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A BRIEF HISTORY OF ART THERAPY: MENTAL HEALTH AND NEUROSCIENCE

Art and psychology have its roots from the appearance of new ways of thinking and communication in our species, Homo sapiens, dating back to 70,000 and 30,000 years ago. What Yuval Noah Harari (2015) defines as the Cognitive Revolution, when Homo sapiens evolved imagination and creativity. Our species developed new abilities of thinking about their environment: (1) the ability to transmit larger quantities of information about the world; for example, planning and carrying out complex actions, such as avoiding predators and hunting animals, (2) the ability to transmit larger quantities of information about relationships. Sapiens could now gather with larger and more cohesive groups of individuals, and (3) the ability to transmit information about things that do not really exist, such as tribal spirits and nations.

It appears that accidental genetic mutations changed the inner wiring of our brains, enabling our species to think in unique and extraordinary ways and to communicate using an altogether new type of language. Harari (2015) calls it the Three of Knowledge mutation. Giving our species new inner wiring of the brain, our frontal lobes expanded. The frontal lobe is the part of our brains that control important cognitive skills in humans, such as emotional expression, problem solving, planning, memory, language, and judgment. It is considered the “control panel” of our personality and our ability to communicate.

An ivory figurine of a “lion/ness person” discovered in the Stadel Cave in Germany, approximately 32,000 years ago, is one of the first expressions of art in our species.

Since the Cognitive Revolution, art has been used as a tool for communication, self-expression, and group interaction by human beings. The therapeutic use of art has existed for centuries.

In contemporary times it can be traced to Sigmund Freud's theory of human personality. In 1896, Freud coined the term "Psychoanalysis". The psychoanalytic approach was one of the earliest forms of art psychotherapy. Freud believed that people suffering from mental health disorders have a propensity to repress emotions and experiences. Psychoanalysis heals by making unconscious motivations conscious, by gaining "insight". This therapeutic approach employs the concept of "transference," in which the art therapist interprets the person's symbolic or artistic self-expression through various art forms, such as drawings, paintings, or music (Edwards, 2004).

A frequently used projective measure by clinical psychologists, The House-Tree-Person test is based on the premise that unconscious aspects of the personality are exposed through the person's drawings. For instance, children who have experienced trauma (e.g., sexual abuse) are often reluctant to talk about their traumatic experiences but through drawings, they have a medium of expression that is "safer" and less anxiety provoking. It is a valuable tool to establish rapport and strengthen the working alliance or the professional relationship between child and therapist.

One of the pioneers in art therapy in the United States is Margaret Naumberg (May 14, 1890 – February 26, 1983). Naumberg was heavily influenced by the zeitgeist of her time, the psychoanalytic movement. She named her approach Dynamically Oriented Art Therapy (Junge, Maxine B., 2010). Naumberg described how patients who engaged in art therapy with "blocked speech," after creating images were able to verbalize and learn to freely associate in words to the spontaneous images they had created. In victims of trauma, "blocked speech" could be explained as a severe form of avoidance, in-par to dissociation, or detachment from the self. In other words, the terror evoked by the traumatic experience is too painful or powerful that the victim unconsciously detaches him or herself from the self and, or its surroundings. Through expressive art, whether it is drawing, painting or writing, it facilitates the expression of the traumatic memory, to the point that the "unspeakable" can be put into words. In this context, after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 in New York City, art therapists worked with victims and first responders of the World Trade Center (WTC) collapse. Unspeakable horror found space for victims with pencil and paper.

Art therapy has become increasingly popular as a bona fide therapeutic intervention in the mental health field. It is a profession that is described by the American Art Therapy Association as follows: “Art therapy is an integrative mental health and human services profession that enriches the lives of individuals, families, and communities through active art-making, creative process, applied psychological theory, and human experience within a psychotherapeutic relationship. Art therapy, facilitated by a professional art therapist, effectively supports personal and relational treatment goals as well as community concerns. Art therapy is used to improve cognitive and sensorimotor functions, foster self-esteem and self-awareness, cultivate emotional resilience, promote insight, enhance social skills, reduce and resolve conflicts and distress, and advance societal and ecological change”. Assessment tools have also been developed by art therapists that are used in clinical and research settings. Art-based diagnostic instruments consider the formal elements of visual expression as a way of helping to determine the person’s cognitive and emotional functioning and address their strengths, challenges, and progress in art therapy (Betts, 2006). Some of these art-based assessment tools are, the Diagnostic Drawing Series (DDS; Cohen, Mills, & Kijak, 1994) and Draw a Person Picking an Apple from a Tree (PPAT; Gantt & Tabone, 1998).

There is strong scientific support of the efficacy of Evidenced-Based Treatments (EBT) for many psychiatric disorders, such as Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) for depression (Beck et al., 1987) and Prolonged Exposure Therapy (PE) for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD; Foa, E. B., & Rothbaum, B. O., 1998). Advances in neuroscience is opening our scientific understanding to the benefits of art therapy in a wide range of mental health conditions, from anxiety and dementia to trauma and stressor-related disorders. Brain imaging studies using advanced technology such as Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) reveal information about how a person is processing stimuli that cannot otherwise be observed or self-reported. Konopka, LM (2014) clearly articulates the benefits of art therapy in the treatment of human pathology. “Art gives us a tremendous alternative unique and novel option for engaging brain networks that enhance the way the brain processes information, incorporates external and internal data, and develops new efficient brain connections”. The Cognitive Revolution is what enabled our species the ability to create art in its various forms. The healing properties of art are undeniable. It heals and enhances psychological well-being in the human kind.

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