

ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

The relationship between figure and background: Towards a new theory of a social prism for analyzing the mechanisms of art in therapy

Professor Ephrat Huss

'Art helps take down barriers, in that the use of the imagination is the ability to put oneself in another's place...in this sense, art is moral, because empathy is the ultimate morality' (Dewey, 1934. p.10).

Social theories are different from the psychological dynamic and humanistic theories much used in art therapy: Compared to psychological theories that assume that the problem is within the individual psyche, social theories assume that the problem is situated within the social systems that surround the individual, such as the ecological circles of family, community and state, or global systems of power. On a broader social level, then marginalized roles or positions create a lack of physical, symbolic, social, or other types of resources for solving problems (Minuchin, 1975; Gladding, 2002). The solution is to shift the roles within the system and to re-distribute resources. Marginalization stems from social and economic policies that create systematic discrimination and deprivation based on race, ethnicity, religion, or gender; and exacerbated by processes of immigration, war, and political instability, as well as general social disorganization and conflicting values within the social system (Foucault, 2000). The theory of empowerment

assumes that all relationships are power infused, and that the ecological layers that comprise the socio-cultural context of the client's reality can include different types of disempowerment and marginalization such as a racial, gendered, or ethnic lack of power (Patterson et al, 2009; Piercy et al, 1996).

These forms of marginalization create personal pain; thus, the political is always personal. Power is understood as a dynamic and relative construct that is at the base of all social interactions, which shapes personal experience.

Social critical theories go beyond describing this, to actively resisting global and neo-capitalist social organization, which keeps power among a privileged few. In other words, while psychology will aim to adjust people to oppressive realities, a critical social stand will aim to adjust the reality so that people are not oppressed and don't develop the symptoms of pain resulting from oppression, discrimination, and marginalization. (Bronner, 2011; Foucault, 2000; Jameson, 1991). A critical stand will create awareness of the social roots of personal pain, as a way to de-pathologize and empower the individual (Alcock, 1997; Martin & Sugerma, 2000)

Another important characteristic of social critical theories is that they do not define a single psychological or social theory as absolute truth. The aim is to understand theories as evolving sets of ideas embedded within a specific socio-historical time and space. This critical stand is in itself transformative because it undermines a static understanding of a client through a single theory as an absolute definition of the other. Thus, critical thinking will question the theoretical assumptions behind different types of evidence that is always based in a set of theoretical assumptions on what truth is (Gay, 1996; Leary, 1994). From this stand, then the question if art 'works' in art therapy, is the wrong question, and it is more important to understand how art works and what role it has in different social contexts. According to social theories, art itself is a concept that can play different roles in different social contexts, such as a search for beauty, harmony, challenge, shock, cognitive, or emotional contents. In some cultures, art is connected to religion, consumerism, crafts, didactic methods, or all of the above. This critical perspective can challenge the single understanding of art as 'art as self-expression' commonly used in

art therapy and based on humanistic theories about art as a self-actualizing tool or core condition for authentic self (Hills, 2001). Thus, a critical stand in art therapy will advocate firstly a phenomenological stand where the creator is the first interpreter of the art (Arrington, 2001; Betinsky, 1993; Kapitan, 2003) and secondly, the use of multiple and tentative interpretations of art, rather than a static diagnostic model (Huss, 2012).

The question is how can this theory be inherently utilized within art therapy practice? How can it help us understand art products, and work with them? Although art therapy is often practiced in social settings, the art is usually understood through dynamic projective, or phenomenological subjective theoretical prisms, rather than through social critical theories. So many art therapy clients are living in high context social realities with multiple forms of marginalization, that it would seem worthwhile to attempt to create a more rigorous compositional analysis of art based in social theories.

Rose, an art historian, outlines three predominant 'visualizations' of art in western culture. The first visualization is that of art history, which understands the compositional and content level of images as a closed aesthetic system disconnected from the social context within which it was created. The second visualization is based on dynamic projective theories that understand the compositional and-or content level of art as expressing regressive elements connected to fantasy desire and conflict. Dynamic and Phenomenological Art therapy utilizes both of these art analyses. The third visualization described by Rose is a social analysis that claims that art always expresses a socially constructed position created within and in reaction to a specific power, culture, and socio-geographic context. The aim of this social art analysis is not to penetrate into the projected meaning or aesthetic language of the art, but to understand the social discourses from which it stems, to which it reacts, and to whom it presents (Rose. 1988). While this social stand is useful in arts-based research, visual culture and community art, they are difficult to apply to art therapy that aims to go beyond understanding social reality, to using art and it's compositional components to transform the social reality's impact on the individual. Indeed the claim of this paper is that the visual arts have inherent compositional elements that adhere to the basic principles of social theories, as will be demonstrated below.

Firstly, the act of making art can be defined as empowering. Images enable a socially marginalized group or individual a space to construct one's own narrative and theory of the issue, giving meaning to personal experience through compositional elements. When this image or art work is then explained by the creator, then his interpretive voice is intensified and he becomes the 'expert' on his drawing. In other words, making art involves an intense dialogue between form and content—through making a set of compositional decisions about how best to express the content. This helps the art maker define and redefine the content level, concretizing and externalizing an inner, reflective process. For example, if creating an image that includes a heart, one has to decide the color, position, and size. The form must also be decided: a small bleeding heart with an arrow, a large colorful heart within a person, a biological diagram of a heart, two joined hearts, or even lack of a heart, are all different compositional elements of the same symbol that define love in different ways.

Thus, the process of creating or discussing images can help clarify inner theories to the art maker in an action-based and embodied way, and to narrate the theories to others.

This act of self-defining issues becomes a way of fighting marginalization and silencing, for groups who do not usually have the power to identify themselves and their experiences, as subject but are usually defined from the outside as objects by power-holders or by 'experts'. Creative expression can be defined as empowering because it becomes a means to gaze back at society and name what is seen (Savneet, 2003; Hogan, 2003; Liebman, 1987). Additionally, the shift from verbal to visual language helps shift from the abstract verbal concepts that are often the terminology of dominant groups, so a shift to symbolic expression enables a redefinition of the basic concepts and parameters of the discourse. (Huss, 2012, 2014; Friere & Maciedo, 1987).

The second stage of working with art, after it's conception, is the exploration of it's content and compositional levels. All art forms are composed of the reciprocal relationship or tension between figure and background (actor and stage, dancer and space, central tune and background). This relationship between figure and background reveals the subjective experience of the

social context, and shows how both subject and background construct each other. Perceptual theory points to the evolutionary need to quickly differentiate between figure and background so as to effectively assess dangerous situations (Huss & Sarid, 2012). Tension between figure and background creates a phenomenological depiction of how the individual experiences the system and a social depiction of how the system constructs the individual. From this then a way to understand clients art through social theories, is to explore the negotiation between individual and social reality through the compositional relationship between figure and background (Huss, 2012, 2016).

Additionally, the spatial division of the elements of the whole gestalt, can reveal the division of resources within the system, in terms of who is next to whom, who is largest, who has the most space, etc.

The professional terms used by social practitioners and researchers are often abstract and can hide the social-structural problems that are the reason for the problem. For example the professional term 'PTSD', that is defined as a psychological illness, is usually an expression of social violence or of lack of safe space for some members of society. The arts, as a spatial medium, can help to map these abstractions back into concrete spatial terms that show the way resources such as space, mobility and basic physical resources are divided. For example, space in a house, or in a community. Once lack of space has been revealed then the arts are also a space to enable to symbolically start to re-divide resources and to 'dare to imagine' a new division. For example, if both social worker and service user each have a page to describe their understanding of the problem and of the solution, then space is already re-divided and both sides have physical space. Understanding division of spaces within a drawing thus becomes subversive, pointing to lack of spaces. Soja, (1989) writes: "Class struggle must encompass and focus upon reassertion of space in critical social theory" (p. 92).

The above two levels of making art as giving voice, and art as mapping out relationships between individual and society are a way to understand art through social theories of silencing, and of division of resources, as ways of

constructing individual experience and identity. It can be a way to evaluate how the individual experiences his social context, and how the social context constructs the experience of the individual. However, art therapy aims to be not only descriptive, but also transformative. The art enables a space in which compositional shifts of these relationships between figure and background, and spatial division, enable to envisage new social organizations or understandings that change society, and through this, self.

Thirdly, arts are a broad hermeneutic space in which multiple meanings can be negotiated and new perspectives can be found, thus shifting social meanings. Art's symbolic and indirect nature enable a gradual and indirect shift from homeostasis to change, or the expression of conflicts and contents that challenge the system. Spivak, a feminist sociologist and historian, describes how:

The place where female and marginalized 'speech acts' can be heard is not in historical, academic, and political writings that are male dominated, but in the areas of symbolic self-expression, where resistance is removed from reality, and thus does not threaten the central male discourse. (Spivak, & Guhah 1988.p 207).

This short paper has aimed to create social analyses of art as a methodology within art therapy. The first was the use of art process as shift from object to subject, as excavation of inner theory and as intensification of voice of marginalized groups as 'experts'. The second was the analytical prism of space division and figure-background relationships as a method of including social context into the analyses.

The last two analytical prisms aimed to be not only descriptive but also transformative of social reality. The third analytical prism analyzes the act of drawing as an empowering space in which marginalized groups can self-define the contents in an indirect, and thus safe, way.

The final fourth analytical prism aims to generate multiple meanings simultaneously, using both content and composition to shift static binary understandings within and between social groups. It used the compositional

and meaning-based analyses of symbols as a zone to enable shifts from homeostasis to change in the system, and to generate new perspectives on the problem

The following analytical prisms were outlined:

- Compositional analyses of spatial division of the page, as showing resource division within the system

- Compositional analyses of the relationship between figure and background on the page, as showing the individual experience of social context, or the connection between micro and macro levels of experience

-The page as a space in which silenced groups can self-define their understanding of the division of resources and social context)

-Using visual language to shift static social stands and to negotiate multiple perspectives

These mechanisms aim to show that the visual arts have inherent compositional elements that adhere to the basic parameters of social theories. Indeed, art's power is that it can connect between the subjective and objective, micro and macro, or individual and society, enabling both perspectives to appear together on the same page (Harrington, 2004; Foster, 2007). This analytical model can be useful for analyzing art in the systemic contexts of family, group, and community, where the high social context is often left out of projective and phenomenological art analyses. However, as in feminist therapy, a social analytical prism is also important for understanding an individual client's problems, which often emerge from a difficult social context (as shown in the examples of the marginalized women above).

This short paper was theoretical; these theories are illustrated more fully in my forty two articles and three books on the subject.

Biography

Professor Ephrat Huss teaches at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev in Israel where she chairs an MA program specializing in arts therapy for social workers. She has published over 40 articles and 3 books on art therapy and arts based research within social contexts. " *What we see and what we say*" *Using the Arts in Social Research and Practice* and - *a theory based textbook for teaching art therapy*. She has also received competitive grants in this field, and is currently working on experiences of Bedouin youth in Israel using arts based methods.

She has also published an edited book in Hebrew about arts based research in the context of Israeli society called, "*Researching creations, creating research: Arts based research in the context of Israeli society*" 2012, Ben-Gurion Press.

References

- Alcock, P (1997). *Understanding Poverty*. London, UK: MacMillan.
- Arrington, B (2001). *Home is where the Art is: An Art Therapy Approach to Family Therapy*. Springfield: Charles C Thomas Pub.
- Betinsky, M (1995). *What do you see? Phenomenology of therapeutic art experience*. London, UK: Jessica Kingsley.
- Bronner, S (2011). *Critical Theory*. USA: Oxford university press.
- Dewey, J. (1934) *Art as Experience*. New York: Capricorn
- Foucault, M (2000). *The birth of social medicine*. New York: Power New Press.
- Foster, V (2007). Ways of knowing and showing: Imagination and representation in feminist participatory social research. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 21(3), 15. -25

Freire, P. & Macedo, D (1987). *Literacy, Reading the Word and the World*, London: Routledge.

Gay, P (1989). *The Freud Reader*, London: Penguin Books

Gladding, S (2002). *Family therapy History, Theory and practice*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall

Harrington, A (2004). *Art and social theory: Sociological arguments in aesthetics*. London, UK: Polity Press Ltd.

Hills, P (2001). *Modern art in the USA: Issues and controversies of the 20th century*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall Publications

Hogan, S (2003). *Gender issues in Art Therapy*. UK: Jessica Kingsley.

Hooks, B. (1992). *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. London: Turnaround.

Huss, E. 2012. *What We See and What We Say: Using Images in Research, Therapy, Empowerment, and Social Change*. London: Routledge. 180 pages.

Huss, E.(2015) *A Theory-Based Approach to Art therapy: Implications for Teaching, Research and Practice*. London: Routledge. 200 pages.

Huss, E/ (2016) *Toward a social critical, analytical prism in art therapy The example of marginalized Bedouin women's images* *Arts in psychotherapy* available online: 7-JUN-2016 DOI information: 10.1016/j.aip.2016.05.017

Huss, E., & Sarid, O (2012). *Using Imagery to Address Physical and Psychological Trauma*. In: Malchiodi, C. Ed. *Art therapy and healthcare*. New York, NY: Guilford Publications.

Jameson, F. (1991) *Postmodernism or the cultural logic of late capitalism*, North Carolina: Duke University press.

Kapitan, I. L (2003). *Re-enchanting Art Therapy: Transformational Practices for Restoring Creative Vitality*. Springfield, Illinois: Charles C Thomas Publications.

Leary, D (1994). *A history of psychology*, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Liebmann, M. (1996). Giving it form: Exploring conflict through art. In

Liebmann, M (Ed.), *Arts approaches to conflict* (pp. 152-173). Bristol: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Martin, J. & Sugarman, J (2000). Between the modern and the postmodern: The possibility of self and progressive understanding in psychology. *American Psychologist*, 55(4), 397-406.

Minuchin, S (1975). *Families and family therapy*. Harvard, MA: Harvard University Press

Patterson, J., Williams, L., Edwards, T., Rauf-Grounds, C. & Chamow, L (2009). *Essential skills in family therapy* 2nd edition New York: Guilford press.

Piercy, F., Sprenkle, D. & Wetchler, J (1996). *Family therapy: sourcebook*. New York: Guilford Press.

Rose G. 1988. *Visual methodologies*. Sage: London

Savneet, T. (2003). Decolonization: Third world women and conflicts. In Hogan, S. (2003). *Gender issues in art therapy*. UK: Jessica Kingsley, 185-193.

Spivak, G. C. & Guha, R (1988). *Selected subaltern studies*. New York: Oxford University Press.