

CHAPTER 3

MAJOR THEMES IN THE ARTS THERAPIES

3.1 Introduction

The ten most prominent recurring themes throughout the arts therapy field – some suggested with bold print in **Chapter 2** – will be discussed. These illuminating paragraphs should be seen as summaries of the main points provided by the literature and the reader should not expect to find a reference to each therapy discussed. The most valuable points pertaining to each heading will be mentioned, however.

Themes Underlying the Arts Therapies
Catharsis
Creativity
Healing
Metaphor
Projection
Ritual
Spirituality
Symbolism
Self and Relations
Conscious and Unconscious

Table 2: Themes underlying the therapies in Table 1

3.2 Themes Underlying the Arts Therapies

3.2.1 Catharsis

In general, the arts are synonymous with the term, “catharsis”, which seems to imply emotional or spiritual cleansing. Feder (1981:223) points out that a cathartic experience seems to be a common occurrence in a number of expressive arts approaches and many therapists regard it as a temporary relief that is useful, mostly in making patients more open to further therapy. It can be achieved in a variety of ways:

- It may involve the mutual sharing of jokes between client and counsellor (Granick, 1995:3).
- In drama therapy, members of the audience may gain insight as they identify with the protagonist (Wilkins, 1999:28).
- In storytelling, children experience an emotional release as they identify and project their own feelings onto story characters (Carlson, 2001:5).
- In art and dance or movement, the expressive act itself may bring release (Feder, 1981:223).

3.2.2 Creativity

Rogers (1993:1) describes the relationship between creativity and therapy as follows:

“Part of the psychotherapeutic process is to awaken the creative life-force energy. Thus, creativity and therapy overlap. What is **creative** is frequently therapeutic. What is therapeutic is frequently a **creative** process.”

Creativity is seen as a force that flows through each individual and to obstruct its natural flow leads to mental and physical ailments. The expressive arts, “adaptable to suit personal needs”, could help to further the progress of **creativity** and, in its awakening, an apparent **spiritual** path is uncovered, which also “activates a sense of personal responsibility in the world”. The path of **creativity** is seen as the route to discover “the divine self” (Rogers, 1993:187-188, 201-202 & Reynolds, 2000:113).

As an approach, photo therapy has a “rich revealingness” that enables the client to be “**creative** rather than reactive” and to meaningfully represent the self by means of intentional and unintentional information that speaks louder than traditional verbal responses.

The photographic **self-portrait** is **self-empowering**, because it frees the client to create himself when no-one is observing, thereby minimising external interference and letting the desired appearance of the real **self** emerge (Krauss & Fryrear, 1983:106 & Weiser, 1993:37).

3.2.3 Healing

In general, art therapists view the **creative** process as a **healing** medium, because visual art can provide opportunities for discovery and occupies a space that can be subjective or objective. It can also supply a reparative space where early psychological wounds can be addressed.

“The supportive silence of art” can facilitate the artistic expression of feelings of ambiguity, thus providing an opportunity to explore contradictory elements and to find new ways of becoming whole (Spaniol, 2001:222, Franklin, 2000:3 & Rogers, 1993:70).

Sandplay is seen as a modality that is primarily meant for “**self-healing** without interpretation”, because regardless of the sandplayer’s inner state, what the player expresses in the tray is regarded as evidence of the fact that coping with inner issues is taking place. It is the sandplayer’s experience of the process that heals and not the understanding that the therapist has of the sandplayer’s expressions that facilitates **healing**. The role of the therapist is merely to provide a protected and safe therapeutic environment conducive to the **self-healing** process (Bradway & McCoard, 1997:11, 49-50).

Rogers (in Levine & Levine, 1999:115) is of the opinion that when the arts are employed for **self-healing**, the quality of the artwork, style of writing, or incorrect pitch of musical expression should be disregarded, so that the client may derive maximum benefit from the emotional release and expression facilitated by the arts. Insight and **self-analysis** will be achieved later, when the **symbolic** and **metaphoric** messages are studied and verbalised and, over time, the art constructs will still convey messages to the maker.

In discussing video as a medium, Heilveil (1983:2) raises a valuable point, namely, that “video itself is nothing more than a technology” and it needs the skilled facilitation of a therapist to affect change in the client and give expression to a meaningful, **healing** therapeutic experience. The value of the video as a possible healing agent lies primarily within the professional relationship between the therapist and client.

3.2.4 Metaphor

Duggan and Grainger (1997:23-24, 29) point out that **metaphors** precede our linguistic ability, because they are a **creative** right brain activity and are links providing a way of enabling the client and therapist to go around the communication barrier and not through it. The intention of **metaphor** is to open up possibility and freedom.

“Instead of being reminded of what we knew and have experienced, we are carried way into what we *could* know, *what could be our experience*... The chair could be a mountain, the empty floor an ocean – but it would be a mountain and an ocean we had certainly never climbed or crossed before, one which had never existed anywhere except in our imagination ...” (Duggan & Grainger, 1997:29).

The fact that **metaphor** allows an emotional process to be “embodied” in a visual (aural, tactile, kinetic) form bestows on it a sense of the dramatic.

“In this primary bridging of idea and object which expresses both the initial opposition and the gradual movement towards resolution and a new reality we have the origin of art in general and drama in particular. Every **metaphor** is a **symbolic** arena, a world of interaction [and] a stage for drama” (Duggan & Grainger, 1997:33).

MPC (Magazine Photo Collage) and photo therapy seem to provide ample opportunity for **metaphoric** expression, because the photograph can simultaneously be both an object pointing to its imagery and a **metaphoric** or **symbolic** representation. The thought that

visual-**symbolic** depiction is less subject to distortion than verbal translations of sensory-based experiences is the premise of all art therapy (Landgarten, 1993:3, Krauss & Fryrear, 1983:60 & Weiser, 1993:10).

Cinema therapy relies heavily on **metaphor**, as it searches for the **metaphorical** applicability of the prescribed movie and not its contents similarity with the life of the client. Once the client has watched the movie, the therapist engages in an indirect discussion with the client on a **metaphorical** level, based on their shared experience (the movie), in order to provide an opportunity for information to bypass the client's defense mechanisms and awaken the initial stages of problem-solving (Sharp et al., 2002:2-4).

In literature and storytelling, **metaphors** allow the client to adopt an external outlook that enables the examination of difficult issues pertaining to the internal environment in a non-threatening way and the client can relax while relating to the therapist, because the messages are indirect and the language is approachable. The relaxed environment created by the **symbols** and **metaphors** of the therapeutic story reveals the client's **conscious** mind and grants the therapist access to the client's **unconscious** (James & Hazler, 1998:4, 8 & Carlson, 2001:3).

3.2.5 Projection

Projection is the major component on which the psychodynamic model of the **creative** arts therapies relies and it is seen as the basis for affirming the potential of the arts to reveal personal material needed in psychotherapy. **Projection** has been regarded as both the factor determining content and form, linking art and psyche, and as a process that attributes personal nuances of meaning, once the artworks have been completed (Johnson, 1998:85).

Yaretzky and Levinson (1996:2) discuss clay as a therapeutic tool and distinguish between expressive and **projective** art. The work itself is of primary importance in the expressive art context and a variety of verbal and non-verbal therapeutic intervention techniques are used. **Projective** art requires greater intervention involvement from the

therapist, because its objective is to stimulate the client's abstract descriptive abilities and to enable the client to give a clearer account of the internal and external worlds.

Artworks allow the client's internal concerns to emerge gradually through the **unconscious** process but in photo therapy and magazine collages, a **conscious** effort is involved in the photographing and image-selecting activities. Therefore, the deliberate photographs and **self-selected** pictures become valuable **projective** (documented) data. Photo therapy is a helpful tool that can enable clients to become aware of what they **project** onto others (without being aware of it) and why people react in a certain way towards them (Landgarten, 1993:1 & Weiser, 1993:10-11, 19).

3.2.6 Ritual

The element of **ritual** in playback theatre contributes to the **healing** process. What is meant by **ritual** is "the establishment of a ceremonial frame in space, time, and demeanor, in which the stories of ordinary people are told and remembered". Drama therapy is compared to **ritual** because of its boundaries. It is only a play and fundamentally a symbolic representation of life that does not exist in the physical reality but it **creatively** plays "with meanings until human truth is ready to emerge" (Salas in Lewis & Johnson, 2000:290 & Duggan & Grainger, 1997:38).

With regard to the **ritual** capabilities of the arts, Knill (in Levine & Levine, 1999:44) states the following:

"[T]he arts are the bridging existential phenomena that unite **ritual** characteristics, imagination and dream-world in a way that no other activity can do. They engage the **conscious** and cognitive similarly to free association, but give it a disciplined **ritualistic** thingly, temporal and spatial substance."

Art practice expressions as seen in painting, sculpting, acting, making music, writing and storytelling are seen as playful disciplined **rituals** that provide safe vessels in which existential themes, pathos and mystery can be met (Knill in Levine & Levine, 1999:45).

3.2.7 Spirituality

Rogers (1993:184-187, 200) points out that **spirituality** can be discovered through **creativity**. **Spirituality** encompasses a vast range of concepts. Examples of words that may illuminate the meaning of the **spiritual** dimension in this context are: intuition, clarity, perspective, inner truth, reconciliation of opposites, purpose, knowingness and love. Some clients may unexpectedly experience deeper **consciousness** early in the **creative** process, while others may gradually awaken to a deeper inner reality.

Enlightenment, an inner work, can be achieved through activities like **ritual** or meditation, and the ritual of creating a *mandala* enables the creator to achieve a state of inner psychological order, which is useful in the search for a meaningful spiritual experience, significance and personal growth (Snyder, 1999:3).

3.2.8 Symbolism

According to Wadeson (1980:39), each client's work possesses a particular **symbolic** imagery but, according to Rogers (1993:189), these symbols are not that unique, because they come from a collective **unconscious** and are similar across cultural divides. Even though these **symbols** are universal, however, they fascinate clients and awaken them to the mystical elements of being.

In discussing photo therapy, Krauss and Fryrear (1983:61) point out that the diversity of cultural perspectives, or the collapse of "**symbolic**" cultural absolutes, has left individuals with the burden of creating a viable personal **symbol** system that can serve as a support structure for beliefs and behaviour. In discussing dance and movement therapy, Stanton-Jones (1992:95) expresses the opinion that **symbolism** in the arts affords clients the opportunity to express difficult personal and societal issues.

Weiser, in Comparisons with Other Fields, 2003:1, points out that photo therapy employs the **creative** arts idea that **symbolic** representation of deep, sensory-based issues is more truthful, because it is less distorted, due to the fact that it can bypass verbal “filters”. A study of the photos clients select will reveal factual and emotional information and consistent personal **symbols**, even though the client appears to be unaware of their presence during photographing and selecting (Weiser, 1993:23).

3.2.9 Self and relations

Expressive arts therapy aims to channel the client’s chaotic fantasies into meaningful imagination, in order to revive the dormant faculties of **creativity** and **self-observation**. During the **creative** process, the client discovers new possibilities of **self-expression**, **self-exploration** and **self-discovery**, as the artwork, which is an extension of the **self**, mirrors **self-revelation** to the client, fosters **self-reflection** and challenges **self-beliefs**. The client has an opportunity to experience **self-actualisation** through **self-expression** and to integrate the experience into an understanding of the **self** and the environment (Franklin, 2000:5, Ihde, 1999:118-119, Kahn, 1999:2, Kramer, 2001:5, Reynolds, 2000:108, Snyder, 1997:1 & Wadson, 1980:38, 40, 42).

Photo and video therapy allow the client the opportunity to observe the **self** as an object, to view the many **self-concepts**, to gauge **self-esteem** and to experience visual **self-confrontation** in a way that would not be possible without photographic or video representations. Auto-photography allows the **self** an opportunity to engage in **self-disclosure** by creating an autonomous **self-world** and revealing a **self-system** and a **self-social** relationship that reflect the interaction between the **self** and the environment (and the possibilities for **self-correction**), thereby creating an opportunity for the **self** to feel empowered.

Video editing allows a greater measure of freedom. By means of editing, the client can produce an ideal **self-model**, which makes rewarding **self-viewing** possible, stimulates **self-perception** and encourages the attainment of personal goals (Weiser in Comparisons

with Other Fields, 2003:3, Krauss & Fryrear, 1983:72-76, 88, 97, 108, 111, 113, Weiser, 1993:19, Greelis & Haarmann, 1980:6, 42 & Heilveil, 1983:56).

In the performing (dramatic and movement) therapies, spontaneity can stimulate **self-expression** and the communication of a **self-experience** or **self-narrative** can facilitate emotional growth. In a dramatic scenario, playing the role of another can awaken awareness of the multiplicity of roles in characterising the lives of others and in the many facets of one's own **self**, while the **self-view** that is revealed is continuously evolving. Movement fosters **self-awareness**, as it unites body, mind, feeling and spirit and reveals the unknown parts of the **self**, resulting in deepening **self-understanding** and **self-insight** (Dunne in Lewis & Johnson, 2000:111, Emunah in Lewis & Johnson, 2000:72, Granick, 1995:2, Levine & Levine, 1999:135 & Snow in Lewis & Johnson, 2000:229).

An interesting statement made by Milliken (2002:206) regarding dance and movement and its application in a prison environment concludes this account of the **self** and its aspects:

“As **creative** arts therapists, we have something important to contribute to this process of rescuing people from their past. As artists and therapists, we bring a blend of perspectives, which enables us to offer a context for **creative** process and a container that provides safety while allowing for the rediscovery of **oneself** as a positive human being.”

3.2.10 Unconscious and conscious

In order to connect with the essentially **unconscious** aspects of being, a primarily non-verbal language of presentation and communication is needed and this can be found in non-verbal and sensory-based techniques. Photo therapy is an example of such an approach. During the photo therapy process, clients are very likely to reveal their inner maps, which they follow **unconsciously**, by the elements or objects they focus on. Spontaneity is regarded as an essential ingredient in the therapeutic environment of the

arts, because it relaxes defenses and provides opportunity for the contents of the **unconscious** to surface without restraint (Weiser, 1993:8, 16 & Spaniol, 2001:228).

Therapeutic writing does not have as its main focus the details of life but life's **unconscious** processes. The reason for this focus is the belief that some of life's difficulties originate from the tension that exists between the **conscious** and **unconscious selves** and the act of writing may align the **conscious self** more harmoniously with the **unconscious self**. The **creative** writing process with its images and **metaphors** provides access to material that allows the **unconscious** to become **conscious** (Riordan, 1996:3-5).

Therapeutic (children's) stories with their memorable presentation of ideas stimulate problem-solving and allow access to the **unconscious** with its influential resources, which release **healing** and peace in difficult situations. The **symbols** and **metaphors** presenting in the client's **unconscious** permit the therapist insight into the client's **unconscious** (Carlson, 2001:3). In a similar way, the application of music in therapy allows traumatised individuals the opportunity to safely acknowledge their feelings and access **unconscious** traumatic material, while **self-esteem** and anger management are heightened within the hopeful atmosphere (MacIntosh, 2003:22).

Clown therapy connects the known and unknown within by means of the clown emerging from the **unconscious**, seen as a **creative** outlet through which the contents of the **unconscious** can be scrutinised (Carp, 1998:248).

Dance movement therapy aims to awaken an awareness of **unconscious** content by relying on the tendency of the **unconscious** to establish fresh and unexpected connections between ideas, movement and imagery (Stanton-Jones, 1992:7).

3.3 Conclusion

This chapter attempted to provide insight into the common core themes addressed by the selected arts therapies and to alert the reader to these deeper issues and their contribution to the arts experience.

In the next chapter, examples of relevant techniques, procedures and exercises will be illustrated to reveal how the arts therapy methodologies manage to capture the imagination of the client.