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Signs and Symbols: Art and Language in Art Therapy

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Signs and Symbols: Art and Language in Art Therapy

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This paper is a preliminary attempt at theory building by exploring the use of art and language in art therapy through a theoretical inquiry model. Inductive and deductive processes are used to explore literature from the fields of psychology, art philosophy (particularly aesthetics), and linguistics. Concepts common to each of these disciplines are then further explored through the lens of bilingual therapy. Practical applications are discussed, along with suggestions for future research.

It is interesting to consider the nuances of verbal and nonverbal communication in a therapeutic modality that is based in art. A wide variety of techniques for integrating art and language in art therapy exist throughout art therapy literature. Talking about, investigating, examining, and exploring visual imagery through verbal means is often called processing the art and, for purposes of this paper, this terminology will be used. Processing in this way, in the context of a therapeutic relationship, distinguishes art therapy from art-making. As such, an exploration of the connection between art and language is a direct contribution to the field of clinical art therapy, in which art and language are integrated for psychological exploration and therapeutic gain. This paper utilizes theoretical inquiry methodology to explore the use of art and language in art therapy.

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

Wadeson (2000) calls for the creation of a new art therapy theory that encompasses psychology, creativity, and the meaning of visual images, including an understanding of the healing process of art and acknowledging that art can build bridges between people. Rubin (2001) also expresses hope that an art therapy theory may emerge from art therapy itself: “It will no doubt partake of elements from other perspectives, but will need to have its own inner integrity in terms of the creative process at its core” (p. 1). Gantt (1986) recommends that art therapy researchers not hesitate to borrow from neighboring fields for research design and strategies in order to push art therapy research beyond the scope of the individual case study. She recommends the fields of art history, anthropology, and linguistics as a starting point.

According to the Fielding Institute (1991), theoretical inquiry methodology “attempts to generate new knowledge through the analysis, critique, extension, and integration of existing theories and concepts” (p. 37). This process may reveal limitations and contradictions between and within theories, and tries to eliminate those contradictions for more “consistent, comprehensive, and powerful theories” (p. 37). Grounded theory is the process of theory building in three stages: (a) induction, (b) deduction, and (c) verification (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In this methodology, in contrast with traditional scientific methods, theory is an end-goal, not a starting point (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In this paper, the data examined consist of literature, ideas, and concepts.

A preliminary review of art therapy literature identifies a wide variety of ideas about the relationship between art and language. To further explore these concepts, a secondary literature review presents concepts from three fields related to art therapy: psychology, art, and linguistics, and searches for generalizable similarities (induction). These similar concepts are grouped and named (deduction) in an attempt to better understand the use of art and language in art therapy. A third review then facilitates application of the concepts presented. Figure 1 illustrates the modified theoretical inquiry methodology proposed for this paper. Adaptations of Figure 1 are included throughout this paper to illustrate the theory-building process.

The thoughts presented below have evolved from a series of readings in a variety of disciplines. From these writings, certain authors have explored concepts which have much in common with art therapy and related fields. Although their ideas may...
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have been written decades ago or have fallen out of vogue, the inclusion of certain theories, authors, and writings in this paper is based on the applicability of their concepts to art therapy theory and practice.

FIRST LITERATURE REVIEW

A broad review of art therapy literature finds a wide variety of methods using art and language in the practice of art therapy. Naumburg (1955) had her clients free associate to their imagery, though Kramer (2001) did not encourage verbal description of the artwork at all. Jung (2009) kept careful journals about his artwork, examining and exploring its meaning through words. Phenomenological art therapists ask questions in the process of intentional looking at the art (Betensky, 2001), while psychoanalytic art therapists engage the client in a series of discursive steps, combining art and dialogue into a therapeutic experience (Nucho, 1987). Expressive arts therapists may invite the client to not only talk about the art, but also to dance, sing, and write about it (McNiff, 2001). Art therapists may disallow comments about the artwork and instead ask the client to dialogue with the imagery, as Allen (1995) does, or the therapist may ask a client to tell stories about it, as Rogers (2001) recommends.

SECOND LITERATURE REVIEW

Art and language can be combined in a variety of ways to create positive outcomes in art therapy, and sometimes art itself can be considered a language or mode of communication. Exploring concepts from related fields may shed light on the use of art and language in art therapy. Specifically, literature from psychology, art, and linguistics are presented in search of common concepts and ideas. A careful reading of basic texts from these disciplines reveals four common categories: (a) descriptions of an internal world, (b) discussions of structure, (c) an exploration of signs and symbols, and (d) the role of the recipient. Examples of these shared concepts from authors in each field are presented below. Figure 2 illustrates how ideas from these three disciplines form the basis of this exploration (compare to Figure 1).

Concept 1: An Internal World

In psychology, there are several names to describe the internal world of thoughts, feelings, and drives. Whether you call it the unconscious (Freud, 1965), the psyche (Jung, 1933), or the self (Kohut, 1985), insight-oriented therapists are interested in uncovering, exploring, and understanding this internal world.

Noted art philosopher, Langer (1942), calls the internal world feeling and argues that the form of art is designed to convey this feeling to others. Langer’s feeling is a momentary event, but in most cases, artwork leaves behind an artifact which can be experienced long after the emotion has had its expression.

Linguistic theorist Chomsky’s (1965, 1975, 2002) universal grammar, or set of characteristics common to all human languages, implies that humans all over the world create verbal language to externalize their internal world. According to this theory, each distinct language contains similar elements which correspond with basic human needs, including the need to communicate about one’s internal and external experiences.

Concept 2: Structure

Psychological theories often explore the structure of the mind and attempt to name its parts. For instance, Freud (1965) organized the mind’s structure according to primal drives and the ways in which these drives come in conflict with one another. He introduced the concepts of id, ego, and superego and illustrated the ways that these realms interact structurally.

Langer (1942, 1953) refers to art’s form. Form is comprised of the visual, structural elements of the artwork such as color, line, composition, etc. Langer believes that artistic form may be used to represent internal feeling in a structural way. Form is the structure of the art, and it is this structure to which we respond when we view, hear, or otherwise experience it. In Langer’s theory, it is the form and structure of art that convey the feelings of the artist.

In linguistics, grammar is the architecture and rule structure of verbal communication. Chomsky (1965, 1975, 2002) proposes that language uses a generative grammar, or an infinite number of potential expressions and combinations which are employed in individual ways (performance) by the speaker.

Concept 3: Signs and Symbols

The concepts of signs and symbols are explored by theorists in a wide variety of disciplines. Humans use a system of signs to communicate about both concrete and abstract concepts. A sign is generally considered to be a stand-in; one says “cow,” for instance, rather than going to the field, tying a rope around a cow’s neck, and leading it into the room. A symbol represents something deeper—the experience of larger and more complex concepts which are harder to reduce to signs.

In general, psychological theorists tend to be more interested in symbols (meanings) than signs (names). What Freud
(1965) called symbols are actually closer to signs; they serve as stand-ins (e.g., the famed cigar). Jung’s (1933) symbols represent a deeper, ineffable, mystical process in which the psyche works to heal and defend itself. Lacan (2002) and Kristeva (as described in Borch-Jacobsen, 1991; Bowie, 1993) also wrote extensively about symbols, in particular their semiotic meaning and the interplay between internal signs and external symbols.

Langer’s (1942) distinction between signs and symbols in art is a difference between the ability to communicate denotation (a name, for instance) and connotation (a meaning). In applying Langer’s definitions of signs and symbols to art, the sign would be the image or denotation, and the symbol would be the deeper meaning that is attached to the sign, or connotation. In this way, the symbol is our mental and emotional connection to the concept.

Saussure, in his linguistic theory of semiotics, preferred not to explore symbols at all and instead focused on interpreting signs, feeling that symbols were unidentifiable, unreachable, and too vague to be studied (as cited in Barthes, 1977). Saussure’s semiotic signs are made up of two parts: signifier and signified. The signifier is the collection of parts or components which comprise a sign. In looking at a word as a sign, for instance, the combination of letters is the signifier. The signified is the mental image conjured by our interaction with the signifier. Thus, the letters s-h-o-e (signifier) provoke the concept of a shoe (signified) in our minds. A symbol represents the deep, internal experience of shoes, shoe-ness, and shoeless-ness and is not considered important by Saussure (as cited in Barthes, 1977).

**Concept 4: The Recipient**

The communication in psychotherapy is received by a therapist. In talk therapy, a client communicates in the context of the therapeutic relationship using the languages that are available for both client and therapist.

Art is viewed by an audience. Each individual brings a unique set of knowledge and experiences to art’s messages. In addition, very few viewers have the luxury of personal, one-on-one contact with the artist, and must rely on the form and context of the artwork to find meaning. Wittgenstein believes that this is a fundamental characteristic of art: that the artist expresses his or her most profound and private thoughts in a public way while allowing the audience to interpret those public thoughts in their own private way (as cited in Hagberg, 1995).

Both Saussure (as cited in Barthes, 1977) and Chomsky (2002) wrote of the differences between an individual’s communication and the greater body of language possessed by a group of people or an entire society. Each spoken or written communication is made with the purpose of being understood by the other. The study of semantics is the exploration of the communication of meaning, including speaker’s intent, listener’s intent, and context.

**INDUCTIVE AND DEDUCTIVE PHASES**

The next step in the theoretical inquiry is to reason from specific concepts into a larger, more general set of ideas (induction) and then move from these general ideas to a more specific understanding (deduction). Figure 3 illustrates the next steps.

In order to complete the inductive and deductive phases, the common concepts explored in the first two literature reviews are grouped into patterns and categories. Figure 4 shows how the concepts are grouped according to similarity amongst the general ideas (induction), and then distilled and renamed to create a more specific, encompassing set of concepts (deduction).

In Figure 4 Step 1 lists concepts and patterns uncovered during the second literature review. Step 2 regroups these shared concepts together so they can be further explored and understood. Arrows are used to demonstrate how this process works for the first concept, and the process is repeated for the remaining three. Step 3 illustrates the deductive phase, which attempts to synthesize these general concepts, then simplify and name the resulting ideas. In this instance, the concepts of unconscious (from psychology), feeling (from art), and universal grammar (from linguistics) are distilled and titled as The Internal World. The same procedure...
gives titles to the other concepts: the Process of communicating (through structure, form, etc.), the Product of the communication (in the form of speech, art, etc.), and the Recipient.

**THIRD LITERATURE REVIEW**

Although this set of ideas may be applied to the process of art therapy, it does not illuminate the relationship between art and language in a way which may be easily applied to the practice of art therapy. To do this, it is helpful to explore more ideas from related disciplines. First, the literature on semiotics, then art as sign and symbol, and finally, ideas about bilingual therapy are presented.

**Art as Language and Semiotics**

Based on the literature presented in the second review, it seems that psychoanalysts are primarily interested in symbols, linguists are investigating signs, and certain art philosophers believe that art can function as both. The system of words is a system of signs, and although these signs may be combined in ways which illuminate the internal symbols of the psyche, they are not considered to be as adequate when processing or providing direct access to those symbols (Langer, 1942, 1953). Speech does not seem to be a natural mode for communicating connotation. Where verbal and visual signs fall short, art can function as a symbol and, as Langer and others would argue, may do so in a way that is more powerful and more effective than verbal signs alone.

Semiotic philosophers (Adams, 2003; Barthes, 1977; Bogdan, 2002; Burnham, 1971; Mallen, 2004) attempt to equate art and language by reducing the formal elements of art to their pieces and applying linguistic and grammatical principles to interpret them. Although semiotic art analysis is sometimes discounted by art philosophers and critics as too reductionist (Kuspit, 1987), art does seem capable of carrying and conveying meaning.

In 1938, Collingwood (as cited by Hagberg, 1995) laid out a logical and philosophical framework for considering art and language to be equal. In his theory, art and language serve similar functions: external representations of an internal process. Expanding on Collingwood’s ideas, a client in talk therapy and a client in art therapy may experience a similar process: they have an internal experience, go through a process of thinking and feeling about this experience to make connections and find meaning, then communicate with the therapist about that inner world. In the final stage, the client and therapist together will consider what has been communicated and, in the framework of their therapeutic relationship, work toward a better understanding of that original, internal experience. One difference is that when it comes time to communicate, the talk therapy client generally speaks, but the art therapy client has a choice: to speak or make art.

**Art as Sign and Symbol**

Many concepts in the fields of psychology, art, and language are paired. For instance, primary/secondary processes, discursive/non-discursive forms, and linear/non-linear thought patterns are discussed. In these pairs of terms, it is common for one of them to identify a characteristic that is more easily accomplished with verbal language (i.e. primary, discursive, linear), while the other is not. These secondary, non-discursive, non-linear concepts are deeper, more powerful, more ineffable processes, which are just as communicative, but much less communicable. These are the unsayables (Hagberg, 1995).

The unique characteristics of art allow it to function as both a sign and a symbol—to communicate the sayables and the unsayables. Art can emerge from primary or secondary processes. Art-making can be linear (most artists can only work on one figure, shape, or element at a time) and non-linear (the artist can return to a previous shape, or add and take away from the piece at any stage of its development). It can be both discursive and non-discursive. Art can function as both sign and symbol, a feat which spoken language has difficulty accomplishing (Barthes, 1977).

In obvious ways, the process of speaking to a therapist is different from the process of painting. On one hand, the result (a communication of the internal experience) is the same. On the other hand, it is the potential unlocked by an art product—the ability to dialogue with, change, store, destroy, frame, and rework the art—that places it in a unique position to access and affect change in a client’s inner world. These unsayables—the symbols, not the signs, of the internal experience—can be profoundly explored and altered through the process and product of art. This may also be why psychological theorists are so keen to understand the mechanism of symbolism and how to better access it through talk therapy. As Jung stated:

> It is one thing for a person to have an interesting conversation with his doctor once a week—the results of which hang somewhere or other in mid-air—and quite another thing to struggle for hours at a time with refractory brush and colours, and to produce in the end something which, at its face value, is perfectly senseless. …Moreover, the effort to give visible form to the image enforces a study of it in all its parts, so that in this way its effects can be completely experienced. (as cited in Rubin, 2001, p. 82)

**Bilingual Therapy**

As mentioned above, many art therapists will utilize language to process the art that a client makes in session. In this way, there are often two languages being “spoken” in the session: verbal language and art language. Moon (2002) argues that art therapists speak many languages. To better understand this idea of art therapists as multilingual, it is useful to explore literature about bilingual therapy, which explores the use of two languages in a therapy session.

Rozensky and Gomez (1983) write that communication is a two-step process. First, the experience of the world must be communicated to oneself, then this internalized representation is communicated to another person. Therapists who speak the same language(s) as the client are better equipped to enter their representational system and use its symbols to the benefit of the therapy. Whether the client is monolingual or multilingual, Claus (1998) asserts that it is the therapist’s job to “be conversant in the particular language within which our patients experience their world” (p. 188).

In conversation with other bilinguals, a bilingual speaker
Toward a New Theory

The ideas which have evolved from this theoretical inquiry, although not substantial enough to be called a theory, may provide a new direction for understanding the work of clinical art therapists. By applying ideas about bilingual therapy—including code switching and language switching to assist clients in regulating emotion and cognition during session—and returning to the original art therapy concept of processing the artwork, it may be possible to better understand the use of art and language in art therapy. Figure 5 illustrates the last step of the methodology—theory building. It also introduces the two new concepts for understanding the role of language and art in art therapy: (a) art as intermediary and (b) art therapists as multilingual.

Art as Intermediary

An intermediary is a go-between, and carries intentions, messages, and compromises between two parties. It can also be considered a means or a medium, a staging ground from which larger accomplishments spring (Intermediary, n.d.). Between who or what, then, can art serve as an intermediary? Art can be a middle-ground for primary and secondary processes, signs and symbols, and therapist and client. It can be both distancing and symbolic—both safe and profoundly representational. Art is containing but also freeing, linear and non-linear, fleeting and concrete.

This is reminiscent of the art therapist’s work of processing the art. It may be that this linking of verbal language to the visual language plays a major role in the transformative work of art therapy, where the role of art is more powerful than merely as a substitute language. In this process, art becomes a staging ground, an object of discourse, a place where connections are made and opposites are integrated.

Verbal language in talk therapy may play a similar intermediary role, though speech is more fleeting and less easily manipulated and explored. Once a thought or feeling is spoken, it is externalized. It exists in the space between therapist and client. It can be discussed and explored. What it cannot be, without extraordinary means such as recording or transcribing, is concretized. It can be manipulated, but not as readily or directly. Therapists and clients can refer back to something that was said, but must rely on memories and context rather than a concrete representation.

Art, on the other hand, is a concrete object. It has a literal existence apart from either therapist or client. It can be changed, destroyed, or displayed. The client and therapist can talk about it, to it, or through it. It becomes an intermediary.

Art Therapists as Multilingual Therapists

In addition to possessing fluency in basic art language (materials, media, styles, history, etc.) and the openness and empathy required of psychotherapists in general, art therapists may deepen and expand the experience of art therapy through careful use of language switching. Understanding the nature of primary and acquired languages can assist therapists in knowing how and when to invite their clients to make art, how to meaningfully process that art, and how to better affect positive change for their clients.
quisition where they learn about the structure of art language and begin to develop their own vocabularies. Gantt (1986) believes that visual grammar can be considered generative under the right conditions. She wonders:

Can an art therapist help a patient expand his repertoire? As his options expand and increase, can the patient find himself richer and more subtle solutions to psychological dilemmas? This is a question of utmost importance to art therapists who are considering the value of instruction for the patients... Will our providing our patients with more conscious options in their art work—more higher-order esthetic and technical solutions—likewise promote change for the better? (p. 117)

During the first stages of therapy, it may be that the client must gain fluency in the language of art. The therapist presents him with art materials, suggests that these materials may be used to communicate his internal world, and introduces the new language to him. Once the client achieves a certain level of fluency, it becomes the therapist’s job to learn his particular syntax, grammar, and symbolism. As Wadeson (1995) and others suggest, this can be achieved by paying attention to the recurrent elements such as color, shapes, themes, etc. Finally, once both client and therapist have both achieved a basic fluency, they can enter into a new level of therapy where they communicate about the art, through and with it.

Language switching techniques may be applied to deepen exploration or assist the client with regulating their emotional reactions. The therapist’s theoretical orientation will greatly influence choices about the timing and nature of the language switch between art and language. A therapist with humanist or psychoanalytic tendencies may prefer more of a code switching model, in which the client may switch back and forth between art and speech at will. This type of art therapist will be likely to “follow the client’s lead” and allow their clients to express themselves in whatever mode they choose.

Other types of therapists will take a more directional approach. A specific request for artwork is a directive, and a directive is an invitation to switch languages. Rather than invite the language switch by saying, “Can you describe that in Spanish?” a directive art therapist may say, “What did that situation look like?” or “Draw how it feels.” All of this switching should be done in the service of creating a more stable and fertile intermediary ground for planting the therapeutic seeds of change.

Art therapists who prefer to explore the deep psychological connection between artist and art therapist, as in clinical art therapy, may find their work supported by the idea of multilingual therapy. By incorporating both code switching and language switching with visual and verbal languages, the art therapist may facilitate deeper emotional experience, assist with emotional regulation, and invite a more cognitive approach to problem-solving. Understanding the therapeutic interplay of art and language in art therapy may allow clinical art therapists to achieve better outcomes for their clients.

For instance, 16-year-old Jodi had been struggling in her residential treatment setting, including her relationships with peers and staff, and complying with daily responsibilities. In individual art therapy, she would not discuss recent therapeutic gains when verbally prompted to do so. Instead, she requested to make art from the collage box (a code switch), selecting three primary images—a child wrapped in a blanket wandering outdoors, a dead...
Summary

Reading from a variety of scholarly disciplines may give a deeper, broader understanding of art therapy. Psychology, art philosophy, linguistics, semiotics, bilingual therapy, and art therapy theorists contribute to an understanding of the relationship between art and language, including the shared concepts of internal world, process, product, and recipient. Bilingual therapists utilize code and language switching to enrich the experience of talk therapy, and art therapists may be able to apply these concepts to their work by considering art as intermediary and art therapists as multilingual. This paper suggests that art can serve as both a language and as a way to express and explore unsayables. Thus, art in art therapy can function as sign, symbol, and intermediary, and thoughtful switching between art and language modes may effect positive change in art therapy clients.

The design of this study, which was based on a theoretical inquiry model, is illustrated in Figure 7.

Limitations

This work is based on preliminary exposure to complicated concepts. Many of the ideas presented in this paper were formulated after an introductory exposure to the literature from psychology, art, and linguistics. This literature, in most cases, came from compilations or translations of the authors’ original work. In one form or another, I have largely explored interpretations of their original concepts.

It is my hope that deeper examination of these ideas will ultimately eliminate the inconsistencies that currently exist, and that I or another art therapist can continue to formulate the kind of consistent, powerful theory that a theoretical inquiry is intended to produce. I am aware, too, that the “verification” work of this theory building remains to be done. The original project on which this paper is based (Morrell, 2005) contained an extensive case study in which the process and product of one client’s art therapy treatment were laid out, broken down for syntax and grammar, and traced for changes in fluency amidst primary and secondary processes. However, the true work of verification on a theoretical inquiry such as this would require years of work and collaborations with art and talk therapists in a wide variety of settings.

Suggestions for Future Research

Several disciplines which could contribute to these ideas have, of necessity, been left out of this paper. The expanding field of neurophysiology and its connection to the art therapy process may have much to contribute, particularly if coupled with the current research on language and bilingualism in the brain. I have not addressed the most current thinking in semiotics and structuralism, much of which is a reaction against semiotic analysis from the mid-twentieth century, nor have I included the writings of Derrida or the other deconstructionists, whose work may have an important impact on these thoughts. Further, studying the work of art philosophers differs from studying the words and experiences of artists themselves.

In addition to case studies and practical verification of these ideas, a deeper, more interdisciplinary reading of the literature, with a focus on primary sources and an interdisciplinary exchange of ideas with scholars who are experts in these fields, would seem to be the next logical steps for future research.

tree against a backdrop of snow, and a girl in pajamas floating above her bed and pointing out a window.

Jodi arranged and re-arranged the images several times, then cut them out of their settings and auditioned them in various combinations. She glued the images to a large white piece of paper, combining the wandering child and the tree, and cut them out again. After mounting, the floating girl was separated and glued to a piece of patterned paper, then cut out a third time. The images were arranged with the floating girl pointing to and observing the wandering child with the dead tree between them (see Figure 6).

The therapist asked Jodi to speak about the images (a language switch) and took notes on what she said. Her description focused on the images’ dreamlike qualities, sense of freedom and exploration, and child-like elements. She identified the angled, dead tree and muted colors as adding a surreal element, as though from another planet. She spoke of the floating girl as an observer of the other child’s exploration, as if looking through a “window of memories.” As the recipient, I observed that the characters seemed disconnected and isolated. “Yes,” she replied, “but they’re happy.”

Through the process, Jodi was calm and curious. The meticulous way she cut around the images created a series of borders around the pictures. She auditioned many images to evoke her “dream-like feeling.” Jodi’s product conveys a sense of otherworldliness, isolation and exploration. The images are disconnected from each other and seem reflective of her experience in the residential community. Jodi may have been communicating that although we were seeing “progress” at a therapeutic level, she still felt content to “float” in her child-like way. The use of both code and language switching illustrates the way that Jodi used the art and language to explore and express her internal world.
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