeutic change. The non-verbal process of creating the artwork is regarded as compensation to the conscious experience of living, thereby creating a belief that a change has taken place. Here, the expressive process is not considered to have any transformative effect in itself, unless the unconscious content manifested in the artwork is integrated into consciousness through a felt understanding of its personal meaning.

From a Jungian perspective the expressive process can be explained as a process of self-regulation controlled by the unconscious self and not by the ego (Sullivan, 2010). Psychological creativity therefore includes both unconscious and conscious processing, and this may account for the fact that the originality in the work may lead to therapeutic change.

The concept of ego-self in Jungian psychology

In Jungian psychology, the concept of self is described as a center in the psyche that regulates the conscious ego from living a one-sided life through compensative creative processes. Sullivan emphasizes

that it is an “energetic force that strives for much more than instinctual satisfaction... It is trying to balance and complete the person” (Sullivan 2010, p.50). The self is also understood as an “objective” part of the individual psyche because of its archetypal nature and lifelong attempt to become part of living, which Jung named “the process of individuation” (Bertelsen, 1975).

In this paper psychological creativity rests on the two-folded understanding of the self as both having a compensative function and a drive towards wholeness. When the self is unable to reach the conscious ego with suggestions for corrections (through dreams and symbols), the ego becomes alienated from the self and from intuitive knowledge of what to do in life. Everyday creativity, as described by Richards (2010), is a necessity for our survival both as individuals and species and is connected to an attitude of openness to experience. Trusting the creative process during the phase where it does not make rational sense seems to be an essential `working-through` attitude in psychological creativity.

Since the self is only reachable through the symbol, we think the use of imaginative ways of approaching the symbol is an important part of the dialogue between the participant and the artwork facilitated by the art therapist in order to discover *new* connections between the conscious and the unconscious part of the psyche.

Research procedure

Sampling procedure

Seven people were chosen to participate in an art therapy group during a six-month intervention with a total of thirteen meetings, each lasting five hours.

The inclusion criterion was identification of mild to moderate depression based on test results from the WHOQoL-Bref and Depression MDI (Bowling, 2005).

There were no dropouts during the six-month intervention, but one participant was absent three times and was therefore not included in the analysis.

Methodology

In the search for a research methodology we were looking for a paradigm that could combine the subjective reality of the conscious parts of the psyche - the ego - with the objective reality of the

(unconscious) self; according to Jung's concept of the self. This process is often experienced as inner figures and unknown persons in the artwork.

A bricolage methodology was chosen and defined as, a) a phenomenological approach with a focus on the inner development of the participant, b) a hermeneutic approach with a focus on the relationship between participant and researcher/ therapist, and c) a heuristic approach with a focus on the inner development of the researcher/ therapist.

Using this methodology it was possible to include the reality of both parts of the psyche - the ego and the self - in the analysis.

The setting

The procedure during the workshops was:

1. Group drumming for ten minutes
2. Relaxation/ meditation for fifteen minutes
3. An expressive process (painting or clay work based on a directive or a dream)
4. Art therapy dialogue between participant and researcher/ therapist
5. Group discussion and reflections

These guidelines were based on Jung's concepts of shadow, inner masculine/ feminine and self, thereby attempting to guide consciousness towards the archetypal self (Edinger, 2000).

The purpose of using guidelines was to guide the participants to follow the creative process through patterns, which they might not get into themselves, and then to pay attention to the dream response. This combination of inner and outer stimulation was intended to create a symbolical dialogue between the conscious ego and the unconscious self, but the combination was also suggested as a self-developmental tool that the participants could use on their own.

Data collection

The data collection consisted of test results from questionnaires, pre, post, follow-up 1 and follow-up 2, video recordings of all work-

shops, video transcription of therapeutic dialogues, dreams, artwork and the participants' self-evaluative reports.

Analytical procedure

The analytical procedure was based on Abt's model (2005) of picture interpretation where he approaches the artwork using four different perspectives in order to find the psychological meaning of the artwork. This method is contrary to a reductive way of understanding the artwork, where meaning is found by translating/reducing the image to content that is already defined independent of the associations made by the person who created the artwork.

Steps in analytical procedure

The following steps were used as a meaning-making process related to the artwork.

Step 1. Descriptive presentation

A presentation of the artwork and the dialogue between the participant and the therapist exploring the artwork together (based on video transcripts). These selected parts contained the participant's own words and can thus be called a descriptive presentation. All descriptions were exported to a computer program (NVivo) and coded, searching for themes and patterns.

Step 2. Therapeutic process

The second level of the analysis had an emphasis on the *emotional* content from the images and the participant's life situation. Themes were recognized as patterns of therapeutic interchange between conscious and unconscious content and related to Rosen's transformative model that consists of 3 phases; egocide, initiation and return, (Rosen, 2002).

Step 3. Theoretical triangulation

The third level of the analysis consisted of developing a *theoretical* understanding of the participants' emotional development. There was a change from using a participant's perspective to having a focus on using different theoretical approaches as a way to further understand therapeutic change.

Step 4. Therapeutic change

The fourth level of the analysis focused on the overall *transformation* in the participant's development as an indication of therapeutic change. One important aspect was to see if and how the regulative function of the self, was active during the process. Part of this process included a triangulation of qualitative data with pre-post and follow-up tests results.

Summary of analytical procedure

Implementing the four analytical steps as different perspectives related to the data became a way to include the participants' own associations in the meaning-making process, thereby consciously attempting to avoid reductionism (Shepherd, 1993). This method also suggested a way to combine the subjective experience of the artwork with more objective understanding of the therapeutic process based on different psychological theories.

Findings were categorized as a) therapeutic process b) theory, and c) art therapy methods. This is presented in the following.

Findings related to the therapeutic process

In the coding procedure, we found themes and organized them according to Rosen's (2002) description of egocide, initiation and return. They showed a connection between conscious and unconscious processes as illustrated in fig.1 as they moved from the point of activation to the point of change.

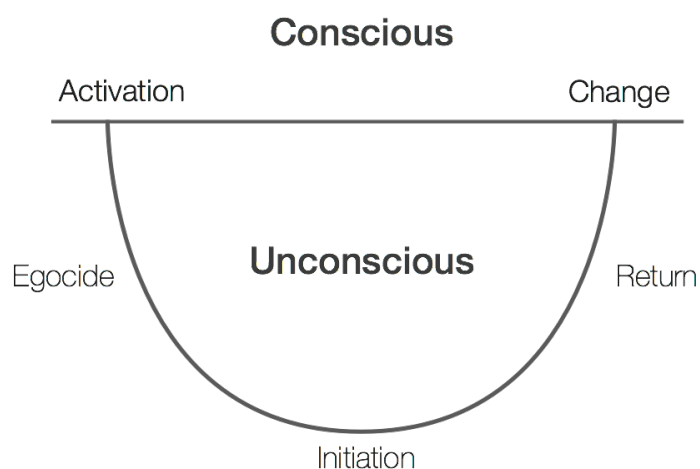


Fig.1

The process in the unconscious part of the psyche was found to *prepare* a change in consciousness that only became meaningful to the conscious mind at a later time.

Egocide

Egocide relates to the process of sacrificing a part of the ego identity that connects to a low quality of life experience.

In all cases the inner judge appeared in the artwork as inner critical voices preventing the creative process to unfold. In one image made by A (fig.2), the expressive process started with the yellow figure followed by black lines and dots covering the figure. The participant later explained *"it was as if my father's voice came up confusing me with all his comments about right and wrong"*.

The egocide for this participant became the sacrifice of her attachment to her father's voice inside and appeared as the core theme preventing her from a more creative life. Prior to this discovery, A had identified with the inner judge as if that voice was part of her own self.



Fig.2. Confusion

Initiation

In the following stage of initiation, a deeper imaginative exploration of new possibilities emerged, suggesting a different approach and attitude in life. Comparing the first and last artwork made by A. the symbol of a spiral appeared in her last painting and was experienced as the creative new solution to the dissociation between the front and the back in the first clay figure (see directives in table 1).

Return

The stage of return was identified in her daily life through her new work as a drama teacher, where she felt she could be herself in a more integrated way than when she was performing on stage as an actor. The spiral was recognized as a transforming image moving between the inner and outer reality in her new attitude to work and life.



Fig. 3. First artwork.
Inside and outside are not connected



Fig. 4. Last artwork.
Inside and outside come together through the spiral

Originality

For all participants the creative product to some extent mirrored experiences that were once conscious, but then repressed. Nothing *original* was found in these memories. For something original to appear, the image must be recognized as something unknown to the subject. This is what Jung referred to as the archetypal level in the psyche, which can only become known through the symbol (Kugler, 2008). From a Jungian perspective working with symbols therefore means working with the original part of the psyche. In order to initiate this process, the inner judge was confronted in the therapeutic process and sacrificed as part of the participant's self-understanding.

Recognition of personal repressed memories and of ways of being that were not allowed in childhood became an important part of the opening to more original parts in the psyche.

Findings related to theory

In this study a strong connection between theory and clinical work was found to be useful as long as the art therapist/ researcher used theoretical models *before* and *after* the therapeutic dialogue with the participant. Thus theoretical models were not applied to reduce or replace the verbal exploration of the artwork but instead widened the psychological knowledge of the creative process and product.

A new paradigm has not yet developed from Freud's reductive stance to the unconscious parts in the psyche and to images (Skov, 2015). If imaginative exploration is not included in the meaning-making process, interpretations from theoretical models are too easily based on reductive assumptions more than on individual originality.

Our view is that psychological creativity is *more* than creative expressions. It includes a conscious interaction with the creative product by the participant in order to facilitate a therapeutic change (see p. 7). The imaginative dialogue with the image as a representation of the self then becomes the bridge *between* ego and self. This interaction was found to be most active during the stage of initiation (See p. 16). We suggest that a transformative depth is not possible through a reductive method because this is mostly concerned with what is already known by the conscious mind and therefore does not support the development of the ego-*self* relationship.

Jungian concepts were found to be most useful having a guiding function during clinical preparation and interaction with symbols in the initiation stage leading to more focus and trust in the therapeutic process. Other orientations such as transformative learning (Heron, 1992) and cognitive methods (Siegel, 2010) were found to be more helpful for our psychological understanding of the therapeutic process during the analysis of the egocide stage and the return stage.

Findings related to art therapy methods

The art directives in this study were meant to create a raised interaction in the relationship of the ego and self-axis through a practical activation of different structures in the psyche. Table 1 shows the goal of each directive.

Table 1. Goal and directives

Goal	Art directive
Activation of ego-state	Present yourself as a clay figure
Activation of inner voices	Make a family portrait in a painting
Activation of shadow	Make a painting of the person you were <i>not</i> allowed to be as a child
Activation of Anima and Animus	Make the inner couple in clay
Social interaction	Group painting versus individual painting
Activation of self	Using both the masculine and feminine in a painting

The participants were invited to use the guidelines in their own individual ways by following their own impulses in the creative process more than what they might think was expected from the therapist. The therapeutic dialogue with the art therapist that followed this expressive process supported the participants' imaginative

experience of the artwork. Using this relational mode, it was found that the participants were able to project the images needed for self-regulation into the artwork.

The participants in this research study all thought that the blend of therapeutic dialogues and art expression was equally important for the therapeutic outcome.

Summary and conclusion

The findings showed that as a result of a developmental process working through stages understood as egocide, initiation and return, the participant's experience of an individual self as a part of their living psyche became stronger. This was expressed by some of the participants as a better connection to inner needs and more confidence in actively fulfilling these needs. We think these findings suggest that imaginative methods are beneficial for people who are living with a vulnerability to depression because the imaginative exploration of symbols also stimulates novel resources beyond the existential problems in life.

Using a Jungian concept of the self can add a potential to art therapy, which we think is helpful in order to bring about a transformative rather than just a compensative therapeutic effect. This does not exclude other theoretical perspectives of creativity, therapy and learning processes. We found that such theories supplemented Jung's focus on the inner life.

Some of the activities in this study, such as painting and drumming, have activated the unconscious parts of the psyche, while others have been more cognitive in orientation, such as putting words to images.

A final conclusion, related to psychological creativity and therapeutic change, was that the biological (expressive), social (group) and spiritual (symbolic) aspects and levels were beneficial to help psychological creativity operate in a practical and transformative way.

We are aware that this study included a small sample size, and thus cannot be readily generalized. Yet we hope the findings can serve as guidelines for future art therapy practice and research.

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