ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

Art Therapy with Syrian Refugee Children in Jordan: Difficulties of containment

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Abstract

Syrian refugee children face ongoing trauma living in Baqa'a Palestinian Refugee Camp in Jordan. The experiences and the struggle of an art therapist working for three months with 30 children in the midst of chaos, pain and anger, raise challenges for the application of art therapy in the broader practice and geo-political context. Group art therapy, guided in particular by the work of Yalom, provided a foundation for limited yet meaningful therapeutic engagement for children through art.

Keywords: Refugees, group art therapy, trauma, cultural responsiveness

Setting

Dana called and explained that she was the founder of a Non Government Organisation (NGO) based in Dubai that was sponsoring art therapy groups for Syrian refugee children in Jordan living in Baqa'a Palestinian Refugee camp. I wondered how that would affect them; Syrian refugees living alongside Palestinians, a people who have a collective consciousness of 'we have been waiting to go back since 1948'; people who are surrounded with a different reality than that they had envisioned for themselves; the reality of being stuck; and of a 'waiting' that could take much longer than had ever been anticipated. Dana wanted to provide two groups of 30 Syrian children with art therapy for a week before I took over for three months. We were welcomed with piles of garbage by the entrance (Figure 1) and more than 50 children running around the room. They were on top of tables, screaming, yelling – it was complete chaos. We met Um and Abu Jamal, who were in charge of the community centre, providing us with the children and the space (please note: all names or other identifying features of real people have been changed).

Figure 1-The Entrance- Baqa'a Refugee Camp Community Centre

Dana tried to contain the children. However, she introduced games that had the reverse effect and made the children even more volatile with excitement. That's when the first fight broke out; two boys were punching each other amid accusations of being on the wrong side of the Syrian conflict.

I left Dana's 'session' deeply worried. How was I going to contain these brief art therapy groups after their 'fun' week with Dana? How do you explain that games and art are not considered art therapy to a part of the world that does not recognize art therapy as a profession or acknowledge its existence?

Plan

The limitations of the space, the duration of the art therapy groups, the number of children and the sheer happiness of adults (Um and Abu Jamal) watching Dana in action led me to believe that the best way to deal with this situation was by setting strict boundaries, and also by focusing on the here-and-now. Irvin Yalom (2005) said that brief psychotherapy groups help 'emphasize the transfer of skills and learning from the group to the real world' (Yalom, 2005: 289). I wanted to stress concepts of empowerment, sharing of feelings, acceptance of others and build resilience to help the children cope with a chaotic traumatizing present and a disturbed past.

Setting boundaries

I called Um Jamal three days before my art therapy groups and made sure that I set the boundaries; two groups, 15 children in each group, same children every week, and the need to start on time and finish on time without interruptions. Um Jamal was a lady in her 50's, small yet big, kind yet loud, sweet yet harsh.

First session

Um Jamal took me aside before I entered the room and asked me to get veiled; she explained that Abu Jamal refused to communicate with me or attend the art therapy sessions with my hair showing. At that moment I decided to take advantage of the culture that I understood so well and use it to set my own boundaries. I turned the table around by asking her to inform Abu Jamal that I was not comfortable with men attending the art therapy sessions especially with my hair showing and that he nor anyone else should interrupt the sessions.

Figure 2 Curtain divider keeping Abu Jamal and his class from Art Therapy Space

Curtain divider

The art therapy space was part of a classroom divided by a curtain. I found an ongoing religion class being taught by Abu Jamal on the first day of sessions, and that the curtain that was meant to keep him and the class apart, was on the floor (Figure 2). I called Um Jamal to ask for help with the curtain and she asked me to start without it. I refused. After we managed to put the curtain up, the 15 children sat in a circle on the floor and I explained why I was there; the art we were going to make and the feelings we were going to eventually share. We also discussed the fun week they had with Dana and how could we make their experience better? To my surprise eight year old Layla said there was too much screaming and noise. They all discussed the amount of fighting and screaming they endured. We wrote down suggestions for future sessions such as: listening to one another, sharing of art material and no yelling or fighting. Jamal (the son of Abu and Um Jamal) stood up and suggested that the group give me permission to physically hit them and mentioned that it is a sign of love and respect. I almost choked and explained that, even though I appreciated his trust, I would not be screaming or hitting anyone and in return, I asked them to do the same with each other. We then put the suggestions on the wall. I wish now I had used different words such as 'talk calmly' instead of 'no yelling'. I understand it reflected my worry of not being able to contain the groups or not being able to focus on the brief art therapy group goals I had aimed to achieve after their week with Dana. Helping the children make sense of their experiences through instillation of hope, building resilience, self-empowerment and teaching them to self-soothe, was going to be challenging.

Building a routine

The children and I managed to set a routine during that first session. We first played a game that came up with the nicknames we were going to use for the duration of three months and then we had story telling from a 'far-far-away place' followed by art-making. Traumatised children find routines ultimately comforting. Blaustein and Kinniburgh (2010) insisted that 'by providing predictability in the therapy setting, children are able to achieve a sense of safety and a sense control because they know what to expect' (Blaustein and Kinniburgh, 2010: 97-98). We also made folders that they started personalizing and I explained that their art was private and the folders would keep it, and their feelings, safe. The adults had provided me with a curtain divider that kept on falling. I could hear Abu Jamal yelling while giving his class throughout our art therapy sessions, and they had tried to get me to cover my hair – all within the duration of the first three hours. I did not want to leave the children's folders with Um Jamal and decided to keep them safe in my car between sessions instead. I wondered if my feelings of unease towards the adults reflected the truth of what the children had to live with in their everyday lives; men and women who needed containment and therapy themselves.

Second session: a good deeder

I drove an hour to get to Baqa'a Refugee Camp for our second session, carried the children's folders up two floors and opened the door to an empty class room. Um Jamal explained that a 'good deeder' had taken the children to get sweets in his bus and she forgot to inform me.

I felt paralyzed and felt that Um Jamal was undermining the art therapy process and undermining my effort to help the children. I wondered how much of it was because of the fun week they had with Dana and also Um Jamal's lack of understanding to art therapy. It was clear that the adults were going to be a handful and I had to find a way to communicate with them without affecting the children. Yalom (2005) suggested that the client-therapist relationship might be affected by any disharmony between therapist and third-party administrators and I needed to make sure that I had boundaries set without offending the adults or harming the children.

Setting boundaries; again

When I went back for our third week of sessions, I found the curtain in place and the children waiting – yet there were some missing faces and some other new ones. The changing of faces did not deter me from focusing on attaining my goal; with a here-and-now focus I needed to make sure I managed the time, and that I was efficient. I started with our routine – the name game and then the story-telling. They told stories about a child or an animal that related to their situation, chosen from far-away countries. I found that story telling worked their imagination, helped them relate to each other and to other children, and also helped them understand feelings of their own without feeling threatened. Knowledge from trauma informed practice (Malchiodi 2016) emphasizes that story telling affects the brain in many ways, including by children turning a story into their own, using their own ideas and experiences, mirroring each-others' and the speakers brain activity and also making it easier to remember experiences and with greater accuracy.

We could hear Abu Jamal screaming during our sessions, yet we managed to tell the stories and make art about the part that touched us the most. I noticed that the art made by the children during the first four weeks focused on the Syrian flag and Syrian symbols. It seemed there was a competition to show who loved Syria most and I wondered how much of it reflected what was going on at home. There was resistance towards showing any real emotion related to their difficult living situation, or their journey as refugees, or the war they witnessed, or the loss of life they grieved. The art developed with time; anger became more prominent, personal stories and pain of their 'here-and-now' was shared. Trust and respect were also more noticeable. Stories of their refugee status were shared and symbolic drawings of their angry helpless parents were made.

Transformation of Art

The children's here-and-now was reflected in drawings of houses that seemed locked up and lacked light and air. Ahmad explained that the yellow house was his home in Syria waiting for him, while the brown one was his house in the Baqa'a Refugee camp (Figure 3). I wondered why he seemed like he was hiding behind the wall; out of view. Ahmad thought about it for a while and said that he felt invisible to his parents since they moved to Jordan, as if he was not there anymore. Fear, anxiety and the ongoing trauma the children live in were reflected in the art made.

Drawings of people holding rifles and killing each other started appearing after our fourth session. When I wondered who was fighting whom (Figure 4), 11 year old Niveen explained that Syrians, who were once your brothers and sisters, were not your brothers and sisters anymore. The children did not understand the situation in Syria, neither did I. It was complicated, and the children were exposed to all sides of the story at all times. They breathed, ate and played politics and war.

Figure 3

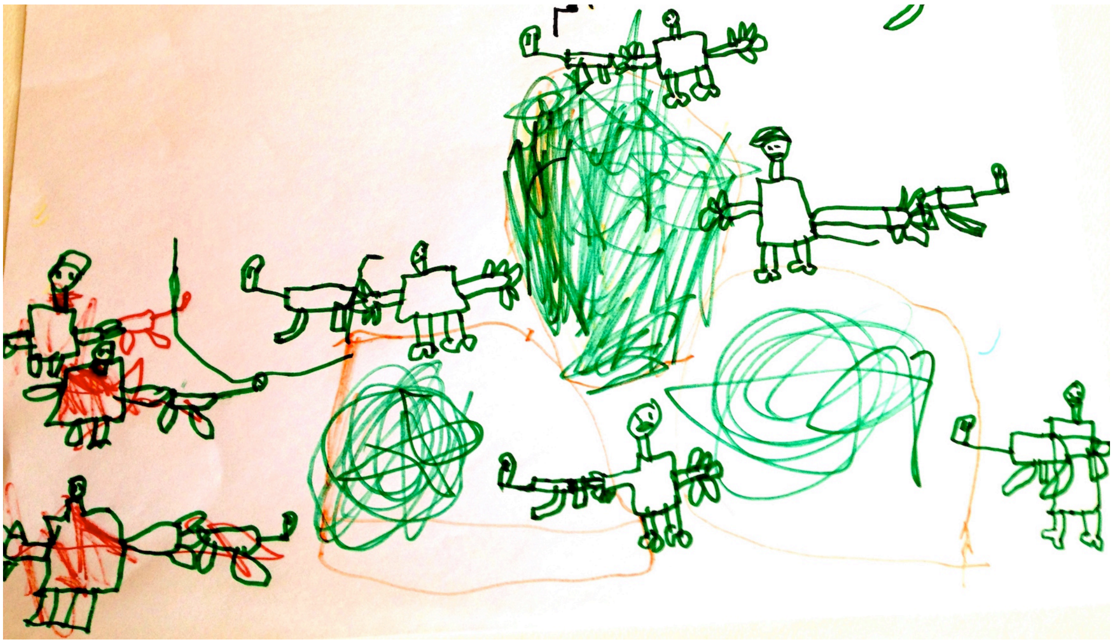

Figure 4

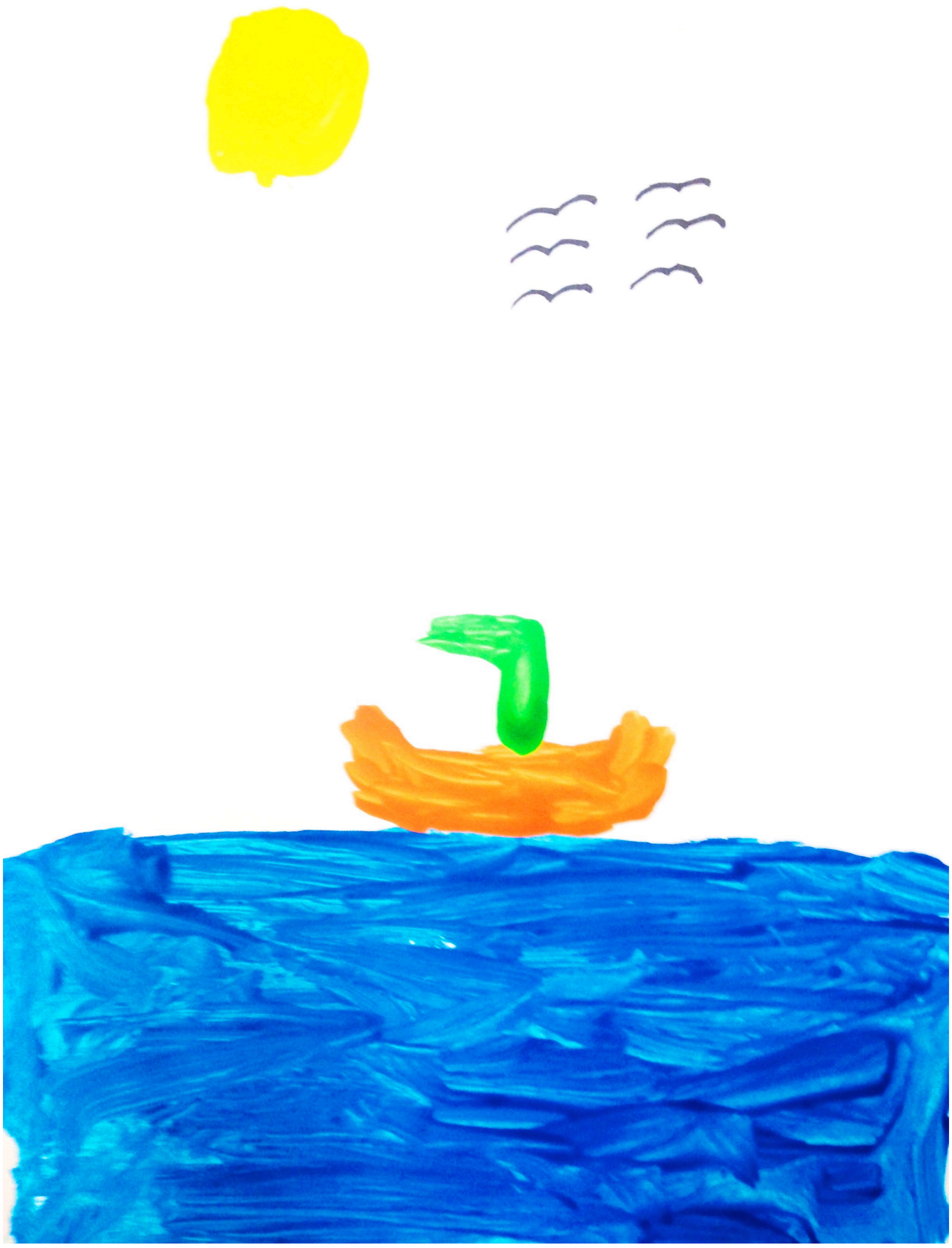

Figure 5

The drawing of an empty boat by 9 year old Qasem (Figure 5) was my introduction to death boats; "You never heard of death boats? They will either take our lives once and for all, or give us the life we deserve. This, here, is not a life." That drawing sparked stories of aunts, uncles and neighbours that got on death boats; those who made it to the other side and those who died trying. It overwhelmed me to think of these children getting onto those boats, but it seemed like their families were waiting for the opportunity. Life in a refugee camp that had been erect since 1948 and the Syrian refugees' here-and-now, offered them no control, no compassion and lacked the basic necessities to stay alive. Drawings of angry animals were also a common theme. Six year old Omar explained that the animals hated all humans - they were sad, angry and dangerous. I also wondered why his drawing had a dead end (Figure 6).

Figure 6

In the middle of our fifth session, Abu Jamal interrupted our story telling and explained he wanted to share his art making skills with the art therapy group. Ten minutes later Um Jamal interrupted to give the children falafel sandwiches. At the end of that day, I called Um Jamal and reminded her that I do not want Abu Jamal walking in on me while my hair is showing and that the falafel sandwiches could wait until the session ended. I also insisted on moving the art therapy group to a more private room. Um Jamal agreed to move us to a bigger, more private space with chairs and tables. The bigger more private space did not deter Abu Jamal or Um Jamal from interrupting our sessions, yet the break-through was when Um Jamal, along with four other women, inhabited one side of the room during our 7th session to pick mloukhya leaves[1] they had with them. The children and I were in the middle of our story, but none of us looked at the women - we were concentrated and contained. At that point it seemed as if adults could do nothing to interrupt our group; we had built a containing space for ourselves in the midst of chaos (Figure 7).

Figure 7

[1] Mloukhya Leaves: leaves of Corchorus olitoriius commonly known as Nalta jute and tossa jute that are widely popular in the Arab world and are used to make a main dish.

Teacher and a stick

Our 10th session was interrupted when a girl ran into our room crying followed by an 18 year old youth, waving a stick. He explained that she disrespected him during class. It was horrific. Feelings of helplessness got to me as I thought of how much pain and humiliation these children and the youth teaching them were dealing with. I could only keep them safe during our sessions. I had no control over what happened outside our door.

It felt like everything was against the children. Politics was discussed in the streets, at home and while they were playing. Jobless fathers, depressed mothers, and missing relatives were powerfully present with us within the sessions. Feelings of helplessness and guilt of ending therapy with the children weighed heavily on my heart, as I knew for certain the children needed long term art therapy groups. Yet the children's commitment to the groups and their respect for the boundaries, in the midst of all that chaos, left me hopeful. Fitzpatrick (2002) found that refugee clients needed a feeling of structure, a way to re-assist their identities through emotional expressions, and had insisted that art therapy and art creation might provide them with that, along with a sense of control and a counterbalance to their losses. I agree with her. The art had developed from being resistant and patriotic to being reflective of the here-and-now situation. Difficult feelings were expressed and contained, resilience was built and self-soothing skills were focused on.

Saying Good-Bye

We ended our art therapy groups with a special session of good-bye art as we discussed themes of empowerment, containment and the importance of art at keeping our feelings safe. We told a story from Sri Lanka, about a piece of land that hid a treasure; about four brothers who belonged to different factions of the Sri Lank civil war, who had to dig it up and realized that the real treasure would only surface when they came together and forgave each other. We made art that reflected the power of forgiveness and empowerment.

I gave them back their folders, a good-bye gift of coloured pencils and a blank paper book hoping they would use it to self-soothe when they needed to. I left with a heavy heart, knowing that their trauma was ongoing, wondering which of them would go back to Syria, or get on boats of death to Europe, and which would stay in one of the poorest, least privileged neighbourhoods in the world.

Biography

Shireen Yaish is the founder of Kaynouna Arab Art Therapy Center; the first Art Psychotherapy Center in the Arab World. She is a Senior Art Psychotherapist and has provided Art Psychotherapy to children, adolescents, adults, and families and has facilitated a variety of Art Psychotherapy groups. Shireen is also a well-known speaker and workshop trainer in Art Psychotherapy in the Arab region.
Shireen has lived most of her life between the Arab and Western worlds including Jordan, Palestine, Canada and England. She believes that her background make her conscious of both western and eastern cultures and her passion lies with helping people dig to find their own insight through Art Psychotherapy. Shireen is trauma informed and has experience working with refugees, orphans and segments dealing with difficult feelings and living in challenging places such as Gaza-Palestine, Lebanon and orphanages in Jordan. Her passion for working with children and women comes from her

deep understanding of these cultures and being able to relate to difference in identity, culture, language and religion.

Shireen's clinical skills are based on art psychotherapy, psychotherapy and influenced by Psychodynamic, Jungian approaches and also trauma informed Art Therapy and mindfulness techniques. Shireen has worked with children and adults with anger management, anxiety, social anxiety, ADHD, depression and attachment difficulties. Shireen is also skilled at working with trauma and PTSD.

Shireen has offered individual Art Psychotherapy sessions and Art Psychotherapy groups to over 700 Syrian and Palestinian refugee children and women in 10 different refugee camps and community settings in the Arab world. She has also been offering training and workshops to social workers, psychologists and psychosocial teams on Art Therapy techniques, concepts and applications in different countries such as Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and Palestine (including Gaza).

Shireen was trained and qualified in Art Psychotherapy at Goldsmiths College, University of London. She is a member of the British Association of Art Therapists (BAAT) and Canadian Art Therapy Association (CATA).

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