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Art therapy: Perspectives of South African psychologists

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Declaration of Originality

I, James A Gower, hereby declare that this dissertation is my own work, and has not been submitted previously for any degree at any University.

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James A Gower

Dedication

General:

This research report is dedicated to truth, faith and love.

- *Truth* that encompasses all knowledge
- *Faith* that remains in the presence of all contradiction
- *Love* that lets you live to the utmost

Specific:

I dedicate this work to the one person who stood by me through this difficult process. You helped me with assurances and encouragement. You stood by me when I had to work through the night. You assisted me with language, grammar and syntax, but most of all with love. Without you I do not know if this work would have been possible.

Thank you my "Babatjie"

Acknowledgements:

- The psychologists who were part of the study contributed not only to this study, but their contribution will hopefully facilitate the advancement of art therapy and ultimately psychology.

- I sincerely thank my research supervisor, Dr. Hermaneun Laauwen, for assisting me in this process. Without her passion and creative spirit this research report would not have been possible.

- My family and especially my parents who have assisted me without reservation in this endeavour. They assisted me emotionally as well as financially, never asking questions.

- Marc Devenish contributed immensely to not only the editing of this report, but also gave emotional support, guidance, and encouragement during the research process.

- Finally, I thank my friends for their support and understanding.

Abstract

Art therapy is a method that has a long global history as a treatment alternative when conventional verbal psychotherapy and even pharmacotherapy have failed to facilitate improvement. It helps access, give form to, and integrate experiences, memories, and emotions that cannot be directly verbalised. Art therapy is the creative expression of the client through the use of art making and the subsequent artefacts within therapy. Art therapy is an opportunity for the therapist to access recesses of the client's mind that may otherwise be hidden. This enables the therapist to utilise these revelations and the artefacts produced strategically within therapy.

In South Africa art therapy as a profession does not have a distinct category of its own under the Health Professions Counsel of South Africa (HPCSA), and is not included in psychology training courses at tertiary level. In spite of this, some South African psychologists do use it as a modality in therapy. These psychologists are the subjects of this study. They provided important information regarding the possible uses of art in therapy from a unique South African perspective.

The participants in this study have responded each in uniquely favourable terms to questions surrounding the value and benefit of art as a tool of psychological therapy. This unequivocal professional concurrence, while derived from a limited research sample, suggests that art therapy, though severely neglected, holds enormous potential for positive application within the South African context. The interpretations, definitions and applications of art therapy by each of these therapists are admittedly in no way as profound as those evidenced in the international literature examined in the course of this study, yet a vast resource of innovative perspectives, informative considerations along with fresh indicators towards areas for potential future research have come to the fore.

According to the participants in this study, art therapy does not receive enough attention in the South African psychological arena. Areas specifically identified by the interviewees in which art therapy can play a role include: group work; preventative work; the crossing of language barriers; providing therapy to the greater

population and previously disadvantaged groups; shortening therapy; and trauma work.

Art therapy is not limited to age, nor by the presenting problem. It is engaging, and facilitates effective communication. The artefacts produced can serve as historic records of therapy, allowing the therapist and client to recollect the process. Colour can play an important part in therapy, yet the client's unequivocal personal interpretation of colour should be the focus. Art therapy is not static and facilitates therapeutic movement, client involvement and responsibility.

The art activity and artefact provides a concrete rather than verbal medium through which a person can achieve both conscious and unconscious expression and, as such, can be used as a valuable agent for therapeutic change. The image is tangible and serves as constant reminder and anchor to the clients conflict or problem, yet moves it to a safe distance outside the client.

Art therapy is implemented in many different ways within South Africa, as is the case internationally.

Although a multicultural South African society seems to be different in many contexts, the implementation and occurrence of art therapy appears to be fairly unchanged, and art may be the universal therapeutic language.

Key Terms:

a. *Art Therapy*

Art therapy is an organised discipline of thought which, rooted in psychological theory, makes use of visual images and art-making for self-expression, insight and healing, and involves directive or non-directive methods. The fundamental validation of art therapy, is that the client brings forth the image, after which insight and eventual therapeutic change is sought.

It helps access, give form to, and integrate experiences, memories, and emotions that cannot be directly verbalised so promoting the strengths of the client.

For the purposes of this study the terms "art therapy" and "art in therapy" are synonymous.

b. *Artefact*

The product of art therapy. The image or object that is produced.

c. *Media*

Different mediums used in art therapy. Clay, paint, sketching, and other materials that can be used to create artefacts.

d. *Traumatic Memory Recollection*

Recollection of traumatic events that have been kept hidden by the subconscious.

e. *Pchotherapy / Psychological Therapy*

Psychotherapy is an interpersonal, relational intervention used by trained psychotherapists to aid clients in problems of living. This usually includes increasing individual sense of well-being and reducing subjective discomforting experience. Psychotherapists employ a range of techniques based on experiential relationship building, dialogue, communication and

behavior change and that are designed to improve the mental health of a client or patient, or to improve group relationships.

Table of Contents

Declaration of Originality		i
Dedication		ii
Acknowledgements		iii
Abstract		iv
Key Terms		vi
Table of Contents		viii
Chapter One		
Aim and Objectives of the Study		1
1.1	**Introduction**	1
Chapter Two		
Literature Study		5
2.1	**History of Art Therapy**	5
2.1.1	***The First Roots of Art Therapy***	5
2.1.2	***Psychoanalytic Roots of Art Therapy***	7
2.1.2.1	*Freudian Roots of Art Therapy*	7
2.1.2.2	*Jungian Roots of Art Therapy*	8
2.1.3	***Birth of Art Therapy***	11
2.1.4	***Growing Pains***	12
2.1.4.1	*The United Kingdom*	12
2.1.4.2	*The United States*	14
2.2	**Art Therapy Today**	15
2.3	**Towards a Definition of Art Therapy**	16
2.4	**Art Therapy versus Expressive Therapies**	19
2.5	**Close Relatives**	19

2.6	**Art as Fun**	20
2.7	**Speeding Up the Therapeutic Process**	20
2.8	**Art as Form of Communication**	20
2.9	**A Less Threatening Environment**	23
2.10	**A Bridge between Therapist and Client**	23
2.11	**Traumatic Memory Recollection**	24
2.12	**The Image**	24
2.13	**The Importance of Aesthetic Standards**	25
2.14	**The Use of Colour in Art Therapy**	26
2.15	**Resistance**	27
2.16	**Material Used in Art Therapy**	28
2.17	**Race and Culture**	29
2.18	**Art Therapy for All Ages**	30
2.19	**A Mirror for the Moment**	31
2.20	**Art as Container**	31
2.21	**Art as Diagnostic Tool and Art as Therapy**	32
2.22	**Who Benefits from Art in Therapy**	33
2.23	**Benefits to the Community**	35
2.24	**Multiple Approaches**	35
2.24.1	***Psychodynamic Approaches to Art Therapy***	35
2.24.2	***Humanistic Approaches to Art Therapy***	36
2.24.3	***Behavioural and Cognitive Approaches to Art Therapy***	36
2.24.4	***Developmental and Adaptive Approaches***	36
2.24.5	***Art or Image Based Approaches***	37
2.24.6	***Criticism to these Approaches***	37
2.25	**Art Therapy in Practice**	37
2.26	**Group Art Therapy**	38

Chapter Three

Research Design and Methodology 41

3.1 **Introduction** 41
3.2 **Qualitative Research** 41
3.3 **Research Question** 42
3.4 **General Principals of Qualitative Research** 43
3.5 **The Stance of the Qualitative Researcher** 46
3.6 **Sampling and Selection of Subjects** 48
3.6.1 ***Sampling Method*** 48
3.6.1.1 *Inclusion Criteria* 50
3.7 **Data Collection** 51
3.7.1 ***Procedure*** 52
3.8 **Data Analysis** 53
3.8.1 ***Transcription*** 54
3.8.2 ***Method of Analysis*** 54
3.9 **Ethical Considerations** 56
3.10 **Brief Personal Statement** 57

Chapter Four

Presentation and Discussion of Data 59

4.1 **Introduction** 59
4.2 **Interviewee Profiles** 60
4.3 **Defining Art Therapy** 61
4.4 **Who Qualifies for Art Therapy** 62
4.5 **The Artefact Serves as History Art** 63
4.6 **Therapy Hastens the Therapeutic Process** 63
4.7 **Art Therapy Makes Therapy More Engaging** 64
4.8 **Art as Form of Communication** 65
4.9 **Creative Therapies and Art Therapy** 67

4.10	**Colour in Art Therapy**	68
4.11	**Inhibiting Factors to Art Therapy**	69
4.12	**No Artistry in Art Therapy**	71
4.13	**Art Creates Movement (Getting Unstuck)**	71
4.14	**Art Facilitates Client Involvement and Responsibility**	72
4.15	**The Media Used**	73
4.16	**Race and Culture**	74
4.17	**Interpretation of Art**	77
4.18	**Group Versus Individual Art Therapy**	78
4.19	**Art as Window to the Subconscious and Emotional**	78
4.20	**Art Therapy may Facilitate Traumatic Memory Recollection**	79
4.21	**Art as Anchor**	80
4.22	**The Process of Therapy**	80
4.23	**Potential of Art Therapy**	82

Chapter Five

Conclusion and Recommendations 84

5.1	**Shortcomings and Recommendations**	84
5.2	**Revisiting the Question and Towards a Conclusion**	85

References 88

Appendices 100

Appendix A – Interview Schedule 101

Appendix B – Information Sheet 104

Appendix C – Informed Consent Form 107