ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

Therapeutic practice: a personal account of an arts based activity

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Abstract

From a socio-historical and dynamic systems perspective, family and world environments have meaning to an individual. In art based research with the therapist in mind, the transpersonal practitioner seeks to recognise the complementary nature of cognition and social context, but also the potential of being informed by a larger realm associated with the unmanifest, formless, wordless, the coming into form, into words, hovering between and surrounding seeming separate worlds. This article explores both the process and the outcomes of engaging in an art therapy activity involving the examination of childhood/early adolescence experience and defense mechanisms developed at the time that intensified later in life. The findings may also inspire other art therapy practitioners.

Key words: therapeutic practice; self-study; arts based activity; interactive field; dialogue

Introduction

Deaver (2011) argues for an increased engagement in research as part of art therapy training despite the reluctance of US based art therapists and institutions that train them. Towards that idea, she presents a quick overview of possible research topics and

appropriate methodologies. Deaver suggests that research may appear too difficult a task to many due to lack of training in research methodologies, or because research is seen as too antithetical to the spontaneous, non-verbal and non-judgmental nature of art therapy. But engaging in research can also benefit art therapists' acumen, clarify and help build therapists' theoretical underpinnings, and bolster their professional identity.

Despite the idea that it may limit art therapy research development (Metzl, 2008), it is generally accepted that art therapists employ a research method that suits their way of working, for example heuristic and hermeneutic research (Junge, 2008; Junge & Linesch, 1993) that encourages and validates the process of immersion and of meaning making. This method of inquiry may also help understand the impact of modernity and associated social changes impacting on our roles and professional relationships (Metzl, 2008; Cochrane & Possamai-Inesedy, 2013). Art based research (McNiff, 1998) is particularly suited to the art therapy profession as it incorporates art making as both the object and method of investigation. Narrative and (auto)ethnographic research can help practitioners, for example, to critically explore the relationship between culture and class position, health and illness, but also the constantly changing personal dimension of therapeutic practice (Barnett, 2007). Biographical and autobiographical accounts of well-known and respected analysts and therapists demonstrate a need for self-expression and reflection on experiences. Especially accounts from childhood that helped them shape their professional lives and motivated them to enter the profession can help trigger their readership to reflect on their own experiences (Barnett, 2007), and help practitioners to transform the traditional focus on individualisation, de-politicisation and pathologisation (Cochrane & Possamai-Inesedy, 2013; Dafermis, 2013; Loewenthal, Malikiosi-Loizos & Athanasiades, 2013; Mentinis, 2013; Metzl, 2008).

As an art therapist, an academic and educator it is important to be engaged in arts based research and report on the findings in ways that resonate with the audience. It is also important to focus on a topic of relevance, such as the need to develop awareness of the therapeutic relationship, so as to contribute to the profession as a whole. An exploration into late childhood/early adolescence is useful from a psychoanalytical perspective because defense mechanisms developed at the time tend to intensify later in life. But childhood experiences are also contextualized. From a feminist perspective it

is necessary to consider the complementary nature of cognition and social context in and as a space that is inherently interactive and intersubjective (Gendlin, 2008,), because people are always situated. Human development is an evolutionary, self-organising process (Van Geert, 2000), not static but changing over time and place. Interactions between various people impact on, and transform relationships. Not only our intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships evolve, but also our dealings with various theories, methodologies and ethical challenges as we mature in the process. So an experiential exploration of a fundamental relationship with a world that we share, and reporting on the process and impact of externalizing our thoughts and feelings in that relationship, can help improve art therapy practice.

Setting the context

Whilst many psychological therapies focus on the development of the therapeutic relationship, art therapy differs in that it involves not two but three characters. The third character is the image or artefact. Actively including this third character in the conversation helps privilege the unconscious rather than the rational mind. Moreover, as Deaver (2011) argues, as art therapists it is important to use art making and journaling to enhance our clinical practice. In this case, I kept a journal of the dialogue that unfolded and afterwards reflected on my childhood experiences that at first seemed unrelated to my current professional practice. But after having engaged in this activity it became clear that I had been unaware of the body as something intimately interconnected in time and space. This finding was important and useful as the exercise had the therapist in mind (Barnett, 2007, p. 258). I wanted to improve understanding of my professional role as something that forms part of and feeds into a larger socio-historical and geo-political fabric.

What I learned is that the technique of making a painting and using both the non-dominant and dominant hand to establish communication between two inner voices by sitting in front of the painting, is a useful activity to come to terms with issues we are personally struggling with that impact on our professional practices. It allows a shift into 'fourth order thinking', which is not a fixed position as Neville (1998) suggests, and beyond former thinking orders of child and adolescent. When shifting into that order of

thinking I also learned that the therapist partakes of a realm associated with the unmanifest, formless, wordless, the coming into form, into words, hovering between and surrounding seeming separate worlds (Rabbin, 2008). The more aware we become of that realm, where the Aware Ego has a place, we can get a *felt sense* of different voices interacting. For example mindfulness training alerts us to taking note not only of the mind's fullness, but also it's tendency to run away with itself and the hidden energies related to desire: entities that are socially re/constructed as one of the major activities of the mind (Krishnamurti, 1978).

In the description of the art therapy activity below, with in mind the therapist's development, not only the process of art making and the use of specific mediums is considered but also a dialogue with the image and the impact thereof. Dialogue is an important part of heuristic research. Heuristic research is an organically unfolding process of engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication and creative synthesis (Moustakas, 1990). Dialoguing can be an important part of the heuristic process to help raise awareness of the self in inter/action (Richards & Richards, 2013). Dialoguing also allows for tacit knowledge to be revealed which is implicit (Gendlin, 1996; Preston, 2008). In an online article Sela-Smith (2012) suggests that 'tacit knowledge must be accessed through thought that is connected to pre-verbal, body-based, global experience of wholes rather than reflective reason… It is the *"I-who-feels"* [or felt sense] that experiences the feeling that provides access to tacit knowledge'. In this art based research activity, the sensory experience is highlighted both in the process of art making and the process of communicating with the art piece.

The activity involved an exploration into late childhood/early adolescence and defense mechanisms developed at the time that intensified later in life. This particular activity helped understand at a deeper level what independence means and how this relates to professional practice. It helped deepen the understanding of Kegan's (1989, 1994) notion of the child as an identity that is able to differentiate her sensations and herself as the experiencer of those sensations. It also helped re/connect with my identity as an early adolescent who becomes capable of thinking across categories (Neville, 1998 p 18). Further, it deepened insight into the idea that family and world environments have meaning to the individual (Junge, 2008), but also that human development is a self-

organising process where both complexity and order emerge (Van Geert, 2000). In other words, people are not perfectly organised, static organisms. They feed into and out of social systems, but in a fluid way. As O'Loughlin (1995/2005) argues in her discussion on self-study, people have an intimate sense of "place" and connections with other dimensions of living. They are situated in personal and communal histories and as such find their 'place'. But this place is not static, because the meanings we attribute to objects and behaviours change over time and place.

The art therapy activity

Making a painting of late childhood/early adolescence was a liberating process. It allowed for a remembering and feeling again of the bodily sensations experienced at the time with myself as the experiencer of those sensations. It also triggered my awareness as an early adolescent; someone who started to see connections but could not yet quite piece them together. Remembering, expressing and communicating these sensations and ways of thinking allowed for a perspective on life stage theory that is cyclical rather than linear (Hudson, 1991); childhood is about preparing for adulthood whilst having tacit knowledge of that period of time. Childhood is also about gaining deeper insight into how networks of people and group orientations have an impact on a growing identity as if a continuity 'which is only an apparent reality, not ultimate truth' (Goenka, in Hart, 1987, p. 28). As Ormsby-Green (2007, p 185) would point out, there is a difference between the 'native being' and the 'identity package', where the second is the result of the first. The activity also allowed for a seeing of the relevance of testing the boundaries of others and of social systems, and the desire to show that nobody is a carbon copy of anyone or anything. At the same time the testing of boundaries is important to experience their quality, and whether they can be protected. Perhaps there is a lot of learning to be done in the 'space between'.

The studio in which the art activity took place is the property of an artist who left this earthly plane late last year. Though this artist was an atheist, he made utterly beautiful 'spiritual' paintings. The studio still resonates his gentle, generous and creative spirit and allowed me to first engage then be fully immersed in the process of expressing and

communicating - on canvas - the complex and multi-layered 'issue' of growing up as a child in an environment that projected an image of an ideal self. That *image* was a culturally negotiated idea that persisted in the psyche of my mother's family, with various members of that family Catholic clergy. My adopting that image helped raise awareness of the vertical pulls upwards (towards the 'heavens') and downwards (gravity, Mother Earth), but nobody could explain what 'incarnation' was about. Struggling to make sense of the power of gravity on this earthly 'horizontal' plane and its socio-historical and geo-political relationships, it became clear that Vygotsky's idea of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZDP) was applicable: the child can only be as competent as those who teach it (Van Geert, 2000, p. 65).

I used a large canvas (50-70 cm) and mostly acrylic paint. Why that size and medium? The need to see a clear picture seemed to call for a large size canvas, and the wet quality and slippery texture of acrylic paint seemed to share the qualities of my childhood experience, especially as the medium dries and sets on the canvas very quickly. Only in the end I used a few bits of oil-paint, perhaps because the smell and texture of oil paint shares the quality of organically but slowly settling down into a specific shape. Though I usually like to finger-paint with my 'bare' fingers, this time I used a throw-away glove to protect my fingers and indeed whole hand from getting covered in paint and possibly poisoned. In hindsight, this was interesting as it seemed to match my childhood experience of not wanting to be 'poisoned' by the vagaries of adulthood too early in life. I used my non-dominant (left) hand to make the painting to enlist childhood memory.

The process took about 1.5 hours all up. This is the painting I produced:

Image 1: painting of late childhood/early adolescence life stage

The next day I engaged into dialogue with the painting after having let the painting 'incubate' into my psyche, stimulated by the space in which I live: the Perth Hills with plenty of trees around and a quietude needed to let new insights 'sink in'.

Dialogue between two inner voices and my art work

Dialogue took place by writing on paper. To clearly distinguish my normal, dominant voice from that of the child and give room to the child's voice, I felt it was appropriate to use my left hand to express thoughts and feelings as the young person represented in the painting, and my dominant (right) hand to represent the present 'I'. With my left hand in control I picked up a red/orange pencil to write with (which brought me in touch with the sense of softness and smudginess in childhood), and with the right hand I chose a pen (which resonated with the sense of hardness and delineation). Then the dialogue started and 'my right hand' wrote:

I see you've used lots of orange and yellow colours in your painting. And gold and silver sparkles around your body...

'My left hand' responded:

Yes, I feel angry and sad. I cannot talk with mummy and daddy the way I want to. They, like my brothers and sisters, will never be able to understand my thoughts and feelings. I mean nothing to them.

I understand...

No, you don't. NO adult does. All they can do is throw ugly angry and loud words around. They make me cringe. They hurt my ears and eyes. I want to be away from all that! So throw clouds in front of them.

I like the glitters...

Yes. Me too. They're my angels. Like the butterflies, they give me comfort. They protect me.

I see...

No, you don't. That's the problem. Most of you are blind! You cannot see what the effects are of what you're doing, like my brothers. They hurt me but can't see the pain they cause.

There is a long silence. Nobody speaks, only silence…

What do you see in the painting?

The red spots and splashes that float around. I am strong. The red does not taint me. Perhaps mum's love also protects me. The white smeared all over my face bothers me though, and the white under my armpit and around my wrist/hand. I cannot give shape to anything, in a way that is understood by others.

Yes... very debilitating... disarming perhaps?

So I have to find other ways of arming and protecting myself. I write many poems, feel very depressed and alone upstairs in my room. I miss Ans (sister). She is nice and listens sometimes...

That's nice...

Yes. That purple blob also bothers me, on my mouth... gagged... The white makes me blind and the purple gags me and attacks my heart, smears it and it all hurts my large intestines, constipates them.

Long silence again…

I have good intentions and a lot of good, clever things to say but need to find the right audience. This is perhaps not at home, huh?

No, perhaps not. Well done!

Thank you!

A sense of completion is left in the space (a felt shift) where the 2 voices have been in dialogue. Smiles all over (within).

Reflecting back on the activity to deepen insight

I found that using the non-dominant (in my case left) hand privileged the unconscious and offered access to tacit knowledge that is implicit and accessible through the 'I who feels'. Tacit knowledge of power dynamics was also accessed through dialogue by sitting in front of the painting and allowing both the 'adult' and the 'child' voices to speak with each other, and in the process understand and acknowledge each other. The painting formed a medium, an intermediary for the dialogue and mutual understanding to unfold in a seemingly timeless space. This 'sitting in front of the painting together' activity in itself was very powerful. It offered a common space, a safe and open space that allowed for a 'sitting next to each other'; it offered the type of distance needed for two entities to gently feel into each other's spaces and gain mutual respect, even

validate each other's company, both learning from the other. It gave access to and empowered inner resources, promoting a dialectical space that did not necessitate my body to move into different positions to identify with the 'adult' or the 'child', as encouraged for example in voice-dialogue or transactional analysis related activities. This insight was important, because this 'moving the body' into different positions can have a negative impact on the client, as it reinforces the mechanical paradigm and the idea that problems and a 'sense of place' are always linked with a certain position. It blocks the possibility of a shift into 'fourth order thinking'. As O'Loughlin (2006; 1995/2005, p. 2) argues in her discussion on self-study, it is important for people to realise they have an intimate sense of "place" and connections with other dimensions of living. No matter where they are, they are situated in personal and communal histories and as such have their 'place'. But this place is not static, because the meanings we attribute to objects and behaviours change over time and place.

Simply having the painting there to talk about and using my non-dominant and dominant hands to express and communicate, allowed the two voices to come to their own insights, mediated and encouraged by the other. It allowed for an integration of awareness with myself as the experiencer of sensations and the capacity to think across categories, culminating in a capacity to stand outside the set of truths and narratives embodied at the time: 'fourth order thinking', where the individual 'detaches herself from the taken-for-grantedness of the knowledge inherited and absorbed from family, school and mass media' (Neville, 1998, p. 18).

The process of writing with the non-dominant hand and a color pencil took a lot of time, mimicking the struggle of a child as s/he tries to master the skill of clear communication. As the image below shows, the 'voice' of this child is authentic and has its own vibration.
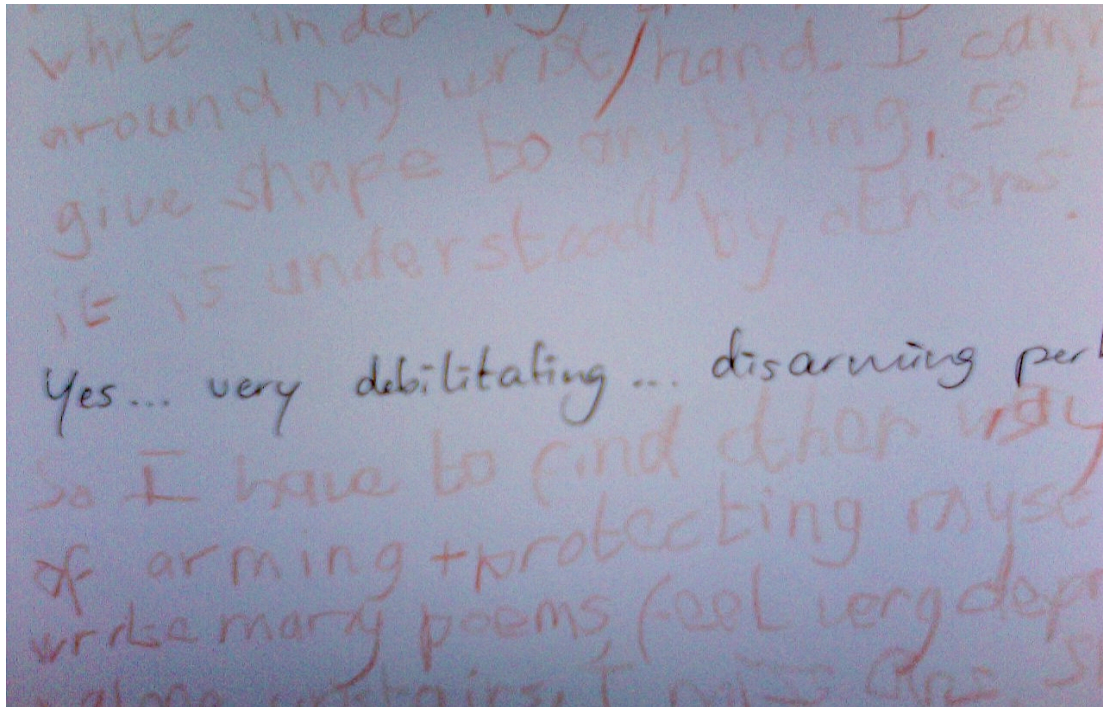
Image 2: two voices communicating using dominant and non-dominant hand

From an observer's perspective, the slow pace of writing also tested the patience of the adult and forced 'her' to shift position (inside herself) and as such allow 'the child' more space to talk. Though this 'observer' at first seemed to have no voice because it kept a low profile in the background, that voice became stronger as the dialogue developed, acting as a kind of mediator to help steer the process into a desired direction. In a method called 'Voice Dialogue' (Stone & Stone, 1991), this mediator is called 'Aware Ego' that helps the inquiring adult to trust the process of unfolding interactions and move beyond the need for social stratification and the existence of social power/knowledge inequalities.

Reflecting on the dialogue
Whilst many psychological therapies focus on the development of the therapeutic relationship, art therapy differs in that it involves a third character: the image or artefact. After completing the activity of dialoguing with the image and reflecting on the exercise in order to improve my practice as an art therapist, academic and educator, it became

clear that most conversations are socially constructed and highly ritualized, perhaps because the 'Aware Ego' does not get the chance to speak, most people too busily caught up in the conversation. Symbolic interaction theory considers ritualistic ways of interacting a matter of different dominant entities defending their individual face whilst protecting the face of others, creating a scenario of 'actors' and an audience that supports the performance. When unaware of this ritualistic event the expression of other selves is suppressed (Goffman, 1967), which supports social stratification processes.

It also became clear that it is important to deepen understanding of the notion of 'place' in therapeutic contexts. The danger of perceptual blindness is a result of being trained in biomedical and functionalist schools of thought that suggest 'place' is separate from the lived experience and social roles (such as patient and practitioner) need to be sharply delineated and protected to maintain stability and 'good health' in society as a whole. It follows that practitioner/client roles and their status are reinforced rather than contested. To empower our clients (and students), it pays to be mindful of the notion that we as practitioners are *performative*, that is the impact of our embodiment is located in the performance itself. We are left to question and counteract the typical role of 'expert' (Bullough, 2008, p. 8) but also the place we create from moment to moment.

Conclusion

This article assumed a socio-historical and dynamic systems perspective, where family and world environments are considered as having meaning to the individual. These environments and their meanings need to be attended to and reflected on in art based activities with the therapist in mind, for him or her to recognise the complementary nature of cognition and social context but also to allow for a shift into 'fourth order thinking', which is not a fixed position. It is important for art therapists to recognize people's capacity to be informed by a larger realm associated with the unmanifest, formless, wordless, the coming into form, into words, hovering between and surrounding seeming separate worlds. In that context, engaging in an art therapy activity that involves an examination of childhood/early adolescence experience and defense mechanisms developed at the time may be useful, provided it helps us realize our

embodiment and the way in which we create place, to assume responsibility for our performativity.

In the art therapy activity discussed here the technique of making a finger painting and dialoguing with the art piece, using both the non-dominant and dominant hand to establish communication between two inner voices whilst sitting in front of the painting, proved a useful activity to shift into 'fourth order thinking' and understand our participation of a realm associated with the unmanifest, formless, wordless, the coming into form, into words, hovering between and surrounding seeming separate worlds. The more aware we become of that realm, we can get a *felt sense* of different voices interacting: entities that are socially re/constructed as one of the major activities of the mind.

If this art activity was to be reproduced in a therapeutic setting, it would be important to offer a clear explanation of what personal capacities might be tested in the process. The activity would need to be carefully planned, with clear education an essential part of the process. Education would consist of the human being situated, not a static 'place' but in a larger, intersubjective and interactive field. This notion of 'place' deserves more attention in art therapy contexts to accentuate the notion of therapeutic practice as something that is informed by and also informs socio-historical intervention. This leaves me to finish with the words of Soesman (1990), who refers to Steiner's notion of 'a timestream going from life to death [and] back from death to life' (p. 38). This idea of a timestream resonates with the Buddhist understanding that at a deeper level the entire universe, animate and inanimate, is in a constant state of rising and passing away. 'Each of us is in fact a stream of constantly changing subatomic particles, along with which the process of consciousness, perception, sensation, reaction change even more rapidly than the physical process' (Goenka, in Hart, 1982, p. 29).

Biography

José van den Akker (PhD, MEdSt, AdvDipTransArther) has over 15 years of experience facilitating individuals and groups of people in their personal and professional development. Committed to transformative education, her doctoral work focused on the

dynamics in cross-cultural education and identified the need to consider the human condition and rehabilitate the self-in-relationship. Her current work has shifted into the area of art therapy and working with migrants, carers of people with disability and dementia, and international health practitioners and students, to create a sense of home in an increasingly complex, global world and continuing to remember and appreciate the intimate connection between human and non-human worlds.

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