

SENSORY ASPECTS OF ART THERAPY WORK WITH CLAY

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ABSTRACT

In the therapeutic use of modelling from clay, effective factors of multisensory therapeutic approaches overlap with the principles and processes of art therapy. Clay as a medium offers various sensory stimuli, including dispersed touch, temperature and smell. These inputs may serve as triggers for memories or emotional associations and as means of change. Art therapy can intentionally work with the sensory qualities of the material realizing their potential in art-therapeutic creation. This qualitative study explores the sensory characteristics of clay as art-therapeutic medium and provides an analysis of effective factors of clay modelling in art therapy through a case study report. Thanks to its sensory specifics, clay helps to process emotions of fear, to eliminate aggressive behaviours and to create space for the change in attitudes towards oneself and other people.

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Keywords: multisensory approach, art therapy, clay

INTRODUCTION

Art therapy is a therapeutic method that uses artistic approaches in order to provide support, help and treatment. Šicková-Fabrici [1] defines art therapy as a set of art techniques and processes that are aimed at changing a person's self-esteem, raise self-confidence, integrate personality and bring a feeling of meaningful fulfilment of life. According to American Art Therapy Association [2] art therapy enriches a person's life through art making and creative process in a psychotherapeutic relationship.

Art therapy combines movement, smell, taste, touch, visual, auditory sensations and experiences. It engages the body and mediates the opportunity to perceive one's own body and oneself. Through the artistic and outer sensory experience, it allows a person to become aware of inner experiences – 'what is happening with me on the outside and inside?' Art therapy carries the characteristics of expressive-form dispositions, which means that art production in art therapy is not conditioned by artistic skills. The offer of art creating in a therapeutic relationship allows clients to express themselves regardless of the aesthetic qualities of the final product [3].

SENSORY APPROACH IN ART THERAPY

Multi-sensory therapeutic approaches are based on the knowledge of neuroscience. They stem from the paradigm of plasticity of the neural system, which proves that based on sensory inputs from the environment and the body, it is possible to change neural structures and influence abilities and skills of a person [4]. Multi-sensory approaches are concerned with the impact of sensory stimuli on a person and individual specifics in their processing. Multi-sensory environments such as Snoezelen rooms offer sensory stimulation as a means of broadening the experience of clients and creating a relaxing environment [5], [6]. Different sensory stimuli have shown different therapeutic effects on selected groups of clients. In general, sensory stimuli may have a calming or an activating effect. The theory of sensory integration, which laid the basis for many of the multi-sensory approaches, is focused on exact assessment of sensory processing. The assessment may reveal low sensitivity, high sensitivity or problems in differentiation. Only based on the assessment it is possible to offer appropriate stimuli in meaningful activities, which help build the nervous system and support the development of skills through adaptive responses in play [7]. A hypersensitive person may react in a defensive way by fleeing or fighting the threatening situation. Therefore, knowing the sensory preferences of clients is an important part of assessment also in creative expressive therapies including art therapy, especially when the creative approach uses various kinds of sensory channels. Then, it is possible to use the sensory qualities of different art forms for therapeutic purposes. There are some general principles of the impact of different sensory inputs. It has been proved [8] that there is a correlation between proprioceptive inputs and reducing anxiety. Thus, activities that actively use muscles such as pushing, pulling or hanging and activities including deep pressure have an organising, calming effect. In this study, we will focus on the multi-sensory aspects of working with clay as a therapeutic material in art therapy.

THE USE OF CLAY IN ART THERAPY

Artistic images that constitute a key form of expression in art therapy are mainly connected with the visual sensory system. We perceive art through sight. An artistic product or a work of art is perceived holistically. We evaluate how it affects us, whether we like it or not, whether we find it subjectively harmonious or disharmonious. We perceive the colour, its intensity, shapes, content, lines, invested energy, format and structure. Visually, we do not only focus on two-dimensional but also on three-dimensional objects such as sculptures, reliefs, or architecture. We can identify with images and express ourselves through images. Even tattoos, street art, graffiti, doodling, ornaments and decorations are part of our expressions. An image, a sculpture, or a different work of art access the inner world of a person through the visual system. On one hand, strong visual messages may cause feelings that reach us on a physical level. On the other hand, overstimulation can lead to an overwhelming feeling followed by a shut-down causing that we may overlook the content. We become blind to the seen information. Connecting visual information with another sensory system may contribute to a more aware perception and to real 'seeing'. Šicková-Fabrice [9] considers three-dimensional creativity such as physical activities with clay very important in today's world where seeing and hearing represent the dominant and also widely 'attacked' senses. Working

with clay, touching it may teach children and adults how to touch and perceive the world and their lives in the context of reality.

Sensory art education is rooted in this concept, taking place in artistic expression of synesthetists. Synesthesia is a connection of senses, their simultaneous perception. The word stems from a Greek origin of *syn-* together and *aisthesis* – perception. Hartlová and Hartl [10] define synesthesia as a physiological occurrence when a certain perception triggers the experience of other senses. Artistically, we can depict any perception, including physical pain. We can illustrate music, sounds, singing, whistling, silence, smell, or touch of different surfaces or objects [11]. Šicková-Fabricei [9] states that haptic experience combined with visual perception and verbal intervention used in art therapy carries the benefit of triple simultaneous and parallel effect, which is more powerful than interventions using the visual, auditory and haptic sensory channels separately. The simultaneous activation of the brain centres holds a deep therapeutic potential.

Sensory experience depends mainly on the offer of materials that the art therapist provides for the clients. Knowing the impact of art materials, also based on their sensorial qualities is important for an effective art therapy process. Albrich [12] understands material as the heart of art therapy. Materials are the means that move a person on a physical level as well as in their everyday reality. Different materials touch a person in different ways, which can be used purposefully in interventions; for example, with the aim to deepen the relationship towards oneself, towards other people and the world. Considering developmental perspectives of art making, in the beginning of the graphic development Pogády et al. [13] recommend providing children with media that do not lead to stereotypical use but rather support the authors in authentic creativity regarding the content and the form of desired expression. Materials allow for intensive contact with the senses by providing various qualities that reach different senses.

In different forms, clay is used as medicine with therapeutic potential for the body as well as for wounds on the soul [1]. Clay represents a unique medium not only in art therapy. Besides its other qualities it possesses immense expressive potential. Clay allows for spontaneous moulding, stimulates the tactile brain centres, rehabilitates fine motor skills, offers opportunities for correction and change, permits the creation of three-dimensional forms, symbols, and objects. The tactile process stimulates implicit memory and supports social-emotional development [9]. Working with clay supports self-esteem. It represents a medium of compensation for a lost or impaired sense. It has a relaxing and rehabilitating effect for people with motor skill difficulties. For people with learning disabilities it gives an opportunity of concrete physical perception and thus understanding of links that are unavailable to them in a graphic or a written form due to being highly abstract [1].

Holding a piece of clay in hands, we can perceive its qualities. The smell of clay belongs to scents that are quite strong for people. Not so much due to its intensity but rather by being a basic element evolutionary. We are made from earth and we shall return to earth – Mother Earth awakens in the spring and we know that thanks to smell. It signals that she is ready to give life. Using clay as a material for art therapy, this factor also has a therapeutic impact. Besides the fact that we can smell the clay – it may smell good or it may reek – we may also taste it. When working with clay we can hear

different sounds depending on the quality of the clay at that time. When we add water, it makes a smacking sound; when we throw it, we can hear a pounding sound; when we swish it between our hands, it sounds like quiet clapping.

Clay has got different qualities including thickness, shape, and temperature, which we perceive through touch. Merhautová [14] mentions that it is important to allow yourself to be in physical contact with the art material. We work with clay either using tools or through the most accessible and natural tool – our hands, our body. We may just carefully use our fingers, or the palms, but mostly we bury our whole hands into the clay. We knead it, form it, warm it with our own warmth and it changes in our hands. In the beginning, clay is firm. Then it becomes malleable and formable. The tactile experience with this art material can be very strong.

Touch and the need of physical contact are very important in human life. Touch is not needed only by young children but by adults. It embodies closeness and safety. Therefore, materials that we can touch and that are tangible and malleable are useful for tactile stimulation. Tactile stimuli are important for healthy social-emotional development and they enhance the integration of the whole personality of a child. There are situations in art therapy, however, when a person cannot bear a direct touch of the clay, or even the thought of having their hands dirty could cause a panic attack. They can and do want to create but with removing the risk of getting dirty.

Another potential quality of clay is its novelty as an art material. Many people are familiar only with basic art materials which they used in art classes at school, or which they were provided with at home. Pogády et al. [13] describe a gradual process of discovering art materials. If certain materials present a big unknown for the client, their first art making constitutes of exploring the material. They try working with the material, observe the effect that it leaves on the surface, take in how it feels in their hands, explore its qualities, firmness or flexibility. It can happen that clients are so fascinated by the new material that they reject working with other materials and only immerse themselves in the newly discovered one.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In our research study, the described qualities of clay were taken into consideration and their effect was explored in single-subject case study. We have used qualitative methodology for the analysis of a therapeutic process of working with clay in individual form of art therapy. The research data was collected through a semi-structured participatory observation in direct work of the art therapist with her client. The observation focused on recording the sensory aspects of modelling from clay and their impact on the therapeutic change in the client. Subsequently, the observation findings were processed into a case study.

CASE STUDY

Nika (13 years old) was referred to therapy due to problem behaviour at school and at home. She was born as a first child. At the age of 18-months her parents got divorced. At that time, she was hospitalised for difficulties with constipation. Along with that, first signs of defiance against her mother appeared. After the divorce, Nika lived with

her mother at her maternal grandmother's house. Nika's relationship with her grandparents was better than with her mother. After some time, her mother found a new partner. In the beginning, his relationship with Nika was good, because he was not interfering into the mother-daughter dynamic. Later, they got married and had a son together. Relationships started deteriorating. According to Nika, her half-brother is spoiled, and the parents were always on his side. Nika's biological father got married again as well and has got another daughter with his new wife and takes care of his wife's first daughter from a previous relationship too. Nika and him have a nice relationship. Nika's relationship with her mother is complicated. Nika is angry at her that she never takes her side in a conflict. The mother is influenced by her husband. Nika does not feel accepted. Due to frequent conflicts and anger outbursts, Nika left home to live with her grandmother who live in the same building on a different floor. She argues a lot with the grandmother too. The grandmother complains about untidiness and breaking the rules. Nika's grades at school also dropped. On the outside, Nika expresses herself as an extrovert, she talks a lot, but she wanders off into her fantasy world. Even though her expression is childish, the content and understanding of circumstances is very sensitive, mature and clear. She thinks a lot about herself and her situation. She has got many questions and searches for answers, which are not coming. She described herself as cheerful on the outside, but that being a mask for other people. Inside, she is sad. *'When I look inside into myself, there is only darkness.'* In her family, she feels like an outsider. Nobody explained to her why her parents got divorced and therefore she places the guilt on herself. She thinks that if she did not 'happen', her parents would not have gotten married. Since her parents got married young because they had to, she blames herself for their divorce too. *'I should not have been born.'* Nika thinks that she is a burden for everyone; perceives herself as a weirdo that nobody understands. She is very vulnerable, doubts herself, feels unattractive, unimportant and worthless. The mental pain transfers into physical pain and lively frightening fantasies. She likes to retreat into darkness with her pain, which is not understood by the grandmother, who 'always overthinks it and tries to educate'. Nika often talks about her needs not being accepted and that nobody listens to what she says. At her age, she really need a mother, but her mother does not know how to communicate with Nika and avoids topics that Nika is interested in. Nika feels disappointed and expresses how she misses hugs and touch from her parents and grandmother. She does things on purpose so that the surrounding would understand that she needs a hug but instead there is silence or preaching. She searches to fulfil her need of contact, talking and acceptance on the internet, where she plays computer games with adults. There she feels understood, successful and accepted. She would spend a lot of time on the internet, but the grandmother always checks on her, because she worries about what Nika does there. Often, they turn her computer off, which causes a lot of arguments in the family. Nika transforms her feelings into writing and publishing fantasy stories. When she writes, she feels relieved. She also draws a lot. The key themes in her drawing is again fantasy world, half-dead half-alive people, aggressive signs, blood, black colour, masks, torn mouths, and killer children. Nika thinks little of herself. Her self-esteem, self-worth and self-confidence are low. She does not seem to be able to connect neither with adults nor with her peers. She has got two friends with similar view of themselves and the world. They are interested in similar things, games, themes and deal with similar problems in their families. Nika is smart, but she does not consider school to be important; she does not like the approach of some of the teachers. She feels that she has been labelled and

the surrounding is not willing to change their perceptions. She is good at learning languages and she likes it. Languages a door into the world for her since when she plays computer games she communicates in English or in German which preserves her privacy from her grandmother who does not understand the conversations in a foreign language. According to her own words, Nika feels anxious, angry, afraid, guilty and unaccepted. Problems in communication with the grandmother, mother and step-father trigger furious outbursts in her that are fuelled by the feeling of helplessness and the need for love.

During art therapy sessions, Nika is open, wants to talk and looks forward to the sessions. She tends and likes to stay longer. It is a place where she is the centre of attention and interest, which she normally lacks. Despite the problems that she deals with in the family, Nika is very self-assertive. She has got good vocabulary, she is able to argue and advocate for herself. She fights for her place in the family, even though it has not been successful so far from her point of view. Within the art therapy sessions, we offered the opportunity to work with clay with the aim to improve self-perception and self-esteem, to anchor within herself and in the world, to provide touch that was so important and missing in her life. We also aimed at alleviating anxiety, anger, sadness, feelings of guilt and helplessness, and to present her with experiences of joy, success, acceptance and value. Selected techniques of working with clay included techniques focused on exploring clay as a material (e.g. clay field, clay ball, sounds of clay, variations) and on tactile experience without visual control (e.g. feely bag, relief reconstruction, clay self-portrait, finding your own shape). The techniques included also space for learning through transformation of experience with the material into currently lived situations, searching for links and understanding of current emotional state, feelings, perceptions, and thoughts. Space for the change of some attitudes and self-perception of the client was created too. Clay as material was accepted very well by the client. She discovered many verbal expression, which she used to describe her emotions, concerns and experiences. In the context of work, clay served as a metaphorical mediator for naming her feelings. *'It is like entering another world. I am coming in from the outside, but the other way around. I am burying my hands into the clay, which I have in front of me, and it is as if I was going into myself. It is doubled, and it is happening at the same time. I am inside and outside, and I cannot even tell where the point was where it came through. Things from the outside are entering into me, I am not protected by anything. It is so fragile and vulnerable. I cannot fight against it, I cannot stop it. I have a feeling as if I was squeezing my guts.'*

Overall, the client attended ten 60-90-minute sessions. Art making with clay was always followed up by verbal descriptions of the experiences, which contributed to improving client's self-perception. She discovered parallels with her own life – some events and thoughts started to make sense to her. She trusts her own feelings more now and she expressed courage and interest to talk to her mother, which she had stopped trying. Thanks to clay she realised that she exists here and now in the world; and has her voice and a reason to be here. She has moved from seeing herself as an outsider in the family. She realised that she has her place in the family and wants to call for attention. She does not wait for the grandmother or someone else to understand that she needs a hug, but she can ask for it. she does not see the darkness alone, but islands of light have appeared.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Clay as an art therapy material allows for various activities and ways of manipulating to be explored and implemented. Each type of sensory working with clay, such as throwing, squeezing, forming, modelling, correcting, or imprinting impacts on the clients in a different way and carries specific therapeutic potential. Clay is not static. We move it and it moves us. We exchange our life energies mutually, we react on it and clay reacts on us. Clay is interesting with its life cycle – it is malleable when it has just the right amount of wetness. If it is dry, it falls apart. If it is too wet, it sticks, and it is hard to work with it. In its unburnt form it is renewable. Even when it dries and hardens, it is possible to liven it into the desired form. When we create an object and leave to dry in the air, it become too fragile. But after burning it in the kiln, it becomes firm, gains its permanent shape and cannot be changed just by adding water. It becomes stable and resilient. These qualities of clay are metaphorically transferred into the therapeutic process as a link to experiences that a client manages in the art therapy sessions.

Clay is 'empathetic'; it can tune into the feelings of a person that works with it and mirror their current state. Clay interacts with the person. A piece of clay from the same pile can dry in someone's hands whereas it can be sticky on hands of a different person. An interesting process is when we do not work with clay to create an object or to preserve it, but only for the present moment. We destroy the object after the process and return it to its original form and place where it came from, into the main pile. For some people it is a metaphor of the empowering process of creating, life and death, which they have in their own hands. Fear of not leaving anything tangible behind may appear. Moreover, to destroy something that required laborious effort, touches deeply on the inner mental and physical experience of oneself.

CONCLUSION

Based on the case study, clay as an art therapy material with specific multi-sensory characteristics contributes to transformation and therapeutic change in several areas of self-perception and actions of the client. Clay served as a catalyst, a metaphorical means of expression mediating parallels between physical material and psychological experience. Through the visualised, tangible and strongly tactile form of art making, the client was able to organise her thoughts in a personally meaningful way. The sensory-based concreteness and malleability of clay secured the focus of attention on the present moment and provided grounding, feeling of belonging, sense and hope.

From our research results it can be derived that clay as a highly sensory medium in art therapy may be used for several purposes: a) to overcome barriers of fear; b) to substitute verbal communication; b) to eliminate aggressive and auto-aggressive impulses; c) to develop imagination and three-dimensional perception; d) to create space for distance and insight; e) to create safe space for changing attitudes towards oneself and other people.

The results of our case study complement the findings of Šicková-Fabrici [1] stating that art making with clay supports the elimination of aggression, anger, fury, and also of sorrow and sadness.

Clay mediates the tactile-physical experience that can influence self-perception and self-esteem of a person. The malleability of clay not only a physical but also a psychological experience. It has the ability to absorb physical energy, but also pain, anxiety, unrest, distress, anger, or fear. In art making with clay a person can experience pleasant feelings of tenderness, love and acceptance. Therefore, using clay with its sensory qualities carries a special meaning and serves a purpose in an art therapy process that cannot be substituted.

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