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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 non-verbal 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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Figure 1. Proposed methodology (theoretical inquiry).
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 psychoceramic 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...
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
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 adept at 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
will often select a base language, yet switch spontaneously to the other language for a word or a phrase. There seem to be rules and structures governing these switches, and linguists call this process code switching. Rozenzsky and Gomez (1983) describe a specialized form of code switching called language switching. In contrast with code switching, which happens spontaneously in conversation between bilinguals, language switching occurs at the request or prompting of a therapist. This type of guided code switching may have a therapeutic effect when the therapist understands the emotional, affective, and intellectual implications of a bilingual’s choice of language in therapy. For instance, as early as 1949, Buxbaum observed that her bilingual clients would code switch to their second or subordinate language in order to detach from strong emotions or pain in their sessions (as cited in Marcos & Urcoyo, 1979). Indeed, more recent studies suggest that a bilingual client’s use of a second or subordinate language is correlated with either a decrease in emotional intensity or an increase in resistance (Bond & Lai, 1986; Clauss, 1998).

Because of this, Marcos and Urcoyo (1979) recommend that the second or non-dominant language be used to explore painful or distressing material. The distancing provided by the second language may provide the safety that clients need and make them willing to say things that they would not otherwise consider, sometimes called the “detachment effect” (Rozenzsky & Gomez, 1983; Santiago-Rivera, 2001). In general, the first or primary language will be best for communicating about deep, emotional, primary processes, and the second language will allow a client to distance and employ more of the secondary processes.

**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 regulat-
Parents and caregivers of children with autism often find art therapy to be a beneficial intervention. In this article, we discuss the use of art therapy in the treatment of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). We explore the therapeutic potential of art therapy as a means of enhancing communication, improving social skills, and fostering self-awareness. We also consider the role of art therapy in the education and support of children with ASD.

Art therapy can be a powerful tool for individuals on the autism spectrum, as it provides a platform for self-expression and communication. By engaging in artistic activities, children with ASD can develop a deeper understanding of their own emotions and experiences. This can lead to increased self-awareness and a greater capacity for empathy and connection with others. Furthermore, art therapy can facilitate socialization and communication skills, as children are encouraged to interact with others during their artistic pursuits.

Art therapists working with children with ASD often employ a variety of techniques to support their clients. These may include guided drawing, collage, and puppetry, among others. The choice of techniques is typically based on the individual's interests and abilities, as well as the goals of the therapy session. For example, a guided drawing session might focus on exploring a child's emotional states or developing their fine motor skills. Collage-making can be a particularly effective method, as it allows children to combine different materials to create a unique and personalized piece of art. This can be a powerful way to express complex feelings and ideas.

In conclusion, art therapy has the potential to be a valuable intervention for children with autism spectrum disorder. Through the use of a multimodal approach, art therapists can support their clients in developing important skills and experiences. As the field of art therapy continues to evolve, we can expect to see even more innovative and effective applications of this approach to the treatment of autism spectrum disorder.
Morrell: Art and Language in Art Therapy

ART AND LANGUAGE IN ART THERAPY

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 art 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.

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Figure 7. Actual methodology (modified theoretical inquiry).
REFERENCES


