

Exploring the Impact of Art as Psychotherapy

Tiffany R. Bergman

University of Wyoming

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“Think of research as a fishing line thrown into a river of potential benefits, where a well designed study hooks a little fish that, in turn, attracts a larger fish to nourish many people. Even a relatively small research study, when precisely focused on an existing need with a demonstrable benefit, can jumpstart a whole movement of interacting demands for art therapy services in different quarters.” - Dr. Lynn Kapitan

Abstract

Art therapy is the intersection of creativity, psychological theory, and human experience. The relationship between creativity and psychotherapy allows for heightened expressions of the self, as well as provide an outlet for the psyche in ways that do not require words. The basic design of this project is leading three separate art therapy sessions over an online video conference, with three participants creating a collage of things they care most about while simultaneously engaging in conversation related to emotional and mental wellbeing. Each participant was required to take a pre-session and post-session survey that provided more context on their individual experiences in therapy throughout their lives, as well as on their experience within this project. Through anecdotal information obtained from the pre-session and post-session surveys, it can be suggested that art therapy is a powerful approach to psychotherapy.

Introduction

Adding a creative element to psychotherapy is a relatively recent development in the field of psychology. The American Art Therapy Association defines art therapy as an “integrative mental health and human services profession that enriches the lives of individuals...through active art-making, creative process, applied psychological theory, and human experience within a psychotherapeutic relationship.” The goal of utilizing artistic intentions in psychotherapy is to stimulate the mind, body, and soul in ways that merely exchanging words cannot do.

The inspiration to incorporate artistic practices in psychotherapy, came from a British artist who was suffering from a bout of tuberculosis that hit Europe in the late 1930s. The artist, Adrian Hill, took notice of the increased morale among tuberculosis patients when they were able to draw and paint while in the hospital. He himself reported being so bored while in treatment, that all he could think to do to pass the time was drawing (Bush, n.d.). After his release from the hospital, Hill’s doctor recommended that Hill come back to teach art to the patients. This sparked Hill’s interest in developing an art therapy program that is led in part by a health professional or psychologist. Another British artist, who was also a chiropodist, by the name of Edward Adamson assumed this role and developed a program with Hill for the Red Cross Picture Library. As TB hospitals began to close, Adamson took this program and started employing it in mental hospitals (Adamson Trust, 2021). This led to the wider exposure of art therapy as a means of psychotherapy, and subsequently influenced the founding of the British Association of Art Therapists in 1964 (Adelphi Psych Medicine Clinic, n.d.).

Anyone who is willing to try art therapy can benefit from it. Artistic talent is not considered in treatment using paints or pencils, but what is considered in this form of treatment is how it can help patients navigate self-expression and increase self-awareness while reducing stress and anxiety. It is also a way to express oneself from places of the mind that are inaccessible by words. This is usually a product of a person's inclination to avoid disclosure, because of emotional vulnerability, which in the long-term can negatively affect one's mental wellbeing. Conversely, positive reactions to disclosure reinforce a positive outcome for one's ability to disclose their thoughts and feelings (Chaudoir & Quinn, 2010). This idea of the fear of disclosure and how positive reinforcement can potentially alter that fear, makes it paramount that art therapy is further explored as a means to which stress and anxiety can be reduced.

Though, for some the act of drawing or painting can induce anxiety because the patient does not want to fail, so that would be something for each psychologist to appraise before implementing this kind of therapy. There are a few populations that many psychologists have found to especially benefit from artistic means of therapy. They include adult or adolescent cancer patients, children with asthma, older adults with dementia, and individuals with Parkinson's disease. The most notable benefit of art therapy can be seen amongst trauma patients who participate in this modality of psychotherapy. Dr. Karin Schouten et al. put together a comprehensive report of all empirical data reflecting the effectiveness of art therapy and trauma patients specifically. The results found do show a correlation between art therapy and decreased symptoms of PTSD, but also highlight the urgency for more research to be devoted to the effects of art therapy since it is still in its infancy within the field of psychology (Schouten et al., 2014). Another study conducted by Dr. Linda Chapman et al. expressed that their findings showed

reduction in acute stress symptoms among pediatric PTSD patients as well (Chapman et al., 2011).

Method

Originally, the design had been to conduct the sessions in an elementary classroom with students in the 4th grade. In observation of the COVID-19 pandemic, the alternative chosen for this project was to conduct individualized sessions with each of the three participants. The structure of the zoom session was to begin with an introduction of the study as well as a summary of the history and background information of art therapy. Following this, there was a reminder of the scope of the exercise the participant would be involved in. They were also reminded that they are allowed to cease the session and withdraw from participation at any time. If they had any questions about the collage or session itself, they were able to ask before the activity began. Once all questions were answered, the 1 hour session began. While each of the participants were actively working on their collage, I asked them easier questions to start with, such as what things they knew they wanted to include in their collage before they started and how they felt going into this exercise.

Further into the session, questions related to their experiences in counseling and therapy were asked. The intention of these sessions was to be organic, and while the same questions were asked of every participant, the floor had been left open for free conversation and discussion regarding anything that might be positive, harmful, bothering, etc to the participant. Their real names will not be attached to any information shared within the session that are reported in the findings page.

Participants

There were three total participants in this study. All but one session were conducted over Zoom due to pandemic restrictions. One participant was male, the other two were female, and their ages ranged from 25 to 31. All participants had previously been going to therapy at some point in their lives for more than 6 months at a time.

Assessments and Measures

There is no statistical data to report for the purposes of this particular study. However, there was valuable anecdotal information expressed by each of the participants. In conjunction with the information gathered during the sessions, each participant also reported information on a survey meant to be taken before their session, and a similar survey for after.

Research Questions

On the pre-session survey the participants were asked the following Yes or No questions:

- Have you participated in therapy before?
- Was it traditional talk-therapy?
- Have you heard of art therapy before?
 - If so, have you ever participated in art therapy in a professional mental health environment?

They were also asked the following short answer questions:

- If you have been in therapy, how long did you participate?
- Did you find it helpful, why or why not?
- Is art therapy something you would consider for yourself as treatment? Why or why not?

- What are your expectations of participating in this study?

On the post-session survey, the participants were asked the following Yes or No questions:

- Were the instructions clear?
- Did you feel comfortable with the time you were allowed?
- Was it difficult participating over Zoom?
- Did you complete your collage in the time allowed?

They were also asked the following short-answer questions:

- Did you find the exercise effective? Why or why not?
- Having participated, is art therapy something you would consider for yourself as treatment? Why or why not?
- What were your thoughts on the dialogue portion of the exercise?

In the final space, they were given the opportunity to provide any additional comments or feedback on the exercise.

Results

Participant 1

Participant 1 chose to complete their collage digitally, but in typical context the exercise is done with paper cutouts. From the initial survey, they reported that they had previous experience in therapy because they were having frequent anxiety attacks at a previous point in their life. This participant's expectations of the study were that they were going to learn more about what art therapy is and how it can apply to a therapeutic context. During the session, Participant 1 explained the symbolism present in each of the elements used in their collage. The mushroom representing mushrooms found native to their neighborhood in Washington, the owl for protection and intuition, and the pottery representing their passion for creating art from clay. They also included an image of their dog, as well as their husband and best friend. Participant 1 explained that they appreciated engaging in a mindful and structured activity that also allowed them to be creative. As they were creating this piece, they talked much about how art had always been an outlet for them, and that they had wished they knew there was a way to incorporate it into a guided session like this. In response to the first post-session survey question, Participant 1 had said "it got my mind in a creative flow that was relaxing and comfortable." Their comments in the feedback section of the survey indicated that the session felt more natural than they had expected it to be.

Participant 1's Digital Collage



Participant 2

This participant had been in extensive therapy for depression for about a year of their life. They used to be very interested in art, but began to see a decrease in interest as their depression worsened. They expected from this study to learn more about themselves and to better appreciate how art can be used to express emotion. During the session, this participant sort of went on “auto-pilot” with the dialogue after they got started on their collage. They answered all questions purposefully yet remained totally focused on the exercise. This response is similar to what has been seen in sessions with trauma patients as mentioned in the Introduction. This participant talked about the symbolism present in their collage and one of the most important being the beach and mountains depicted. For this participant, the contrasting landscapes represent impactful feelings that they mentioned they had trouble feeling when they were in the height of their depression. The mountains represent the need for them to “climb higher than life” and always look for new opportunities and challenges for personal growth. Yet, the beach represents a calmness for them and shifts their focus to the present moment and eases those anxieties about their future. Participant 2 expressed at the end of the session that they enjoyed this exercise because they would not have made a collage otherwise, and found it to be a great meditative experience. They also had mentioned that if they were to consider going back into therapy again, that they would like to try art therapy in a professional mental health environment. In their post-session survey, in response to the closing feedback section, they had said “Having something to “take home” and reference later on serves as a good reminder of the personal work I’ve done- something I can honor and treasure,” which offers an insight into the lingering effects of creative therapy methods.

Participant 3

Participant 3 had a unique approach in their therapy experience. They remarked that they never chose to go to therapy, that it was something elected by their parents during their teenage years. Participant 3 did find this therapy helpful sometimes, but stopped going as soon as they moved out of their parents' house. This participant was receptive to the idea of trying art in a therapeutic capacity, as they believe that it is beneficial to weave your emotions into a physical project because it offers a new angle of thought.

As the session progressed, it was apparent that Participant 3 was confident in the exercise. While the dialogue went on, the participant was also seemingly more comfortable in opening up regarding past therapy experiences and why they had an aversion to it, but so far they were enjoying making the collage. Participant 3 also had a special approach to the imagery present in their work. They did not take the assignment literally in that the collage is made up of pictures of people, places, or objects that hold importance to them. Instead, they used imagery that called to them and explained that they felt much more relaxed when talking about their experiences while working on the collage, and the collage itself was important to them as a reminder of the activity and how it made them feel. In their post-session survey, they expressed that they were not new to many methods of psychotherapy, but this method was new to them, and they could see how beneficial it would be in applied context. They mentioned that it was helpful to be in a structured session, because they typically would not do this sort of activity on their own. From their final thoughts, they had said "I found it very entertaining as well, I think that's why I had so much fun with the project. All parts of my brain were firing, and that was so different from any therapy I have had before."

Participant 3's Papercut Collage



Conclusion

All three participants provided thoughtful responses to both the before and after surveys regarding their previous and current psychotherapeutic experiences. They were clearly engaging in their own creativity, which took hold and guided them through the collage portion of the session. However, it was their responses throughout the video conference that were evidence of mental health or illness being something that many of us have struggled with in our lives. There is comfort in harnessing emotions and thoughts and directing those forces into creative work and there was a notable impact that occurred during, as well as after each of the sessions as the participants shared their experiences. All of the participants reflected that they felt the creative component was a powerful addition to their understanding of psychotherapy. As a result of art therapy being a relatively new technique in the field of psychology, there is still a lot of data to be collected to enforce that art is a viable and effective form of psychotherapy. This project showcases a positive relationship between creativity and mental health, and opened up new doors for all participants in regard to their own journey through mental wellness. Perhaps the most rousing effect of this project, was merely witnessing the participants in their element and seeing how their collages were an inaudible and direct reflection of themselves.

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