The Arts in Psychotherapy 38 (2011) 86–95

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

The Arts in Psychotherapy

Art therapy in the postmodern world: Findings from a comparative study across the UK, Russia and Latvia

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Art therapy
Comparative study
Postmodernism
Cultural differences
Work environments
Client groups
Therapeutic trends

ABSTRACT

This is a comparative study of the development of art therapy in the UK, Russia and Latvia. The study is triggered by the belief that important learning can take place from fostering shared understanding and respecting differences across practices within a postmodern world that bears the danger of fragmentation and the loss of professional identity. Following a discussion of key postmodern ideas within art and arts therapies and historical references to the development of art therapy in the three countries studied, this paper provides an opportunity for empirically-based comparisons of practice. In particular, a questionnaire, originally developed by Karkou (1998), was disseminated to all practicing art therapists in the UK, Russian and Latvian specialists using art and art therapy methods, Russian graduates and Latvian students of the first training program in art therapy (Nazarova, 2008; Martinsone, 2009). Collected information relating to work environments, client groups and therapeutic trends were statistically analyzed in order to identify differences across countries. Mutual interactions and 'cultural borrowing' were also found and discussed primarily with regard to therapeutic trends. Despite methodological limitations, the study opens the way for future collaborations on the basis of informed understanding of art therapy practices across countries.

Introduction

Collaborations between arts therapists in Europe are growing as evidenced for example, by conferences organized by the European Consortium for Arts Therapies Education (ECArTE), the development of European Associations (e.g. in Music Therapy and Dance Movement Therapy) and joint training and research programs across Europe. However, different historical, political and legislative traditions often lead to diverse practices and limited harmonization across European countries. This is further intensified by the fact that not all European countries fall within the European Union. Russia, for example, does not form part of the European Union. Although such diversity creates a rich tapestry of practices in arts therapies for instance, it may also limit parity of qualifications, can create confusion, and may hinder informed collaborations across countries.

Furthermore, globalization forces regional economies, societies and cultures to become actively linked with globe-wide networks of communication and engage with trans-national circulation of ideas. This, along with shifts in public healthcare towards valuing multidisciplinary practice, lead to calls for clear definitions of disciplines and thus, clear professional positioning (Berridge, 2007; Cameron, 2009; Harre & van Lagenhove, 1999). Similarly, within a diverse, fragmented and clearly postmodern European context, it becomes apparent that personal and professional identities need to be defined and professions need to find ways in which further collaborations and collaborations with increased confidence can be supported.

Regarding arts therapies, it has been argued elsewhere (Karkou, 1998; Karkou & Sanderson, 2006) that aspects of practice such as working environments and client groups are in a close relationship with the therapeutic approaches followed by practitioners. In turn, by adopting a particular therapeutic approach, arts therapists are called to modify their theory and methods to reflect the culture of the working environment, the language shared by colleagues working in the specific setting, the needs of often diverse client groups and the goals/objectives set for each client by the multidisciplinary team. Harre and van Lagenhove (1999) argue for the value of dialogue and reflective awareness, while Martinsone

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0197-4556/$ – see front matter.
doi:10.1016/j.aip.2010.12.005

(2009) makes active links between these ideas and arts therapies, and highlights their importance for contemporary practice. The need to modify existing practices and to be able to be adaptable becomes even more imperative within European societies that (i) support mobility of practitioners through programs from the European Union such as TEMPUS and ERASMUS (ii) become themselves more mobile, diverse and at times appear in flux.

The particular study presented here aims to delineate overall tendencies and distinctive practices through a comparative research methodology. It is motivated by a desire to develop shared understanding and best practice in training and employment. The need for this is also apparent in relevant published literature in art therapy (e.g. Bonnin & Miller, 2007; Gonzalez-Dolginko, 2000; Orkibi, 2010). Shared understanding becomes essential within a postmodern discourse (e.g. Alter-Muri, 1998; Byrne, 1995; Kapitan & Newhouse, 2000), as do arguments for integration within multiple contexts (see for example similar arguments put forward by Huss (2009)). In particular, the authors of this paper see the study as addressing a need for students and qualified arts therapists to locate clearly within a range of placement and working environments, to offer concise information to potential placement providers and employers, and to create a solid ground for the development of an effective cooperation between training program, student placements, professionals and employers within a particular country, but also across Europe.

In the first instance, this study makes comparisons across three countries: the UK, Latvia and Russia. In these three countries different developments of the discipline of art therapy are apparent. For example, art therapy has had a relatively long history in the UK, while in Latvia it has only recently been recognized. In Russia the recognition of art therapy as a separate profession is still pending.

This study is based on a nation-wide survey of registered arts therapists practicing in the UK that was completed by Karkou (1998) and later replicated in Russia (Nazarova, 2007, 2008) and Latvia (Martinsone & Karkou, 2009). In this paper, literature relating to postmodernism in art and art therapy, the history of art therapy in the particular countries studied and cultural differences are searched through databases such as ScienceDirect, PsychInfo, MedLine and through grey literature. Comparisons across these countries regarding three key aspects are presented and discussed: working environments, client groups and therapeutic trends. We decided to focus on these three aspects as a way of throwing light at both the contexts within which art therapists work, as well as the types of work that take place within these contexts. Limitations of the data collected will be acknowledged and future studies will be suggested.

Literature review

The wider context: postmodern notions in the arts and arts therapies

Historically, the emergence of art therapy has been closely linked with developments in art and modern art in particular. For example, experimentation with materials and new ways of seeing, spontaneous artistic expression, automatic writing and art making were important features of the turn of the 20th century that enabled the emergence of arts therapies as a new profession (Karkou & Glasman, 2004; Karkou & Sanderson, 2006; Waller, 1991).

In the second half of the 20th century, global changes supported by the booming of information technology formed the basis for further paradigmatic shifts in culture, science, education and society in general, and have had an impact upon the arts (Kocur & Leung, 2005) and arts therapies practice (Kopytin, 2001; Martinsone, Mihailova, Mihailovs, Majore-Dusele, & Paipere, 2008; Marxen, 2008). Jameson (1991) argues that postmodernism is a feature of 'neo-capitalism', a term closely linked with globalization and multi-national capitalism. Within this new political and social context, accepting multiple voices and searching for self-definitions have become key tasks for the human condition. This means that the age of universality, a search for the one truth and the belief in grand narratives that were features of the modern era are gone, as argued by Lyotard (1979) in the arts and discussed by a series of publications in the arts therapies (Alter-Muri, 1998; Brown, 2008; Byrne, 1995; Huss, 2009; Kapitan & Newhouse, 2000; Kopytin, 2002a; Pavlicevic, 2005; Rolfe, 2001). However, this paradigmatic shift has not taken place without a cost. What used to be stable and fixed is now in question. Within art therapy, Byrne (1995) argues that the individual, either as a client or a professional, is faced with the challenge to manage with the danger of fragmentation. As a result, within pluralism, diversity and contradiction (Woods, 1989), searching for new personal and professional definitions becomes important (Bonnin & Miller, 2007; Gonzalez-Dolginko, 2000; Nazarova, 2007, 2009; Orkibi, 2010).

Another important feature of postmodernism is the significance it places on the context as important prerequisite in establishing meaning (Harre and van Lagenhove, 1999). Consequently, the context becomes equally important in attributing meaning to an artwork. Since it is not common to have the same context, there is no common or 'right' interpretation of an artistic expression. Each context applies to the artwork a new meaning or meanings. This can be seen very clearly within movements such as appropriation art in which old visual products are reused within new contexts (Schneider, 2003). Consequently, Schneider (2003) argues, 'cultural borrowing' becomes central to both postmodern art and postmodern societies that evolve and change through contact with other societies. The art produced in arts therapies can be similarly seen as a reusable object that is somehow recognizable; in all cases however, its meaning is seen as directly linked with its context.

Furthermore, postmodernism has promoted the use of the arts within diverse contexts such as healthcare and science. In these new fields, the arts are not seen merely as an aesthetic experience; triggered by new ways of viewing creativity (Zurbrugg & Baudrillard, 1997), they either acquire new meanings with associated value or become empty and meaningless. Within arts therapies, the presence of diverse contexts (e.g. social, educational and/or medical) assumes that the individual (professional or client) engages within context-specific activities and tasks. Creativity becomes a key feature in this process, enabling the therapist for example, to adapt activities and tasks appropriately as well as supporting both clients and therapist to engage with the process in new and unexpected ways (Martinsone et al., 2008). Martinsone et al. (2008) argue that within this postmodern era creative processes are central and, as such, supportive of the field of arts therapies. They also claim that new understandings about the relationships of the individual with his/her contexts have boosted the development of the arts therapies as a profession and lend themselves to eclectic/integrative practices. Similar claims are made by Karkou and Sanderson (2006) when they report on findings from the empirical study of arts therapies in the UK that this paper is based on.

Turning back to the European context of this study, the development of arts therapies has been very different in different countries, influenced by the personalities of the pioneers, their professional backgrounds and relevant professional affiliations but also by historical, social, political, cultural factors as well as by laws and regulations (Karkou & Sanderson, 2006; Martinsone, 2009; Stoll, 2005; Waller, 1999). Therefore, we see the 'context' of the country as playing a significant role in the way particular ideas have been shaped and put into practice. At the same time, shifts are made towards making common statutory and non-statutory agreements