



Research article

Clients' experiences of the impacts of an experiential art therapy group

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to explore the impacts that clients experience after participating in experiential art therapy groups and to describe which processes affect these experiences. The research question was: How do clients describe the impacts of their participation in an art therapy group? The data was gathered in two phases. The first narrative material consisted of the retrospective writings of participants (n = 68) from 12 different art therapy groups. In the systematic qualitative content analysis of the narrative data, 12 main themes of impacts described by clients were identified.

In the second round of data acquisition, the trustworthiness of the content analysis was tested by conducting a survey of the groups' participants. A self-report questionnaire with structured and open-ended items was developed based on the main impact themes. The response rate for the questionnaire was 63.75% (n = 51). Of the respondents, 98% felt that art therapy had a positive impact on their psychological health, 82% recognised positive effects on their social relationships, and 67% noted such effects on their physical health. Finally, triangulation of the content analysis with the survey enabled the comparison and synthesis of the results into an overview of the impacts experienced and the processes mediating them.

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1. Introduction

Considering that numerous outcome studies comparing different forms of psychotherapy have found no differences in efficacy between the forms, a base assumption is that art therapy will prove to be at least as effective as other therapies (Wampold, 2013). However, psychotherapies do not only aim at symptom reduction but also have other important aims, such as changes in personality structure, emotional skills and social interaction, improved coping skills or increased self-reflection. Each approach has built distinct theories of how these impacts can be achieved and which special mechanisms work in practice. Furthermore, even if the outcomes on the symptom level are similar, research indicates that there is variety in clients' experiences of special working mechanisms and qualitative outcomes and that this is connected with particular psychotherapeutic theories and their practical application (Nilsson, Svensson, Sandell, & Clinton, 2007). However, these

differences seem to be participant and context-specific, because different clients can experience the same aspects as either positive or negative (Levitt, Butler, & Hill, 2006; Nilsson et al., 2007). Thus, instead of only focusing on symptomatic outcomes, it is equally important to focus on analysing those mechanisms that are particular to art therapy and on understanding their specific qualitative impacts on clients. This will help us to understand the kinds of process and impacts in art therapy that are crucial from the clients' point of view.

It is difficult to explicitly define which the art therapeutic working mechanisms are, or which elements of the art therapy process affect the outcome. Similarly, in process research on verbal psychotherapies, the experience of the therapy process and its outcomes are often viewed as inseparable (McLeod, 2011; Stiles et al., 1990; Wampold, 2013). However, even if the therapeutic process and its impacts are intertwined, it is important to make explicit whether the perspective on the impacting processes is based on the therapists' or clients' experiences, because clients' views have been shown in many cases to be better predictors of outcome than therapists' views (Castonguay, 2013; Horvath and Symonds, 1991; Martin, Garske, & Davis, 2000; Weinberger and Rasco, 2007).

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Clients' experiences of the psychotherapy process have been researched for more than 60 years (Elliot, 2008). This has proved important for understanding how the therapeutic process mediates changes and affects outcomes. Researchers in the field of verbal psychotherapy already have a general understanding of those processes which clients find helpful or hindering (Nilsson et al., 2007; Levitt et al., 2006). Clients feel that the therapeutic relationship, the therapist's attention, empathy or validation and the specific problem-solving techniques, which the therapist offers, aid the therapeutic impacts (Elliot, 2008; Nilsson et al., 2007). Clients also consider the therapist's professionalism and expertise in providing structure and enabling them to face up to painful emotions or to encounter unpleasant things are important (Levitt et al., 2006; Nilsson et al., 2007). In contrast, experiences of therapists being judgemental, invalidating, or imposing their views on clients are felt to hinder the therapeutic process (Elliot, 2008). In addition, an inability to negotiate therapeutic tasks, unsolved problems in the therapeutic relationship and either a too-close involvement or a too-objectifying and distant attitude on the part of the therapist prevent successful therapeutic work (Nilsson et al., 2007; Levitt et al., 2006).

1.1. Overview of clients' experiences of helpful and hindering processes in art therapy

In the field of art therapy, there are only few previous studies focusing on exploring the experienced processes and impacts of art therapy from the clients' viewpoint (Uttley et al., 2015). Those processes which are felt to build the effect of art therapy have mostly been researched from the therapists' perspective, but studies and practice-based reports focusing on clients' experiences also exist (Hanevik, Hestad, Lien, Stubbe Teglbjaerg, & Danbolt, 2013; Morgan, Knight, Bagwash, & Thompson, 2012; Shechtman and Perl-dekel, 2000; Springham, Findlay, Woods, & Harris, 2012; Stubbe Teglbjaerg, 2009). Some studies have focused on the experiences of special diagnostic groups and on the effects of art therapy on patients suffering from particular psychiatric diagnoses such as depression, psychotic problems or borderline personality disorder (Brooker et al., 2006; Hanevik et al., 2013; Rankanen, in press; Rankanen, 2011; Springham et al., 2012; Stubbe Teglbjaerg, 2009). Interestingly, many studies have also focused on somatic clients' – especially cancer patients' – experiences (Uttley et al., 2015; Wood, Low, Molassiotis, & Tookman, 2013; Öster, 2007). Others have aimed to discover the impacting processes that are specific to art therapy by focusing on the experiences of a more general or diagnostically unspecified population (Rananen, 2014; Shechtman and Perl-dekel, 2000). Studies exploring professional or amateur artists' experiences of therapeutic processes in art-making (Reynolds, 2000, 2010; Reynolds and Lim, 2007; Reynolds, Lim, & Prior, 2008) were conducted in recreational, educational, artistic or hobby settings rather than art therapy contexts. However, the participants in these studies suffered from somatic or psychic chronic illnesses, so the studies can be categorised as exploring the impacts experienced of art as therapy.

Previous studies present little support for such symptom-specific art therapeutic processes, which in clients' experiences would affect only certain diagnoses and prove unimportant for others. A recent qualitative review examining non-psychotic patients' views regarding the helpful, potentially harmful and neutral effects of art therapy identified many beneficial effects: Increasing understanding of oneself or one's own illness (6/10 of the reviewed studies), providing freedom for expression (6/10 studies), establishing a relationship with a therapist or group (6/10 studies), promoting future thinking (5/10 studies), facilitating personal achievement and pleasure (5/10 studies), facilitating empowerment (4/10 studies), enabling relaxation (4/10 studies), enabling

distraction from pain or illness (3/10 studies) and providing perspective (2/10 studies) (Uttley et al., 2015). Of these results, only distraction was connected with a specific client group suffering from cancer, with the others appearing across diagnoses. Symptom-specific outcomes were thus not primary for clients. These results are consistent with clients' descriptions of the important verbal psychotherapy outcomes, where they do not mention symptom reduction but instead stress the significance of qualitative personal changes such as better self-confidence, improved ability to cope with difficult situations, changes in relationships with others, and increased understanding of and caring for self and others (Levitt et al., 2006; Nilsson et al., 2007). When looking for art therapy clients' less favourable experiences, superficiality, childishness, fear of being bad at art-making and feeling flawed are mentioned, as well as fear of interpersonal misinterpretation or judgemental attitudes (Brooker et al., 2006; Rankanen, 2014; Springham et al., 2012; Uttley et al., 2015). In addition, negative experiences of the therapist being unable to make contact with a client's unbearable emotions or anxiety have been described by some (Woods and Springham, 2011; Uttley et al., 2015).

In spite of the assumed similarities in symptomatic outcomes between psychotherapy and art therapy, experiences of the art therapy process may differ qualitatively from solely verbal therapies and include special working mechanisms which are only connected with artistic interaction and its impacts. Artistic interaction multiplies the dyadic therapeutic relationship into a triangular relationship, and if art therapy is conducted in a group, this adds even more layers of interaction to the process (Karkou & Sanderson, 2006, 64–67). When the art therapy process and those mechanisms that mediate its outcome are viewed from the clients' perspective, we need to consider multiple different effecting ingredients and their interaction. The clients' interactive relationship with their art, group and therapist all affect their experiences and the impacts of the art therapy process.

2. Research setting

The empirical study focused on analysing participants' experiences of the experiential art therapy groups and aimed to understand which aspects of the process affect the outcomes experienced. It triangulated data to answer the research question: How do clients describe the impact of their participation in an art therapy group? The research question was approached in two phases. First, 68 experiential art therapy group participants' retrospective narratives of their therapy experiences were inductively analysed applying the method of systematic qualitative content analysis to identify the central themes of the impacts described by the clients (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008; Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). Next, a self-report questionnaire was developed based on these results to test the trustworthiness of the analysis. A web-based survey was conducted to collect anonymous quantitative and qualitative data from the participants (n = 51). The aim was to understand more deeply and reliably the impacts participants experienced by triangulating the data acquisition and research methods using both content analysis of participants' retrospective narratives and the self-report questionnaire (Hill, Chui, & Baumann, 2013). The self-report questionnaire also worked as a long-term follow-up survey of the art therapy impacts experienced (Uttley et al., 2015).

2.1. Data collection

Both the narratives and the survey data were collected retrospectively from people who had participated in 12 different year-long experiential art therapy groups during the period 2003–2009. These groups were open to anyone, and 12 participants

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