



Art Creation and the Mental Health: A Qualitative Study among Artists

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Abstract

The article aims to examine the effectiveness of art therapy to maintain mental health. It is popularly believed that emotional catharsis in the form of art enhances positive mood, brings clarity to one's cognition, and so on. The study uses qualitative data obtained from open-ended and moderately structured interviews conducted among artists. The artists whose arts reflected originality rather than an imitation of a visible target such as portrait drawing are chosen for the study. The group is a mix of professional artists and self-taught artists. The study finds that the art therapy technique helps artists to communicate their thoughts, desires, and contentious emotions in a manner which is socially acceptable. The study says art helps people build self-esteem, bring positivity and self-confidence. Self-esteem, self-confidence and authentic identity are prerequisites for not only healthy performance and high productivity in organisations but also for becoming a fully functioning individual.

Keywords: Art therapy, Non-verbal Communication, Self-esteem, Well-being, Mental health

1. Introduction

The paper is developed with the goal of exploring the effectiveness of art as a vehicle for mental health development. Art is viewed by the majority, as a medium of expression. When the word 'therapy'

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is added, it signals the potential of arts in impacting the mental health of an individual. Art is a broader concept which gives people constraint to define it in a few sentences for art has different meanings to different people. Art is deeply personal and subjective, and none can completely decipher an artistic object. Art celebrates individuality and embraces the whole spectrum of human emotions. The present article investigates if art creation can be viewed as a vehicle for mental health because of the recent popularity of art therapy following Rogers' person-centred approach. In art therapy, there are many modalities that are used such as music, poem writing, dance, painting or sketching, theatre and so on. The scope of the present study is limited to painting and sketching art creation. It helps to isolate the relationship between a single form of art with mental health than going for multi-modal artistic expression.

World Health Organization describes mental health as a state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully and can contribute to her or his community (WHO, 2014). Although it has brought a positive direction from the common definition of mental health as the absence of mental illness, this is not devoid of controversies. After slaying people in war, an individual cannot be said to be in a state of well-being. On the other hand, feelings of desperation or frustration after getting fired from the job is considered a normal reaction to adversities (Galderisi, Heinz, Kastrup, Beezhold, & Sartorius, 2015). Human life is a right mix of positive and negative emotions; hence, gauging mental health only in the positive light is rather incomplete. Mental health is understood in three different dimensions- emotional well-being, psychological well-being and social well-being (Bauer & Hämmig, 2014). Emotional well-being reflects the happiness and general satisfaction, psychological well-being is about embracing the self as it is whereas social well-being is about the sense of belongingness to the society as a whole (Galderisi et al., 2015). Mental health is a dynamic state of internal equilibrium which enables individuals to use their abilities in harmony with universal values of society (Galderisi et al., 2015). Basic cognitive and social skills, ability to recognise, express and modulate one's own emotions, empathise with others, flexibility

and ability to cope with adverse life events and function in social roles, and harmonious relationship between body and mind represent important components of mental health which contribute to varying degrees to the state of internal equilibrium (Galderisi et al., 2015). Stretched description of mental health gives a comprehensive picture of mental health. The present study is an attempt to understand if art serves as a therapy to achieve mental health taking the perspective of Galderisi et al. (2015) on mental health.

2. Art Therapy

Painting, drumming, creative kinesthetic movement, and theatre permit anybody from any age groups to articulate their thoughts and feelings apart from verbal expression (Malchiodi, 2005). Expressive therapy is based on the principle that such activities help individuals communicate freely in a way that talk therapy cannot do. When we use art, music, dance/movement, drama, poetry/creative writing, play and sand tray within the context of psychotherapy, counselling, rehabilitation or health care, we call it expressive therapy (Malchiodi, 2005). It can even be considered as an integrative approach when we mix it up with treatment. Art therapy utilises art media, images, and the creative process and respects patient/client responses to the created products as observations of development, abilities, personality, interests, concerns, and conflicts (Malchiodi, 2005). It is a healing form of settling emotional conflicts, nurturing self-awareness, boosting social skills, managing behaviour, solving problems, reducing anxiety, bringing realism and increasing self-esteem (American Art Therapy Association, 2019).

2.1 History of Arts in Expressive Therapy

McNiff (1992) claims that arts have consistently been part of life as a healing method throughout the history of humankind. Egyptians have a history of encouraging people with mental illness to engage in some artistic activity (Sacks, 1982). During the Renaissance in Europe, English physician and writer Robert Burton theorised that imagination played a role in health and well-being (Kothari, 2015). The idea of using arts as a supplement to medical treatment

emerged in the period from the late 1800s to the 1900s alongside the advent of psychiatry. Goodenough (1926) studied children's drawings as patterns of cognitive development. The creative art therapies became more popular during the 1930s and 1940s when psychotherapists and artists understood that self-expression through nonverbal methods such as painting and music creation might serve people with mental illness. When talking is impossible and impractical, art therapy found its place in the treatment. Gladding and Newsome (2003) highlight the synthesis of visual art activities into counselling treatment for adults. The article emphasised that a quick client drawing or photomontage can move a client forward when talk therapy is resisted or ineffective.

2.2 Art Therapy and Mental Health

The present section examines how the unique characteristics of art therapy are aiding mental health. Galderisi et al., (2015) came up with a comprehensive definition of mental health which balances the inflated positivity, which was there in earlier explanations. The expression of the dynamic state of internal equilibrium (Galderisi et al., 2015) is meant to reflect the fact that different life stages require changes in the achieved equilibrium: adolescent crises, marriage, becoming a parent, retirement and so on requires an active search for a new mental equilibrium. This acknowledges the fact that healthy people may experience appropriate human emotions such as fear, anger, sadness, and grief while at the same time possessing sufficient resilience to restore the dynamic state of internal equilibrium.

Pablo Picasso's challenging statement about the therapeutic power of art after viewing the first exhibition of African masks in Paris, "men have made those masks for a sacred purpose, as a kind of mediation between themselves and the unknown, to overcome their fear and horror by giving it a form and an image" (Gowan, 1975) emphasises the need of art. The concept of converting fear into visual image provides awareness into the process of art therapy. Dissanayake (1992) believes that art comes from the desire to respond to problems and fears we face. We find emotional satisfaction and calm in the controlled behaviour of shaping time and space, of putting these into comprehensible forms (Appleton,

2001). Art can very well aid in maintaining internal equilibrium by overcoming fears.

Expression of collective values specifies respect and care for oneself and other living beings; recognition of the connection between people, respect for the environment, respect for one's own and other's freedom and so on. This is where the role of colours in art therapy comes into the picture. By using colour, the client can liberate a variety of moods and emotions she or he may not be able to express verbally because, in art therapy, all moods and emotions are seen acceptable, each personifying its grace and beauty. The use of colours in art helps clients to immerse in art creation and facilitates the shifting of focus from the left brain to the right brain mode. Art therapy credits its success to the right brain, the true birthplace of emotions. Only by actively using and exposing the right brain, can one get in touch with the deepest, innermost feelings.

The new definition of mental health also emphasises a few fundamental components. Essential cognitive and social skills, emotional regulation, empathy, flexibility, the capacity to function in social roles and opportunities to have communal interaction without prejudice and social exclusion are considered as necessary phases of mental health. Art is a powerful channel of communication and a vehicle for self-expression. Art gives them clarity about their cognitions and emotions and aids in articulating concepts which are otherwise difficult to express (Withrow, 2004).

Art therapy helps us in three ways: (1) as assistance in establishing an empathetic relationship (2) as an expressive outlet (3) as a starting place for imagination and interpretation of one's thoughts (Moon, 1999). According to Kielo (1991), there are five basic uses for art-making in the context of therapy.

1. Art is used for developing empathy
2. Art is used for clarifying feelings
3. Art explores preconscious and unconscious
4. Art helps to distinguish the effect
5. Art helps to explore relationships

The final element of the new definition of mental health is about the mind-body connection. It is on the principle that mind, brain, organism, and environment are profoundly interlinked. Disturbances, in this connection, create a lot of physical and mental disorders. Art therapy is effectively used in establishing this connection, particularly in the areas of mood disorders, stress disorders, and physical illness (Machiodi, 2005). Neuro-science and neurodevelopment have drawn its attention to expressive therapies regarding mind-body interventions. Trauma practitioners actively use expressive therapies to tap the nonverbal core of traumatic memory. Talwar (2007) designed an art therapy trauma protocol (ATTP) to process speechless traumatic memories. This type of processing helps individual to generate sensory awareness, which endorses affect and emotional regulation. The process of generating an image benefits the artist to perceive his/her thoughts and actions while becoming mindful of the sensory-motor experience and the movement of the body.

3. Literature Review

For the present study, a few previous types of research were reviewed to recognise empirical support for the effectiveness of art therapy. Twelve studies were considered, which are directly relevant to the present study. Morphological analysis of the previous literature gives some interesting insights about art therapy. The review is presented following the dimensions used for morphological analysis of literature.

3.1 Demographics

Most of the art therapy papers are based on women (Heenan, 2006; Kim, 2010; Spandler et al., 2007; Talwar, 2007) and children (Wilson et al., 2007). A few focus on undergraduate students as well (De Petrillo & Winner, 2005; Pizarro, 2004). There are no mixed results when it comes to the effectiveness of art therapy. Almost all studies could provide the benefits of it either as a mood enhancer or getting in touch with deeply felt emotions or recovering from mental health.

3.2 Method adopted

Studies in art therapy fall majorly under the qualitative approach; case studies (Kim, 2010; Talwar, 2006; Heenan, 2006; Appleton, 2001), conceptual paper (Chilton, 2013; Withrow, 2004), literature review (Slayton, D'Archer, & Kaplan, 2010; Stuckey & Nobel, 2010) and qualitative study with in-depth interviews and observation (Spandler et al., 2007; Wikström, 2015). Only two studies had used the experimental method, and it was conducted among students in a classroom setting (De Petrillo & Winner, 2005; Pizarro, 2004).

3.3 Orientation-Trauma Treatment

Studies are diverse if we consider the outcomes of art therapy studied. Two studies emphasised the use of art therapy for trauma treatment (Appleton, 2001; Heenan, 2006; Talwar, 2007; Wikström, 2015). Those studies have given a neurological explanation to trauma and its impact on mental health. Traumatic memory as it gets implicit has an involuntary influence. Dissociation happens between implicit and explicit memory due to trauma. The practice of art therapy, which is grounded in psychoanalytic theories of Naumburg, 1973 and Kramer, 1973 (Malchiodi, 2014) claims that the deepest emotions exist within the unconscious mind in the form of images and not words. Due to trauma, patients may find it tough to articulate emotions. In such cases, they find various colours to help them to articulate or express their deep-felt emotions and give them better clarity (Withrow, 2004). Kim (2010) demonstrates how art therapy helped a depressed woman to get in touch with her inner conflicts and emotions. When the patient allows the art therapist to read or see the art created by them, it can be considered as an invitation to the inner world (Kim, 2010).

3.4 Orientation-Positive Impact

Heenan (2006) talks about how art therapy can be useful for improving self-esteem, safe space, and empowerment. Spandler et al. (2005) talk about the influence of art therapy in recovering from mental illness. The paper defines recovery as a sense of hope for the future. It says art therapy fosters hope, creates meaning and purpose, develops a new coping mechanism, and reconstructs identity.

Chilton (2013) attempted to find a connection between art therapy and the flow. Flow is a psychological state of optimal attention and engagement. The study is based on the positive empirical evidence on the relationship between flow mindset with well-being.

3.5 The Rationale of the Study

Previous researches say art has therapeutic benefits if the attention is given to the process of art-making than the end product or result of art-making. The present study intends to explore the views of artists' on their journey of art-making. The study seeks to understand if the journey has brought any changes in their lives and helped them to maintain their mental health following the new definition of mental health. It is worth studying in the Indian context, where social and cultural norms play a major role in one's life. High social and cultural norms create inhibitions when it comes to desires, longings, and emotions. In such a scenario, it is interesting to learn how art helps them to be authentic and maintain well-being.

4. Methodology

Can art be considered as a therapeutic tool for mental health? The study uses a qualitative approach to address this question. The study is conducted among a non-clinical population. The sample consisted of 6 artists, selected as per certain criteria.

1. They have been active in the art-making process for more than two years.
2. They engage in self-expression through arts. Their arts reflect an element of their self. Hence, artists who excessively focus on portrait drawing or imitative art are included in the study.
3. They are either professional or amateur artists.

The sample of artists is selected from Instagram who actively publish their arts regularly.

The interview is carried out with a moderately structured set of questions. All questions were open-ended. All interviews initiated with the question, 'what art means to you?'. That question is wide

enough to elicit the answers without any constraints and direction. Further, they were asked about the emotional experience they go through during the process of art-making. The responses then were thematically analysed to understand if any of the dimensions of mental health are touched in their responses. These artists were contacted online and interviews were conducted through Instagram chat rooms. Each person approximately took 25 minutes to finish the interview.

5. Study Findings

The responses from six artists give a lot of insights on what art means to artists. Thematic analysis of the responses gave rise to seven broad themes; escapism, re-living, comprehension, saviour, self-expression, inner eye, and catharsis. Some of these themes go in a positive direction while having negative themes caution us for trusting art as a definite means for mental health. Findings are described through synopses and deliberations of themes illustrated by direct quotes (Table 1).

The themes emerged are escapism/re-living, comprehension/inner eye, saviour and self-expression/catharsis.

Table 1: Themes identified and quotes from the respondents

Respondent (Res)	Themes identified			
	Escapism/Re-living	Comprehension/Inner eye	Saviour	Self-expression/Catharsis
Res 1	<i>It is an imaginary path to run away from reality. Most often, art elicits various emotions; some are sad, some are happy.</i>		<i>I feel lost and time wasted if I don't create art for long. Usually, I create art when I experience extreme sadness, anger, or</i>	<i>Even if I am recreating a sad moment, I enjoy that feeling. It is almost like I am attached to it. I want to hold on to that moment of seeing that sadness in my way</i>

			<i>lust.</i>	<i>than being realistic. My art has a dual impact; it sometimes gives a peak of happiness and sadness.</i>
<i>Res 2</i>	<i>Art gives some diversion from the sadness I go through in my life; a goal to look forward to. I feel happy when I create art because the process is gratifying.</i>	<i>My art is my understanding of the world. It gives me clarity when I express whatever I see, I feel, I understand through colours.</i>		
<i>Res 3</i>		<i>Art is inherently tied to how I view and shape and form knowledge about the world around me. I do not look at art as a profession, but as an on-going process of knowledge and thought process just like there are language and numbers, art gives language and numbers an image.</i>	<i>Art is a growing exponential component of my existence. The more I live, the more art is created around me, connecting the past, present and future, like a footprint or fossil, art connects the dots we do not see and the dots we see.</i>	<i>I am causal creative and my sense of identity, my purpose, my meaning of existence is in a continual creative practice making sense of truth and reality, fantasy and dreams and the potential energy for colourful exchanges of these realms.</i>
<i>Res 4</i>	<i>There were certain</i>	<i>Art gave me clarity in my</i>	<i>Art was, is and going</i>	<i>One fine day, without</i>

	<p><i>moments in my past life, which I badly wanted to come back, to happen again. All those wishes and desires for the past life made my mind filled with illusionary content. I initiated my art journey there, just to experience those past moments one more time.</i></p>	<p><i>thinking about my unmet emotional needs and helped me to build an identity by embracing my imperfections.</i></p>	<p><i>to be my saviour. I would have gone insane if I wasn't an artist.</i></p>	<p><i>much preparation, I went ahead and bought a few colours and drawing sheets and started pouring my emotions out. I noticed when you express yourself through art; you get more acceptability and less social judgment. Then I took up art to say things which are otherwise tough to tell it openly.</i></p>
<p>Res 5</p>	<p><i>For me, art is an expression of my memorable moments. I love to paint my favourite places I have been to. For example, my first trip to Golden Gate Bridge was a memorable one. When I took at my painting, all the memories</i></p>			

	<p><i>related that painting flows in my mind, and I cherish it. Art is my way of documenting my favourite times. Every painting of mine has a story behind it.</i></p>			
<p>Res 6</p>				<p><i>Art means visionary self-expression to me. I cannot paint my emotions or everyday aspects. But I get a strong urge to paint when I see a vision. And it means it takes a longer time. Most often, these paintings are hidden from all. The vision can be on emotion or experience or a subject. But unless it does not come as a mental image, drawing is dead to me.</i></p>

				<i>Visions are spontaneous, so I have 100 visions but have been able to paint only 4. Art means the ability to express the infinite beauties and wonders that is felt by us, where words cannot capture.</i>
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5.1 Escapism/Re-living

Creating arts to distract you from the present moment can be viewed as positive as well as negative. At times, it is healthier not to act when one is emotionally charged. Painting or drawing during such tough times is helpful to bring serenity in an artist’s mind and can act as a tool for mindfulness practice. Four out of the six respondents thinks that art provides an imaginary path for a brief period. That imaginary path can be about the past or something that has not happened. However, it can backfire if one is using art to hold on to the past for a longer duration if we take mental health as the objective for art creation. The theme is labelled as escapism and re-living to denote the wide range of scope. It can be either a transitory period of escapism or denial to accept the present situation.

5.2 Comprehension/Inner eye

One of the artists claims that art helped to find herself. Although she initiated this journey of arts with a desire for re-living, eventually, it gave her the real purpose for life. Deep thinking about her arts and seeing her mental vision in the form of an image gave her an objective perspective about her felt emotions. Art assist us to understand the world, to connect the dots and to make

sense of the reality. Painting emotions helps people explore the relationship pattern and identity and the role of emotions in it.

Sooner or later, boldly expressing emotions provides lucidity to oneself. Instead of saying to oneself that 'I am hurt', attempting to represent that feeling through image gives objectivity to it. Objectivity helps one see the distance between 'self' and 'emotions of self'. Art is one way of developing intuition and encourages a lot of introspection. Inner eye or intuitive mindset is something which we can expect through art creation over time.

5.3 Saviour

Artists seem to depend on art when they find themselves in a predicament. One of the artists felt a deep sense of responsibility when they are not creative. They see the creation of art as their purpose of life, and when they do not engage in art-making for a long period, they feel they have wasted their time. Art has become an indispensable part of their life. Art is an undeniable element of their existence.

5.4 Catharsis

Society does not easily accept emotions, specifically negative emotions. Expressive and sensitive people are viewed as unprofessional in an organisation. As we progress to adulthood, we learn to regulate our emotions and often, get pressurised to suppress unpleasant emotions. One of the artists opined, "I came into this art creation process because I had plenty of emotions bottled up in my chest, which required a let out." Generally, all emotions and all thoughts are acceptable in art when we compare it with other forms of communication. As per Rogers' client-centred therapy, unconditional positive regard is one of the pre-requisites for building a rapport with the client. When you get acceptance for your ideas when articulated in the form of art, you tend to feel you are among the larger group.

6. Conclusion: Can art creation lead to mental health?

Mental health definition of Galderisi et al. (2015) emphasises certain aspects such as maintaining an internal equilibrium in the background of uncertainties, being harmonious with societal

values, emotional regulation, flexibility, adaptability and empathy, and the mind-body connection. Artists' perspective on the art creation process matches with these dimensions of mental health. Emotions get more social acceptability when it is articulated through the medium of art (catharsis dimension). It helps an artist maintain harmony with societal values (escapism/re-living). Art provides an insight which helps an artist to maintain an internal equilibrium amidst hardships (comprehension/inner eye). Art facilitates the recognition, expression, and clarity of emotions. Art can be a powerful form of empathy. Art helps in coping up with adversity (Savior). If we take art as therapy, we have excellent ways to establish a mind-body connection (Talwar, 2007).

From this conceptual article, we can reasonably assume that art can be therapeutic for the non-clinical population as well. It helps people cope with adversities and live their life fully by being authentic about their emotions. This article is limited in its scope as it was based on qualitative interviews with artists. The study has the scope of future research in the context of the workplace. 'Can art bring a collaborative work culture?' is one such question that can be explored further. Another way to add robustness in this present study would be doing an empirical study. In addition, understanding the impact of multimodal expressive therapy can be explored further. Since this study is a maiden attempt to understand what art means to artists, this has a very limited implication. However, this paper can be seen as a foundation for further studies.

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