



Research article

Toward a social critical, analytical prism in art therapy: The example of marginalized Bedouin women's images



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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines a typology of visual analytical prisms based on social critical theories. Four compositional art analysis paradigms are presented. These include (a) two descriptive analytical prism-compositional analyses of spatial division for resources in the system, (b) compositional analyses of the reciprocal relationship between figure and background, or micro and macro levels of experience, and two transformative analytical prisms, (c) using compositional mechanisms as a way to self-define content for marginalized and silenced groups, and (d) using visual language to shift static social stands and negotiate multiple perspectives. Each of these analytical prisms is explained and illustrated using images created by Bedouin women in Israel, who are an Indigenous group experiencing marginalization. Implications for including a typology and methodology for using social theories to analyze art in art therapy are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Rose (1988) has used the term visualizations to describe how different discourses visualize, or analyse, images through different theoretical prisms thereby creating multiple understandings of the same image. Three predominant 'visualizations' of art in Western culture are considered (Rose, 1988). The first visualization is that of art history, which presents the compositional and content level of images as a closed aesthetic system disconnected from the social context within which it was created. The second visualization is based on dynamic projective theories where the compositional, and/or content level of art, is understood to express regressive elements connected to fantasy desire, and conflict. Dynamic and Phenomenological Art therapy, engages both of these art analytical forms. Rose's third visualization is a social analysis, proposing that art always expresses a socially constructed position created within and in reaction to a specific power, culture, and socio-geographic context. The aim of this social art analysis is not to penetrate into the projected meaning or aesthetic language of the art, but to understand the social discourses from which it stems, to which it reacts, and to whom it presents (Rose, 1988).

This perspective is dominant within visual culture, arts-based research (Eisner, 1997), and in socially oriented therapy literature (Hogan, 2003; Kaplan, 2006; Kalmanovitz & Loyed, 2005;

Liebmann, 1996a, 1996b; Levine & Levine, 2011; Liebmann, 2003; Savneet, 2003). However, a social model is less predominant within art therapy theory, which tends to utilize phenomenological and dynamic projective methods of visualizing art, even when working within high context systemic and socio-cultural contexts and socially marginalized clients. This may be because art therapy is already maneuvering a complicated relationship between psychological and art theories, aiming to gain entry into the psychological canon. Another problem for art therapy social analyses is that arts-based research and visual culture visualize the social meanings of images but are less concerned with a more exacting compositional analysis, which can be used to transform rather than simply describe the social reality impact on the individual and vice versa. However, so many art therapy clients are sent to art therapy because of cultural difficulties with language, and as such, are living in high context social realities with systemic problems. From this, it would seem worthwhile to attempt to create a more rigorous compositional analysis of art based in social theories. The aim of this paper is to create a model for analyzing the visual compositional mechanisms of art through a social analytical prism.

This typology will reveal that the visual arts have inherent compositional elements that adhere to basic principles of social theories: Firstly, images enable a dialogic space to construct one's theory of what is the subject and what is the background, or to give voice to silenced personal experience through compositional elements. Secondly, this experience is contextualized within a social reality, because images reveal the power relations within the social

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system by mapping out the spatial resources within the system. Finally, images enable the personal experience and social context, or the micro and macro levels, to interact because images are composed of the reciprocal relationship between figure and background. These three levels are descriptive and diagnostic of how the individual experiences his social context, and how the social context constructs the experience of the individual. Art-making is also transformative, in that the compositional shifts of cultural visual symbols enable the construction of new meanings, creating change in homeostatic systems. Images are a broad hermeneutic space in which multiple meanings can be negotiated and new perspectives can be found, thus shifting social meanings. Finally, images enable the expression of conflicts and contents that challenge the systems in non-violent, indirect means. The aim of this paper is theoretical: to demonstrate these six mechanisms, using a set of examples of a group of high context, impoverished, marginalized, indigenous Bedouin women in Israel. The above mechanism typology will be illustrated with examples from an impoverished Bedouin women's welfare group.

The question of this paper, is how to turn the above theoretical stand into a method to analyze art works in art therapy.

This paper will demonstrate a methodology for analyzing images in art therapy, based on social theories. It has created a typology of the following analytical prisms.

- a) Compositional analyses of spatial division of the page, as showing resource division within the system
- b) Compositional analyses of the relationship between figure and background on the page, as showing the individual experience of social context, or the connection between micro and macro levels of experience

These two analytical prisms help to analyze the images in terms of their relationship to social resources and the experience of social context:

- c) The page as a space in which silenced groups can self-define their understanding of the division of resources and social context.

This analytical prism shows how the act of making compositional decisions on a page becomes a space within which to self-define the above for processed and marginalized groups. This understands art-making as a space to self-define not only internal subjective experience, but also to express understandings of social reality (items a and b).

- d) Using visual language to shift static social stands and to negotiate multiple perspectives

This analytical prism moves beyond describing a social reality, to using a symbol's broad hermeneutic base as a space for multiple interpretations of social reality, which can in turn transform understandings of that reality. This enables the integration of multiple symbol understandings, and the creation of new perspectives on issues based on new reality compositional organizations.

Each of these five analytical parameters will be illustrated using images from a case study of Bedouin women in Israel, a group which is consistently subject to social exclusion.

2. Literature survey

2.1. Social theories

Compared to psychological theories that assume that the problem is within the individual psyche, social theories assume that the

problem is situated within the social systems that surround the individual, such as the ecological circles of family, community and state, or global systems of power (Minuchin, 1975; Gladding, 2002; Patterson, Williams, Edwards, Rauf-Grounds, & Chamow, 2009; Piercy, Sprenkle, & Wetchler, 1996). According to systemic theories, problems are defined in relation to the role taken within a social system. Some marginalized roles or positions create a lack of physical, symbolic, social, or other types of resources for solving problems. The solution is to shift the roles within the system and thus to re-distribute resources. The focus of intervention is thus: that the system is a complex organism of interacting parts. For example, if a child acts out in school in order to keep his parents from focusing on their own problems and subsequently divorcing, it won't help to work with him individually, without understanding the role his behavior plays in maintaining his family system. Conversely, a shift in his role will create shifts in the system as a whole. Systems wish to remain homeostatic, as this creates clarity, though external factors, such as moving country, death, birth, and internal events like personal development, demand overall shifts in the system to incorporate these inevitable internal and external changes. Roles in systems are often complimentary (i.e. victim and aggressor, coalitions, and leader-follower) and are often learnt roles from culture and family of origin (Gladding, 2002; Patterson et al., 2009; Piercy et al., 1996). As a spatial system of interacting elements, art can show how a system organizes itself; as a phenomenological or expressive medium, it shows how the artist experiences the system as a symbolic medium, and shows the organizing metaphors and beliefs of a system. Art-making enables marginalized members of the system a safe symbolic space to express how they, as subjects, experience the system within which they live (Arlington et al., 1995; Fury, Carlson, & Sroufe, 1997; Jordan, 2001; Kwiatkowska, 1978; Kimmisses & Khanna, 1992; Landgarten, 2013; Linsech, 2013; Riley & Malchiody, 1994; Machioli, 1996).

Marginalization stems from social and economic policies that create systematic discrimination and deprivation based on race, ethnicity, religion, or gender; and exacerbated by processes of immigration, war, and political instability, as well as general social disorganization and conflicting values within the social system (Foucault, 2005). Black and third world feminist theories define power, or lack thereof, as occurring along different interactive parameters. For example, a woman can be marginalized on the level of gender, culture, and ethnicity, and these different types of marginalization will all interact within a specific socio-cultural reality at a given time in her life (hooks, 1992; Savneet, 2003). The theory of empowerment assumes that all relationships are power infused, and that the ecological layers that comprise the socio-cultural context of the client's reality can include different types of disempowerment and marginalization such as a racial, gendered, or ethnic lack of power. These forms of marginalization create personal pain; thus, the political is always personal. Power is understood as a dynamic and relative construct that is at the base of all social interactions, which shapes personal experience. Empowerment intervention will aim to increase the client's experiences and social levels of power.

Social critical theories such as Foucault's conceptions of power aim to resist global and neo-capitalist social organization which keeps power among a privileged few. While psychology will aim to adjust people to oppressive realities, a critical social stand will aim to adjust the reality so that people are not oppressed and don't develop the symptoms of oppression, discrimination, and marginalization. These are often medicalized, and defined as internal, though they often emerge from an abuse of power by one person or group over another (Bronner, 2011; Foucault, 2000; Jameson, 1991). Social change, in continuation of the former systemic and empowerment theories, claims that if the problem lies in an oppressive society rather than in the individual, the solution

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