Brief report

Group cinematherapy: Using metaphor to enhance adolescent self-esteem

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Abstract

This study examines the effectiveness of a cinematherapy intervention at enhancing the perceived self-esteem of 16 youth with a serious emotional disturbance. Participants completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE) at pre-, post-, and 1-week follow-up within a 6-week coping skills group in which a brief cinematherapy intervention is introduced to a treatment and delayed treatment group. A control group was used, which only received the coping skills training. Results of a split-plot analysis of variance (ANOVA) with one between-groups factor and one repeated-measures factor revealed no significant differences within or between groups, however, meaningful differences between the three groups were found. Implications for counselors and therapists are discussed.
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The use of metaphor as a persuasive apparatus in therapeutic counseling aims to evoke greater client insight and solace, ultimately supporting positive change. Gafner and Benson (2003) portray metaphors—metaphorically—as bridges, which indirectly foster open dialogue about subject matter that clients tend to avoid when uncomfortable (Wedding & Niemiec, 2003), and improve exploration into the unconscious, since "it is often easier to respond to a metaphor . . . than to the harsh reality" (Oaklander, 1997, p. 12).

Commercial film is a familiar medium in which metaphors are widely used to entertain and induce strong affective/cognitive exploration. Similar to storytelling, films captivate the imagination, and indirectly suggest new possibilities toward healing (Marvasti, 1997). Hesley and Hesley (2001) maintain, "Films are metaphors that can be utilized in therapy in a manner similar to stories, myths, jokes, fables, and therapeutically constructed narratives" (p. 10), which encourage clients to journey into their emotional experience and personal narratives as indirect observers from a higher, meta-analytic plane (Powell, 2005). Films use metaphor as a springboard to insight, and aid in therapeutic alliance building (Berg-Cross, Jennings, & Baruch, 1990; Dermer & Hutchings, 2000).

Cinematherapy

Cinematherapy is the process of using films in therapy as metaphors to enhance client insight and optimal growth (Suarez, 2003). By prescribing an individual or family the task of viewing a film, clinicians anticipate that clients will connect their own life experiences with those demonstrated on the screen, and ultimately obtain new solutions to old problems (Hesley, 2000). By suggesting films that depict issues similar to that of the client's, the overall goal for

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cinematherapy is to stimulate uncommon exploration into the identified problem and to generate new ideas for growth (Hesley, 2001). Sharp, Smith, and Cole (2002) assert, however, that cinematherapy is more than simply watching a movie. They attest that cinematherapy involves therapeutic discussion of the prescribed film, including client/character similarities via strategic questioning and metaphorical language, which helps prevent client resistance when processing difficult material.

If utilized appropriately, cinematherapy is an extremely effective tool with powerful therapeutic properties (Watson & Van Etten, 1977). Hesley and Hesley (2001) utilize the approach as homework assignments for time-effective therapy, which will "reinforce key therapeutic points," lead to client mastery of the desired behaviors in his or her own natural environment, serve as a measure of compliance and progress throughout treatment, and further connect the knowledge gained in outpatient therapy to real life experience (p. 11). Hebert and Neumeister (2001) apply cinematherapy by showing films within therapeutic sessions. Dubbed *guided viewing*, they detail how live screenings enhance the potential for insight, because a counselor facilitates a client's direct self-exploration in vivo. Powell (2005) documents guided viewing as being inherently powerful as a group counseling intervention, evoking immediate insight and opportunity for processing and feedback.

Cinematherapy with youth

Clinicians have found cinematherapy to be particularly effective with youth, because movies are a "powerful medium in contemporary society and are an especially significant part of the teenage culture" (Hebert & Neumeister, 2001, p. 225). Films assist youth in making connections between inner-life fantasy and current reality (Chethik, 2000), and have a highly persuasive effect on their preconceptions about life (Wedding & Niemiec, 2003). At a time when they developmentally battle with self-appreciation and identity formation (Brinthaupt & Lipka, 2002), youth connect with the power of cinematherapy.

Jurich and Collins (1996) were successful at applying cinematherapy with adolescents by incorporating guided viewings for self-esteem enhancement, which is vital in young people who struggle with self-concept issues, because the amount of self-admiration is crucial in determining an adolescent's degree of emotional development and mental health (Greenspan, 2004). Klein (1995) found that high self-esteem in youth correlates with positive mental health. Youth with low self-esteem, however, are far more likely to develop a mental illness and a serious emotional disturbance (Koenig, 1988), including conduct disorders and mood disturbances (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2004). The participants in Jurich and Collins (1996) study, however, were adolescents enrolled in a 4-H program; not emotionally disturbed youth, whom would seemingly struggle with self-concept issues and such problematic behaviors as eating disorders, conduct disorders, anxiety, and depression (Rice, 1999).

It was youth with a serious emotional disturbance (SED) that Duncan, Beck, and Granum (1986) successfully treated with cinematherapy, by documenting how the film *Ordinary People* (Schwary & Redford, 1980) could prepare inpatient adolescents for re-entry into their homes and communities. The participants viewed the film in three parts, and later specific scenes within 8 weekly, 1-h group sessions, which Duncan et al. (1986) used to portray "the subtle emotions of apprehension, anxiety, and being on stage," to help clients "project into the future and prepare for what lies ahead" (p. 50). Self-concept or esteem issues were not discussed.

Enhancing self-esteem

Although Jurich and Collins (1996) were able to confirm the effectiveness of cinematherapy at enhancing self-esteem and Duncan et al. (1986) were able to document the power of cinematherapy with SED youth, neither study compared the effectiveness of cinematherapy at enhancing self-esteem in SED youth. Enhancing self-esteem, however, is crucial to their development, because these youth are found to have fewer positive experiences than the well-adjusted individual and tend to present with lower levels of perceived self-worth (Barlow & Durand, 2005). Since Berk (2005, p. 360) defines self-esteem as "the judgments we make about our own worth and the feelings associated with those judgments," which begin to emerge in early childhood and are shaped by life-experiences, then it is essential that SED youth receive self-esteem enhancement as part of their overall treatment to elevate their presented "state" of perceived self-worth.

According to the Morris Rosenberg Foundation (2005), "Self-esteem is a positive or negative orientation toward oneself; an overall evaluation of one's worth or value" (Self-Esteem: What is It, para 1). Self-esteem can be viewed as both a trait and as a state. Trait self-esteem would consist of a person's general feelings about themselves, whereas