

The Object and its Shadow in Art therapy : the Importance of the Subjectivity in Mental Health Research

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Introduction

Everybody knows the game:

« What do you see in the image below? Do you see a door handle or do you see a human figure playing flute? » (Figure 1). And if the good response were: « I see both, and I can see that I see both » - would this define mental health?



Figure 1: « What do you see? » - Irina Katz-Mazilu, photography, 2024.

How can art therapy help mental health?

The complexity of the mental health concept and area needs crossed multidisciplinary viewpoints and approaches.

Art therapy is an efficient healing tool because it comes to bridge scientific evidence-based practice and research to empirical sensibility for creative expression and arts. Recent research in the field is based on scientific methods, analysis, proof, evidence - thus joining other human sciences such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, neuroscience, neuroesthetics, as well as psychiatry and general medicine. This is welcome - and necessary - for ethical reasons, while also helping to spread information about art therapy to other professionals, to new categories of beneficiaries and - last but not least - to policy makers. All of them are not yet aware about why and how art therapy is important...

Art therapy is powerful precisely because of its polisemic dynamics. When I look at the door handle both understanding it as a « real object » part of a material reality, and as an outcome of my imagination in a metaphorical, subjective world, it means that I am not limited to only one of the two terms. Simplistic binary thinking is a trap and a mental prison. Creating new expressions and art forms out of already existing realities is an efficient path to hope and change in therapy - and subsequently in real life.

Art, Science and Therapy

But, while using scientific methods, can we reach the core of therapeutic approaches grounded in art making?

Art in itself is not meant to prove anything. It is an existential experimentation as response to life issues. It helps individu-

al and collective emotional regulation and balance. In many circumstances, it is healing in itself. While each living being is endowed with the capability of adapting and evolving in order to keep staying alive, humans are provided with an « aesthetic brain » (Magsamen, 2019) offering a specific approach to existential dilemma, to pain and suffering, to mental health issues.



Figure 2a

Art therapy is grounded in the creative process as an outcome of the primary creativity (Winnicott, 1971) of the human manifestation of life. Active through the empathic creativity (Katz-Mazilu, 2025), art therapy is necessarily as non-quantifiable as art itself. Yet quantitative research through objective measures of the psychosomatic outcomes in art therapeutic protocols offer a scientific vision of its effectiveness. Also qualitative research is able to translate the creativity assesment from the imaginary language to the academic one. Even if, as for any translation, we have to accept some degree of loss or change of meaning...

Research in art therapy has to merge rigorous assesment with awareness of its subjectivity and limitations. As in art, research in art therapy must be open-minded, imaginative, creative and free. As in science, research in art therapy must preserve high quality standards and a deeply ethical grounding (Bokoch R. & al, 2025, King JL & al, 2019).

Figures 2a and 2b illustrate how the shadow of a small paper fish embodied terrifying fear in a dramatic puppets staging within an art therapy group session with feminine prisoners. Simple materials, simple drawings, simple narratives...but the individual and group creative process was in touch with deep emotions.

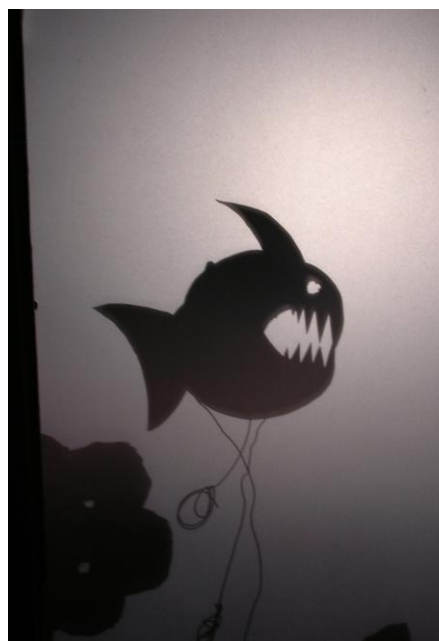


Figure 2b

Conclusion

The core of the art therapy is in the possibility to enhance dinamic, fluid, evolving thinking through creative imagery and art making contained in the space of the empathic relationship. The process of transforming images inside a safe mental environment helps us access our internal « shadow » - defined by Jung as the hidden, unconcious part of the human personality, rejected by the concious ego. Whatever the cause of our somatic or mental conditions, unbearable feelings and emotions can be adressed in metaphorical ways through art therapy. Thus we can accept - and value - the reality of our inner world. Just like in the real world where any object, event or phenomenon is discernable both through its appearance and through its consequences - as, for instance, with the projected shadow of an object illuminated by a light spot (Figure 3) - the art terapeutic process helps handling the double nature of our mental life with objective and subjective realities cooperating, not fighting!

Isn't it this the final goal of any therapy? (Figure 4).



Figure 3: « The Gaze » 2022
Irina Katz-Mazilu, photography.



Figure 4: « Art&Tree » Irina Katz-Mazilu 2020 painting and photography.

Keywords Art, art therapy, aesthetic brain, empathic creativity, creative process, research.

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