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Perception Formation and Attitude Towards Art as Therapy

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Abstract



Art therapy, facilitated by a professional art therapist, effectively supports personal and relational treatment goals, as well as community concerns. Art therapy is used to improve cognitive and sensorimotor functions, foster self-esteem and self-awareness, cultivate emotional resilience, promote insight, enhance social skills, reduce and resolve conflicts and distress, and advance societal and ecological change. Perception formation and attitude were indexed on Gestalt's theory. The study sought to elicit more traditional interventions which concerns are not explicit in orthodox forms of offering counselling therapy by therapists to lecturers in the University of Education, Winneba. The study employed qualitative research methods to elicit information from 8 senior counsellors from the University of Education, Winneba. A multiple case

study was adopted to provide sets of contexts used to explore research questions. Discussions in the study provide a rich source of information that counsellors in academia and lecturers can use as anti-stressors. The study demonstrates that Ghanaian society acknowledges the existence of various art forms that is fine art, dance, photography, music, drama, film and other visual and performing arts and their usefulness in offering psychological support. It is recommended that counsellors in academic settings inculcate the practice of using the various art forms as therapy during their counselling sessions and art therapy must be introduced into counselling education and training in Ghana.

Keywords: Art therapy, cognitive, expressive, Gestalt, therapeutic

1. Introduction

The provision of counselling services constitutes an indispensable part of any higher education institution worldwide. This is because counselling is seen as an essential service to ensure a healthy campus climate that promotes teaching, research, and holistic academic work (Kohl et al., 2022). It is worth noting that academic work demands in higher educational institutions put so much pressure on both students and lecturers. For this reason, guidance and counselling services should form an integral part of education. In the view of Stephenson (2013), guidance and counselling services assist students achieve their full potentials. In this regard, counselling practitioners should offer not only counselling services but interventions that meet the psychological, emotional, social, economic, cultural, and spiritual needs of the ever-changing and dynamic academic community. One of these interventions that can be employed by a counselling psychologist and other helping professionals to assist people cope with stress and associated conditions is art therapy.

Art therapy can be defined as a form of therapy in which creating images and objects plays a key role in developing of the therapeutic relationship (Edwards, 2014). According to the American Art Therapy Association (AATA), art therapy is an integrative mental health and human services profession that enriches the lives of individuals, families, and communities through active art-making, creative process, applied psychological theory, and human experience within a psychotherapeutic relationship (AATA, 2017). Like other forms of psychotherapy and counselling, art therapy and its creative process has been known to help individuals gain self-understanding, boost personal growth, guide emotional amends, self-heal, and enhance life.

Vick (2003) described Art therapy as a hybrid discipline based on the fields of art and psychology. In other words, it is an amalgam or fusion of art and psychology. It merges psychological concepts and theory with art making. This means that, it draws on the fields and tools of art and psychology. Thus, it is a form of psychotherapy that uses art media as its primary mode of communication. By description art as therapy, in psychology, is the use of artistic methods to treat psychological disorders and enhance mental health. In the perspective of Vick (2003), it is a psycho-educational therapeutic intervention that focuses on art media as the primary expressive and communicative channels. It draws on the characteristics from each of these fields to evolve a unique new entity.

Avoke and Essel (2017) also indicated that Art therapy is an activity and a process. Art therapy is a form of expressive therapy that uses the creative process of making art to improve children's physical, mental, and emotional well-being (Cohen, 2017). It is a nonverbal therapy constructed from thoughts and feelings. The creative process involved in expressing artistically can help children to resolve issues as well as develop and manage their behaviours and feelings, and improve self-esteem and awareness (Cohen, 2017).

It is worthy of note that several researchers (Bogousslavsky, 2005; Chong, 2015; Kapitan, 2011; Kaplan, 2001; Seeley & Kozbelt, 2008; McNamee 2003, 2004, 2005; Preston, 2019; Slayton, D'Archer & Kaplan, 2010; Slayton, 2012; Tønnesvang, Sommer, Hammink, & Sonne, 2010; Ziadet 2005) cited the use and patronage of art therapy in the developed and developing countries of Europe, Asia, Canada, the USA, the UK, and Germany. These studies have provided evidence of its efficacy as a counselling technique and intervention. However, not much research has been conducted in Africa, particularly in Ghana to explore the use of art as therapy in counselling. The gap is that the use of art as therapy in counselling in Ghana has not been well documented through literature (Pyne, Osei & Adu-Agyem, 2013). This gap, together with our professional orientation as artist and a counselling psychologist, has spurred the interest in researching into art as therapy. Several questions plagued our thoughts which are critical in the foundations of this research. Predominant amongst these are; what accounts for counsellors' preference and non-preference for art therapy as an intervention? In this regard, the study sought to address two critical questions relating to Counselling Psychology and Art. 1. What is the perception of a counsellor about the various forms of art as therapy? 2. How are the various forms of art as therapy employed by counsellors? In addressing these questions, this paper provides a theoretical framework that underpins the study, provides the methodology, discusses the findings and makes recommendations for implementation and improvement. The

literature is embedded in the discourse throughout the report.

2. Theoretical Framework

This research is premised on a theoretical approach Gestalt art therapy which provide an understanding on counsellors' perceptions of the effectiveness and implementation of art therapy with individuals and many different groups.

Gestalt Therapy

The word “gestalt” means “whole”. Gestalt therapy is an experimental approach that emerges in reaction to psychoanalysis. Other names given to it include concentration therapy, integrative therapy and existential therapy (Brownell, 2010, 2015, 2016). It was developed by Fritz Perls (1893-1970) as a psychotherapeutic approach with present-moment experiences, existential meaning, interpersonal relationships, and holistic integration (Corey, 2012; Eford, 2015). This therapy refers to the whole or configuration which is greater than its sum of parts. There is no separation of mind and body in Gestalt therapy, but instead, a whole organism—a disturbance in any given component of biopsychosocial and spiritual functioning hinders the whole (Brownell, 2010, 2016, 2019). Therefore, unexpressed emotion, disowned aspects of self, and/or fusion to cognition, among other maladaptive psychological functioning, constrict authentic contact with the field (for example, environment)—what many Gestalt therapists refer to as the life-force of an individual (Brownell, 2016, 2019). It is a humanistic approach and an integrative, process-experiential modality to psychotherapy geared toward ameliorating an individual's intrapersonal and interpersonal contact with self, others, community, environment, and spirituality (Brownell, 2015, 2016, 2019; Posnick & Woldt, 2014).

Gestalt therapy is integrative, strength-based, growth-oriented modus to psychotherapy postulating psychological illness and health are inseparably related with a human organisms' contact—getting in touch—or interruption of contact with self, others, the environment, and the spiritual field (Prosnick & Woldt, 2014). It is a distinctive and potent form of process experiential therapy focused on what-and-how (instead of why) an organism does in the here-and-now (instead of the there-and-then) with discernible awareness of I-and-Thou (instead of I and-it) dialogue (Brownell, 2018).

This approach aims to encourage and insist on responsibility, honest, direct and authentic communication between the client/person and therapist. The goal of Gestalt therapy is to empower people to transform their lives, meet their needs, and embrace ecological interdependence via the phenomenological process of

awareness that is a-ware-ness (Rosenthal, 2008). Gestalt therapies encourage active participation and enactment by the individual, believing that through sensory-motor activation, there is recognition and clarification of problems (Brown, 2007; Malchiodi, 2003; Yontef & Jacobs, 2008). In other words, it is to encourage active participation and enactment by the individual in dealing with a problem. In art therapy, one does not need to have artistic ability or special talent. Gestalt's art therapy concept believes that the expression of art is therapeutic because it allows people to know themselves as a whole in a short time. In a nutshell, this approach focuses on the here and now principle. The Gestalt theory posits that the more we work at becoming who or what we are not, the more we remain the same. A basic assumption of Gestalt therapy is that individuals can self-regulate when they are aware of what is happening in and around them. Therapy provides the setting and opportunity for that awareness to be supported and restored. If the therapist can stay with the client's present experience and trust in the process, the client will move toward increased awareness, contact, and integration (Brown, Gorman & Hynan, 2007).

3. Methodology

Phenomenological design was employed for this research. A phenomenological study is a study that attempts to understand people's perceptions, perspectives, and understandings of a particular situation. The population for the study comprised twenty (20) counsellors from three (3) departments at the University of Education, Winneba. Namely Department of Counselling Psychology, Department of Art Education and Department of Health, Physical. Education, Recreation and Sports. A total of eight (8) counsellors were purposively sampled for the study. Silverman (2011) corroborated that a sample of 6-15 may be sufficient to enable development of meaningful themes and useful interpretations especially for studies with a high level of homogeneity among the populations.

The data collected in this study were mainly soft data from interviews and the research diary. These were all analyzed in different ways and for different purposes. As Coffey and Atkinson (1997) explained, in analyzing narratives, care must be taken not to merely report what the study shows but also to construct accounts of what one encounters in the interview, text and interaction. The analysis of the narratives in this study was the task of interpretation involving continual reflection about the data (Baumann, 1997). Riessmann (1993) emphasized that narrative analysis systematically and interprets how people construct meaning around events and of themselves. As such, our kind of analysis and interpretation of the

narratives was done from the perspective of the participants - paying particular attention to the context, use of language and gestures.

Data analysis included preparing the data for analysis, conducting different analyses, moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data, representing the data, and making interpretation of the larger meaning of the data (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). The qualitative (interview and observation) data was analysed using thematic and content analysis procedure. Thematic analysis is the process of identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Byrne, 2022; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lochmiller, 2021).

The goal of thematic analysis is to identify themes, thus, patterns in the data that are important or interesting, and use these themes to address the research or say something about an issue. Creswell and Creswell (2018) recommend a five-step approach to Data Analysis. These steps are 1) Organisation and preparation of the data for analysis; 2) reading all the data; 3) start coding all of the data; 4) generating themes and descriptions; and 5) representing the description and themes.

This study employed face-to-face interviews and field notes for data collection. A semi-structured interview guide was used to collect the qualitative data. All these were complemented with field notes. It was used to explore counsellors' perceptions of art forms as therapy and their effectiveness. The semi-structured interview guide covered the following themes: a) Perceptions about art forms as therapy, b) Art therapies as interventions for the management clients' conditions.

4. Discussion of Findings

This part of the study was about the interpretation of the qualitative data. This was done based on the codes generated with MAXQDA software version 2020. The codes were arranged according to the various qualitative questions formulated for the study as shown in the table below:

Table 1: Generated codes

S/N	Theme	Subtheme
1	Perceptions about Art Therapy	Value/Importance of Art Therapy
2	Forms of Art Therapy	The Eclectic Nature of Art therapy Music Photography/Painting Theatre/Drama

4.1 Findings

Research Question 1: *What is the perception of a counsellor about the various forms of art as therapy?*

The aim of the question was to explore from counsellors their perceptions regarding art being used as a therapeutic strategy in counselling. The question possessed sub-divisions in terms of their understanding of art as a therapy, how helpful the use of art as a therapy could be applied in intervention and the specific aspects of art that are used in therapeutic situations.

Based on the main objective of the study, the study revealed that various art forms were of value and importance. It was revealed that during therapy, clients were eased down or looked relaxed when an aspect of art was brought into the treatment. If the clients were comfortable, they showed responses which lead to positive outcomes. When inquiring about their perceptions on art therapy, participants replied that its effectiveness is in its allowance to be creative and make mistakes without repercussions, gives the client control over the outcome, the bonding between the client and therapist through art, and use of expression through non-verbal activities. Following are some responses from the interview generated from the participants:

Yes, I have eem! For me I think art is not only eem! Having aesthetic values, it has hidden values and eerh! in Psychology that is what we do, we heal people not of physical wounds etcetera but psychologically we heal them of trauma, views a lot of things that affect their psychological wellbeing so I believe eem! Art comes with what... hidden values or therapeutic values and so it's not only aesthetic ones so I have quite some experiences with using eerh! Certain art forms as part of my therapy" (Interview data, participant # 2).

Another participant had this to say:

Oh yes! I have heard about it that some counsellors use art in assisting their client to develop new behaviours, yes, I have heard about it (Interview data, participant # 5).

Other participants gave their opinion about the question:

I'm trying to believe it in as much as it is one of the social scientist areas that we use under normal circumstances to get people out of depression, stress, it's possible that we can include aspect of it in counselling sessions or therapy sessions so that we can get the best out of whatever therapy we engage ourselves in (Interview data, participant # 8).

For music, music on its own has its own connotations. There is music that will evoke negative emotions and when negative emotions occur unpleasant once the feeling are there, remember emotions are not predictable if there is something like a stimuli music is a stimulus that promote the emotions there is no way the person would not react (Interview data, participant # 7).

It's about using art forms or art works to facilitate healing process with your client (Interview data, participant # 1).

Not really because it a whole field on its own and you need to be specialized, have some formal training before you can use as any other technique or any other treatment model you should have a training in it so you will be able to use it (Interview data, participant # 5).

I feel art can play a role in helping counsellors. We should add it to the list of therapies we have and move a little bit away from the psychotherapy that we have been using as the main thing all this while, in other words we need a platform so we can use it as a form of healing (Interview data, participant # 3).

Research Question Two: *How are the various forms of art as a therapy employed by counsellors?*

The question sought to unravel the understanding of the forms of art that were used by counsellors in their practice.

From the study, it was evidenced that, participants mostly used music, photography, painting, theatre and drama. This was premised on some theories and interventions. Others using Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT), Rational Emotive Behaviour

Therapy (REBT), Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) and Gestalt theories and the relaxation and grounding exercises used concluded they used music, dance, drama, theatre, painting and photography to assisted client during interventions and treatment.

In discussing types of interventions with all eight therapists, they reported that they use an array of skills, materials, and intervention techniques including expressive art, dance/movement, clay/sculpture, and poetry/story telling. However, many stated that there are no specific techniques that works above the rest. They discussed that, it is dependent on the client and their symptoms, behaviours, ambivalence, like, dislikes, and commitment to therapy. In essence, it is dependent on where the client is at. These are some citations from participants;

Ok, most of it or all of it has been used as part of a therapeutic tool. Not art therapy as a form or as a distinct form of therapy on its own so possibly if you are using eerh! CBT a cognitive behaviour therapy at a behavioural session, you are going to do a relaxation training etcetera and, in the relaxation training, it comes with what solemn music so usually its part of the... the therapies that I use not as a distinct therapy on its own yea.

Well, for what I know it is not a borrowed intervention, usually for a relaxation training to be very effective it has to do with music, yes solemn music, because I remember even from our training usually you would have to use music just that sometimes the setting in which we work do not allow for us to, you know eerh! actively use and explore that because you are in a therapy room maybe in a hospital setting, interim setting and you know you don't use the room alone, or there people who are in the same floor with you and so even if you are playing music there is so much noise to distract you but then we use it, it's not an afterthought so it actually embedded in the relaxation training. Yea

Yea, I quiet remember I used one music titled "OBRA" by Nana Ampadu which talks about life issues in general so there was this client who was in despair so I played that song and we used the words in the song for discussion and at the end she felt ok. (Interview data, participant# 4)

4.2 Discussion

The findings publicize the use of art therapy by professionals affirming claims by Kaimal (2019) that art therapy is applied in multidisciplinary trauma-focused day treatment. The use of art as a therapy is valued by the counsellors. It provides individuals with an opportunity to communicate and explore their thoughts, feelings, and experiences, especially when verbal expression is challenging. The use of art therapy is an eclectic; to providing assistance to clients who visit or seek counselling when a single approach is ineffective, which is in congruence with the position by Rosen (2017) that arts therapy is a diverse assortment of sub-specialty experiential therapies that cross a wide variety of artistic disciplines. It provides individuals with an opportunity to communicate and explores their thoughts, feelings, and experiences, especially when verbal expression is challenging (Arasaratnam-Smith & Northcote, 2017).

Counsellors use various art forms as therapeutic. The lyrics of a song enhance interaction between and among individuals in circumstances where they might not be able to vocalize their opinions. Alluding to claims made by Corey (2017), Howie (2017) and Moon (2017), music is a means of communication when individuals are overwhelmed by their circumstances. Using music allows a third part to disambiguate a speech and acquire actual meaning for free flow of communication (Leman, 2010).

Use of photography drawings and paintings aid an imagination and envisaging, an experience which provides clients with the opportunity to the beauty of life while they focus on and unveil subsumed emotions. In alliance with postulations by Betts and Groth-Marnat (2014), Campbell et al. (2016), Dilawari and Tripathi (2014) as well as Secker et al. (2017), feelings and emotions, thoughts, and experiences are depicted through the visual stimuli in a created work of art. Counsellors and therapists are able to deduce meanings from non-vocal expressions through photography and provide their clients with the needed assistance. Clients who have challenges verbalizing their experiences, due to the emotion associated with a piece of information, mostly make use of creative arts (photographs, drawings, sculptures, or paintings) in their communication. Supporting this argument, Akrim and Adhani (2021), Guy and Rogers (2022), and Zolyomi et al. (2019) identify photography as an alternative form of communication for sensitive emotional issues, thereby declining in anxiety.

Through performances, either drama or role play can be used in art therapy (Landy et al., 2012). A depressed client may express humour when exposed to

some expressive writings which may constitute a poetry or comic expressions (Stepakoff, 2009). Individuals who are depressed or express cognitive distortions have trouble expressing positive emotions.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, the results determined that art therapy is effective with various ages and diagnoses. The study demonstrates that Ghanaian society acknowledge the existence of various art forms that is fine art, dance, photography, music, drama, film and other visual and performing arts and their usefulness in offering psychological support. Furthermore, art therapy's effectiveness is not based on a single factor; rather, the effectiveness is defined by the work of the therapist in its implementation, by the client's response to this form of therapy, and by the clients obtaining the desired results. In other words, therapists need to build a relationship with their clients and determine whether art is appropriate or what intervention to use, not to focus on one specific theoretical orientation, and to have fun with the process.

6. Recommendations

This study has valuable recommendations for future researchers and art therapist in terms of understanding and utilizing art therapy. The first recommendation is the creation of art therapy class at the graduate level for counselling psychology students that will assist them understand and apply art therapy within their own practice. Counselling psychology students rarely have the exposure required to understand the usefulness and beneficial factors that art therapy can have on many different populations, not only children. Art therapy must be inculcated into the training of counsellors in Ghana.

The second recommendation from this study for future researchers is to utilize what art therapists find effective within their own practice and create an intervention strategy that combines their different techniques and theoretical orientations. Future researcher can use this study as what aspects of art therapy are effective, according to the therapist, and have a plan how to implement what works with clients and what does not.

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