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.

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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 though 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 metaphor expression, because the photograph can simultaneously be both an object pointing to its imagery and a metaphor 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 cerem onial fram e 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 is 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 & Wadeson, 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*...

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.