

Research on person centered expressive arts therapy



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Art has been used for thousands of years as a means of communication. However, according to Edwards (2004) it was not until the 1940's that art, psychiatry and psychoanalysis combined in a variety of ways to provide the conditions out of which the profession of art therapy emerged (19). Art therapy is a psychotherapeutic approach that can be used for a wide range of individuals or groups. It covers a broad spectrum of modalities from drawing and painting to poetry, music, and dance, among other art forms. This research will examine the person-centered expressive arts therapy approach.

Art therapy is a type of activity therapy that may be hard to define because it is such a broad term and there are many professionals who have differing ideas and views about what it is and what it's used for. " Some art therapists put the emphasis on art and some on therapy. The art people tend to exclude procedures where completion of the creative process is not a central goal; the therapy people often explain that preoccupation with artistic goals must be minimized in favor of a specialized form of psychotherapy" (Ulman, 2001, 17).

Natalie Rogers (1993), founder of person-centered expressive arts therapy, posits that " Humanistic expressive arts therapy differs from the analytic or medical model of art therapy, in which art is used to diagnose, analyze, and ' treat' people" (2). Person-centered expressive arts therapists definitely lean more towards the ' art people' side of the spectrum.

Per Rogers (1993), the process is equally as important as the product.

Rogers' approach to art therapy " uses the expressive arts - movement, art,

music, writing, sound, and improvisation – in a supportive setting to facilitate growth and healing. It is a process of discovering ourselves through any art form that comes from an emotional depth.” She contends that there is an overlap between therapy and creativity and part of the therapeutic process is awakening your creative energy; with this in mind she upholds that what is creative is usually therapeutic and vice versa (1-2).

Unlike other art therapies the person-centered expressive arts approach is unique in that it combines the different art modes rather than focusing only on one type of artistic expression at a time, Natalie Rogers (1993) calls this ‘ the creative connection.’ She describes this as “ the connection between movement, art, writing, and sound. When we move with awareness it opens us to profound feelings which can then be expressed in color, line or form. When we write immediately after movement or art work there is a free flow from the unconscious- sometimes poetry.” For Rogers, it appears to make sense to combine different art modes at the same time, for example, many people feel more natural and their creativity flows more easily when they listen to music and even sing while drawing or painting (4).

In interviewing Natalie Rogers, Sommers-Flanagan (2007) stated that “ using her own love of creativity and art in combination with her father’s renowned therapeutic approach, Natalie Rogers has developed a form of therapy that extends person-centered counseling into a new and exciting domain” (124). According to Sommers-Flanagan (2007) Rogers’ mother was an artist so she grew up enjoying art and creativity. She started out using her creativity with children in play therapy. However, in 1974 she began doing experimental work with her father, Carl Rogers, where she started integrating his ideas of <https://assignbuster.com/research-on-person-centered-expressive-arts-therapy/>

person-centered theory with her own ideas to develop a creative healing approach to therapy (121-122).

Much of the expressive arts approach is based on the Person-Centered theory that people have an innate capacity for self direction, an impulse toward self growth, and to reach toward their full potential. According to Sommers-Flanagan (2007) Rogers started the Person-Centered Expressive Therapy Institute in 1984, where she created an atmosphere that is nonjudgmental and clients can express their creativity with psychological freedom and safety. “ The person-centered approach facilitates therapeutic growth through art, movement, writing, and music modalities (120).

Art encompasses many different modalities, in Sommers-Flanagan’s (2007) interview with Natalie Rogers she stated that “ people learn through different modalities” (124). This is why Rogers does not limit the expressive arts approach to only one type of artistic expression. One person may prefer to express themselves through painting while another may want to dance; whatever the person is drawn toward will help them learn the most about themselves.

“ Person-centered expressive arts therapy is an alternative to traditional verbal counseling approaches and may be especially helpful for clients stuck in linear, rigid, and analytic ways of thinking and experiencing the world” (Sommers-Flanagan, 2007, 120). Natalie Rogers (1993) considers art to be a language. “ Color, form, and symbols are languages that speak from the unconscious and have particular meaning for each individual.” Sometimes this language is better explained and understood without words or through

metaphoric expression (2-3). The person-centered perspective assumes that “rigidity impairs learning” (Sommers-Flanagan, 2007, 124). The artistic language allows a person to think outside of their rigid mentality which can open the mind to new experiences and hence new learning.

The expressive arts approach does not aim to downgrade the importance of talking about things in counseling, of course verbally speaking about our feelings is an integral part of the counseling process, but using creative expression can often help surface hidden unconscious emotions that may not otherwise be brought up. It's important to be aware of and acknowledge our unconscious feelings to become more self-actualized. According to Synder (1997), “Ordinarily, clients are only partially aware of the ideas and feelings going on within themselves, while the rest lies hidden from them in the realms of the unconscious. But to live whole, full lives, clients, and indeed counselors as well, need to be able to understand and to be in harmony with the inner, as well as the outer, world” (80-81).

“The intent—just as in client-centered therapy—is to peel away the layers of defense and find our true nature. Art allows us to go into our pain, rage, and grief. Using art sometimes is much more effective than words to deal with some of these very difficult emotions” (Sommers-Flanagan, 2007, 123). Not only does artistic expressions help us release emotions and gain insight but there are also many other healing aspects of the creative process. Sommers-Flanagan (2007) states that expressive arts therapy is somewhat similar to play therapy only for adults (123) as it can allow people to reach inside themselves for self-exploration and healing to come into contact with their inner most feelings but in a more playful and free-spirited way.

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Creating art helps one become more in touch with them self by allowing them to invent their own world, the art product itself is an extension of oneself. Synder (1997) declares that “ the art product, whether it is a self-portrait, a family sculpture, or a drawing of the client’s house, contains parts of the client’s self-identity.” Sometimes this could be a source of self-confrontation as internal conflicts with oneself may arise through this artistic process. However, bringing these feeling to awareness may also aid the healing process (74-75).

In terms of drawing and painting the creative process can be done in a number of ways. “ There are a variety of techniques that can be chosen to assist the client in accessing the unconscious world that contains solutions to current problems” (Synder, 1997, 74-75). Free drawing or painting is a valuable tool and there are many aspects of the process that can be taken into consideration such as the content or theme of the production, behaviors of the client, “ how the client applies himself or herself, the rate and rhythm of the work, colors used, types of lines, and so forth” (75). Synder (1997) suggests other activities including the squiggle drawing game, the kinetic family drawing technique, and the blob and wet paper technique (75-76). The expressive arts approach integrates different modes of art so the client has more avenues for self-expression, an activity that uses meditation, drawing, dance, and writing for example uses all four modes of creativity.

Synder (1997) states that because this approach emphasizes the client’s capacity for self healing and growth interpretation of the creative production by the therapist is often unnecessary (76-77). In fact, Rogers (1993) believes that the art produced in person-centered expressive arts therapy is not
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intended to be interpreted, but rather, the creative productions are meant for self exploration. People are able to gain their own insight and self-understanding by reflecting on the art they create (2-3). According to Synder (1997), sometimes a client may find it desirable to use interpretation and there are many different methods. Having the counselor interpret the client's creative work can sometimes bring up uncomfortable thoughts and feelings. On the other hand, it may also help "transform potentially destructive energy into constructive compositions" (76-77)

In conclusion, The person-centered expressive arts approach is a helpful therapy in that it aids in self growth and resolving inner conflicts by "awakening the creative life-force energy" (Rogers, 1993, 1). It taps into the unconscious and utilizes many modes of creativity. The nondirective therapist is able to facilitate the client on his path to self growth and inner peace using the person-centered philosophy of being empathic, open, honest, and congruent (Rogers, 1993, 3). This allows the client to be artistic and free-spirited because she feels psychologically safe and confident to become who she really is.