

Reflections about the Epistemological Status of the Artistic Productions Created in the Course of Arts Therapeutic Sessions

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Abstract: *We reflect on the special status of the artistic productions created during arts therapeutic sessions. Based upon clinical and experimental data stemming from a multiannual research project with people suffering from exclusion and marginalization, we will show that the pictorial and literary works created in the course of art therapy sessions allow addressing the biographic traumata by detour, allowing both concealing and unveiling the split memories and severed facets of personality. The longitudinal follow-up study with N=30 participants is based on original rating scales allowing to use the artistic production as a tool of research. Our reflections are illustrated with typical examples of artistic productions.*

Located at an intermediary level between objectivity and subjectivity, the artistic production can become a privileged instrument to restore the traumatised persons' mentalizing capacities in the appeasing context of the therapeutic relationship. At a later evolutionary stage, sharing their works with the public will increase their self-esteem and facilitate their social reintegration.

Using the artistic production as a tool of research could also be interesting in the current debate on the evaluation of psychotherapy as this procedure is liable to fill the gap between objectivity and subjectivity.

Keywords: *Arts therapeutic productions, epistemological status, rating scales, social reintegration, trauma.*

1. INTRODUCTION: THE TRIANGULAR RELATIONSHIP

What is the epistemological status of the artistic production created in the course of art therapy sessions? Based on experimental and clinical data of a multiannual research project, we will further develop some thoughts proposed in 2006 [1].

The works created in the course of an art therapy session have not got the same status than a picture painted in a solitary studio or a diary written in one's room. They have not either got the same status than a picture intended for an exhibition or a play intended for a representation. They include a secret message addressed to the therapist, but also a message addressed by the patient's unconscious to his conscious Self. The productions are hence essentially polysemous, and the amazement that they can provoke with the two partners who are present keeps them thinking for a long time after the session.

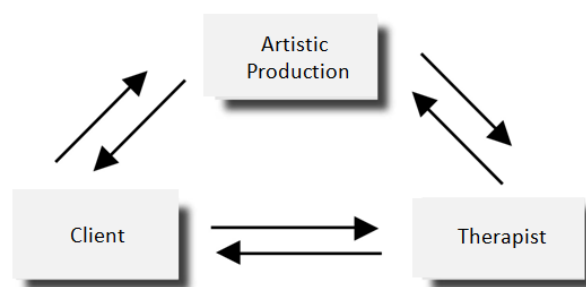


Fig1. *Between subjectivity and objectivity: the epistemological status of the artistic production according to Schiltz (2006a)*

The productions created during the sessions are hence highly subjective as they express the person's most intimate reality. At the same time, they are over-determined by the projections of the two people who are present. But they also have an objective side as they allow keeping a material trace of what is

going on in the therapeutic processes. Research on psychotherapies through artistic mediation is hence more complex and, at the same time, less speculative than research on verbal psychotherapies. The ex post analysis of artistic production allows reporting on the subject's evolution in a much better way than the analysis of his speech; we know that the emotional memory always distorts the facts.

2. APPLICATION OF THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS TO RESEARCH IN ARTS THERAPIES

The major objective in clinical psychology and also in art therapy is the creation of meaning in the course of the therapeutic interaction, namely the intuitive understanding of a process that one is part of oneself.

From the point of view of epistemology of research, the traditional clinical approach is *hermeneutic*, which, according to Binswanger [2] and the phenomenologists, is the ideal method in the humanities as it allows a constant interaction between the parts and the ensemble, so that there is a continuous evolution and a mutual enrichment between the main ideas and the analysis of the details.

For the last 20 years, the former dichotomy between experimental and clinical research has been replaced by an integrated approach [3-8] in which the clinician tries controlling his intuitive impressions, using an experimental or quasi-experimental design, resorting to inferential statistics and searching for validation criteria external to the therapeutic situation. His objective consists in finding the best possible balance between the richness of his subjective clinical intuition and the desire to control his conclusions with a rigorous method.

The inclusive vision fosters the study of one similar reality at several levels, combining several convergence studies, studies with a between-subject design and sequential studies in order to do justice to the richness and the inexhaustible complexity of a real psychosocial situation. Likewise, it fosters the joint use of several tools (semi-structured interviews, psychometric scales, projective tests, expressive tests, external evaluation criteria), of which none is complete by itself, but which, together, allow having a nuanced multidimensional view of the phenomenon that has to be studied.

In this research process, the study of the works created in the course of art therapy sessions stands in a select place as it contributes to the creation of meaning and as it allows, on the other hand, keeping a tangible trace of the therapeutic processes. We will highlight the interest of this tool basing ourselves on some clinical and experimental data of one of the outcome studies being part of a larger multi annual research project [9].

3. EXPERIMENTAL ILLUSTRATION: LONGITUDINAL FOLLOW-UP STUDY OF PEOPLE SUFFERING FROM MARGINALISATION AND EXCLUSION

3.1. Clinical Background: Psychic Transformations Linked to Chronic Stress and Repeated Traumata

The clinicians and researchers have realised that the classical definitions of the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and of the Adjustment Disorder (AD) with anxiety or depression did not fully cover the post-traumatic psychopathological occurrences encountered in clinical reality.

In this context, the functional character of the defence mechanisms of the split and the dissociation has been emphasised [10]. The defence mechanisms and even those called "primary" can indeed permit psychic survival at a time of catastrophe. In the long run, even if they are linked to the privileged functionality of the people, they are however susceptible to block their psychic evolution and their affective maturation. With people who have encountered repeated traumatic biographic events since their childhood, we often meet the syndrome recently called Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (CPTSD), differing from the classical Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder by a more important dissociative component.

The descriptions of the operational functioning stemming from the French psychosomatic school [11-13] can help us understand the mechanisms underlying the adaptive pathology. This school has linked the mechanism of somatisation to the repression of the emotional and pulsional tensions that cannot be elaborated in a psychic way. The analogy between operational functioning and post-traumatic functioning has aroused the researchers' attention. Hence, the state of sideration that one sees in homeless people can correspond to the progressive withdrawal of the pulsional, emotional and imaginary life, leading to a purely factual speech aimed at the material needs of everyday life.

Reflections about the Epistemological Status of the Artistic Productions Created in the Course of Arts Therapeutic Sessions

Posttraumatic Embitterment Disorder (PTED) has recently been described in clinical literature [14]. This condition is often the consequence of a series of traumatic biographic events that are interpreted as being humiliations and injustices and breaking down the persons' fundamental beliefs. Therapeutic approaches of this disorder are based on the concepts of "wisdom psychology" that can act in the context of the values.

In the context of a multiannual research project, the mode of action and the efficiency of arts therapies was explored with several clinical subgroups, using an integrated quantitative and qualitative research methodology, combining psychometric scales projective tests and expressive tests [15, 9]. In order to use the artistic production as a tool of research, original rating scales were constructed, allowing making the link between qualitative analysis and the use of inferential and multidimensional statistical procedures [16].

With the aim of illustrating our reflections about the epistemological status of the artistic production we present some data of a longitudinal follow-up study with N= 30 persons.

3.2. Methods and Population

Composition of the sample (Total N=30):

The sample is constituted of 18 men, aged 20- 62 years (m= 37 years 5 months) and of 12 women: aged 19- 58 years (m= 36 years 7 months).

All of them participated to weekly sessions of multimodal arts therapies for at least 6 months.

Tools:

For descriptive aims, we refer to a typology established in a preliminary stage of the project [17]. For the comparative pretest-posttest study, we use the above mentioned rating scales for the literary and pictorial production. As our data belong to the ordinal level of measurement, the computations are based on nonparametric statistics.

Research Hypothesis:

Located at an intermediary level between objectivity and subjectivity, the pictorial and literary production can become a privileged instrument for restoring the traumatised persons' mentalizing capacities in the comforting context of the therapeutic relationship.

3.3. Results

3.3.1. Descriptive Data

According to a typology elaborated in the course of the exploratory phase of the project more than 90% of the pictorial productions created at the beginning of the treatment by people suffering from exclusion and marginalization, could be categorized according to one of the following 5 categories:

- Type 1: "Nostalgia of the lost paradise"
- Type 2: "Fascination by evil and death"
- Type 3: "Graphics and ornamentation"
- Type 4: "Description and banalization"

Type 5, called "Dislocation and fragmentation of the forms" could only be encountered in the subgroup of people living in great precariousness and suffering from a latent psychosis or from a cognitive deterioration linked to a long-term abuse of illegal drugs and alcohol [17].

The pictorial productions of our sample were classified according to the same typology. The changes in the distribution of the types in the course of treatment by arts therapies are liable to give an indication of the changes at the level of defence mechanisms.

Table1. Distribution of the drawings (N = 30) according to the typology; initial stage of therapy

	Type 1	Type 2	Type 3	Type 4	Type 5
Frequency	4	2	10	12	2

The privileged distribution in types 3 (“graphics and ornamentations”) and 4 (“description and banalization”) (Table 1) shows the importance of the defensive and evasive functioning within our sample.

Table2. *Distribution of the drawings (N = 30) according to the typology; final stage of therapy*

	Type 1	Type 2	Type 3	Type 4	Type 5
Frequency	7	9	6	6	2

At the end of therapy (Table 2), more productions were classified in type 1 and 2, showing a better contact with one’s repressed feelings and unconscious fantasies.

3.3.2. Exploration of the Conjoint Changes in the Literary and Pictorial Expression

In order to explore the development of the capacity of symbolization, we computed rank correlations on the Delta values of the rating scales for the literary and the pictorial production. The connections between the pictorial and literary creations (stories and drawings created under musical induction) show a common development in terms of a decline of conventional contents and banality, an increase of topics of existential significance and an improvement of formal and stylistic qualities (Table 3).

Table3. *Rank correlations computed on the Delta values of the pictorial and literary productions*

Rating scale for the stories	Rating scale for the pictures	Spearman’s Rho	Signif. bilat.
Richness of details	Force of the stroke	,587(**)	,001
Differentiated vocabulary	Objectal relationship : discord	,525(**)	,002
Emotional implication	Figuration: house	,483(**)	,006
Differentiated vocabulary	Existential theme : love	,474(**)	,007
Richness of détails	Personal implication	,445(*)	,012
Poorness of fantasy	Force of the stroke	-,445(*)	,012
Emotional implication	Care and finition	,440(*)	,013
Inventiveness of fantasy	Realism	,424(*)	,017
Differentiated vocabulary	Figure- ground structure	,398(*)	,027
Richness of details	Objectal relationship: discord	,392(*)	,029
Artistic elaboration	Symbolic content	,392(*)	,029
Inventiveness of fantasy	Force of the stroke	,392(*)	,029
Artistic elaboration	Richness of colours	,392(*)	,029
Outcome	Symbolic content	,376(*)	,037
Emotional implication	Force of the stroke	,376(*)	,037
Richness of détails	Existential theme: love	,373(*)	,039
Richness of détails	Existential theme : sexuality	,373(*)	,039
Conformism	Optimal disposal of time	,372(*)	,039
Originality	Care and finition	-,369(*)	,041
Stylistic flexibility	Concordance with age	,368(*)	,042
Cognitive elaboration	Harmony of colours	-,362(*)	,045
Symbolic elaboration	Banal contents	-,361(*)	,046
Artistic elaboration	Banal contents	-,361(*)	,046
Outcome	Objectal relationship: discord	,361(*)	,046
Outcome	Objectal relationship: nostalgia	,361(*)	,046
Outcome	Existential theme: death	,361(*)	,046
Outcome	Application and finition	-,360(*)	,047
Inventiveness of fantasy	Scene	,358(*)	,048
Symbolic elaboration	Scene	,358(*)	,048

These results are concordant with observations on other clinical subgroups: highly gifted underachievers, adolescents suffering from conduct disorders, elderly people confronted to the identity crisis of third-age, psychiatric patients suffering from emotional disorders, personality disorders or eating disorders [9].

In many parallel studies we noticed that, for different kinds of expression, the changes went in the direction of a better quality of the imaginary and symbolic elaboration, in parallel to an improvement of the formal quality of the productions.

4. CLINICAL ILLUSTRATIONS

Some examples of stories written under musical induction will allow illustrating the reuptake of the processes of imaginary and symbolic imagination in the final stage of treatment. At the beginning, the stories invented by the same persons lacked creativity and originality.

4.1. 25-Year-Old Woman; Subgroup of Homeless People

“Once upon a time there was a small bird that lived in a forest near a medieval town. It often dared to advance behind the city walls to watch the lives of those who lived there. It did not ask anyone anything. It simply liked to watch. The majority of the people did not notice its presence anyway. But this did not bother it. It was happy that way. It sang for the people that were lonely and unhappy, hoping to be able to lift their spirits a little. And most of the time it was the poorest and most excluded people that enjoyed its presence and its chirping, and that thanked it by throwing some breadcrumbs.

The small bird was never bored as there was always a lot to see behind these stone walls. Especially on market days that were very lively and very wealthy in colours. As well as on holidays. And when it was tired of (these people’s) eventful life that it normally preferred to watch from a safe distance, it flew back home in order to rest after all these noises and movements of creatures that it nevertheless found strange.” (Vivaldi: The Four Seasons)

This text shows the access to social and humanitarian preoccupations with a person that lived in great precariousness and was only focussed on the satisfaction of her survival instinct and primary needs.

4.2. 25-Year-Old Man; Subgroup of Drug Addicted Prisoners

“I was dead and I resurrected like a phoenix. All I had to do was live, but my wings are shackled even though I would like to spread my wings to be able to explore other territories in this world.

I hence fortify my hope for a future departure, a departure that should carry me high into the air and I exercise myself in patience. In prison there is not much to explore, because one has to submit to a lot of duties. But sometimes, it is maybe better to first have the opportunity to understand oneself, in order to discover contentment later.

Later I succeeded in freeing one of my wings and I already had the impression of rising a little. But I kept my eyes open and I realised that I could only hop. I hence had to admit to myself that I had to take one step after the other and that I could free my second wing in due time to be finally able to discover wonders.” (Purcell: Fairy Queen)

Through this story, love of adventure and desire for freedom are expressed, but also a more realistic view of one’s own inhibitions and weaknesses.

4.3. 57-Year-Old Woman; Subgroup of Refugees and Asylum Seekers

“It happens in a clearing, in spring; sun, light, birds chirping on the trees. The sky is blue. Butterflies flutter, intersect, and dance above the flowers and the blades of grass... They come to rest and rise again.

An agitator arrives: everyone loses their head.

Calm sets in again: the „passer-by” has „passed“. Life starts again, following its own rhythm, in its own place. Life appears from every part: from the smallest hole, from behind the smallest grove: rabbits, squirrels, hinds and deer calves. They all dance; everything is happiness and movement...

Then everything dozes off, everything rests... Nothing dies; everything stays up, like a heart beating, breathing, and harmony. From time to time, like moved by a gentle zephyr, like a child uncurling during its sleep, a small movement of nature, a light change in position, in place, so close to the ground in order not to disturb anyone...

Then everything wakes up, uncurls again... Life starts again without commotion; everyone’s dance: insects, small animals, grass and flowers, shadows and light... everything linked at first, then, one after the other, everyone disengages oneself from the group to move into the centre of the round dance and spin and turn... The others back him... a round dance of tops... at the centre of another round dance... that opens up... the first soloist escapes, flies out, free, autonomous... It can go further... it knows that the others will be there.” (Vivaldi: The Four Seasons)

This text expresses the feeling of being part of the living nature and the access to cyclic time.

The three texts show a high level of mentalization.

5. THE ULTIMATE STAGE OF ARTISTIC CREATION: CONFRONTATION WITH THE PUBLIC

Let us bring to mind that Anzieu [18] explicitly said, when speaking of the 5 phases of creative work, that the presentation to the public constitutes the objective of the last stage. The author speaks of creation in general and, specifically, about the artists' work. The works created in the course of art therapy sessions however have a particular epistemological status. Before the last phase is possible, one has to take special precautions linked to the persons' vulnerability.

One has to emphasise that arts psychotherapy has to continue during a rather long time, as the only way out for people suffering from posttraumatic embitterment disorder due to endured injustices and humiliations is the access to wisdom [14]. Likewise, for those suffering from complex posttraumatic disorders, the integration of the split parts of the personality requires much time and the advance can be discontinuous. This transformational process is linked to a slow maturation of the psychic structures.

Being ready to exposing oneself by writing a text for the magazine of the sheltering institution requires that certain changes already took place, namely the reconstitution of self-esteem, the deceneration of an exclusively egocentric position, the development of the metacognitive capacities and the awakening of initiative and intrinsic motivation. Publication itself has favourable retroactive effects on these same personality dimensions.

We will present some examples of contributions to the magazine:

5.1. Example 1: "The Mountain Path"



Fig2. The Mountain Path

Comments:

"The road starts all the way down near the village and becomes more difficult the closer one gets to one's destination, namely the castle. One always has to reckon with difficulties and obstacles (ascent of the Steep Mountain, then again descent). With regard to reaching the goal, I put the path behind the mountain on purpose, because everyone has to choose themselves the means to reach their goals. Some people use disloyal or inappropriate means, some people lose their lives, some people have to take decisions affecting their whole future (negatively or positively), certain people are covered in scars, some people reach them by legal means, other people do not care about the injustices done to others. Later, everyone has to face their choices... The end of the path is not on top of the mountain, and this is done on purpose, because if one wants to climb too high, one risks falling low. One can also see one single person on the road: everyone has to advance on their own and take their own decisions. But there is no problem asking for advice or getting someone's help. But in the end, everyone is responsible for their own behaviour."

The subject chosen by the author demonstrates his capacity to represent his personal life story in a metaphoric manner.

5.2. Example 2: "Obsessed with Heroin"

*"Every day, the shadows extended, the days shortened,
the circles tightened, the friends left, loneliness occurred."*

Reflections about the Epistemological Status of the Artistic Productions Created in the Course of Arts Therapeutic Sessions

Yes, even the angels disappeared at a certain time.

Because my life was in shambles; it had lost all meaning.

I felt a frozen emptiness, I felt like stillborn.

I had in my mouth the bitter taste of decrepitness.

I wanted to put an end to it all, I almost succeeded. I poisoned myself gradually.

But I survived.

I had burned all the bridges behind me. I do not know whether you understand me.

I had wished for a seat near the window, high in the sky.

But I found myself in the shadows.

I killed every feeling inside myself. Everything that I owned.

Now that I am sober, everything seems clear to me.

Now that I am sober, I realise where I was.

I had escaped to another world, to another time.

I fled from myself and my brain full of anxiety, loosing myself in the endless intoxication of heroin.”

This text demonstrates an onset of introspection, but it also shows that the fascination for heroin has not completely vanished.

6. OPERATIONALIZATION OF RELEVANT CLINICAL CONCEPTS THROUGH THE ARTS THERAPEUTIC PRODUCTION

The analysis of the evolution of the pictorial and literary productions, as well as the observations of the participants' verbal and non-verbal behaviours have allowed to establish some indications of a reuptake of the processes of subjectivation. Table 5 summarises the signs that are able to indicate a favourable evolution at the level of the capacities of an imaginary and symbolic elaboration of the personal experiences.

Table4. Operationalization of concepts linked to the reuptake of the processes of subjectivation

Theoretical concept	Operationalization through the artistic production
Loosening of the defensive functioning	Change in the distribution of the types; diversification and appearance of new types in the pictorial production
Decrease of the splitting tendencies	Appearance of depressive themes in the pictorial and literary productions
Expression of unmet affective needs	Appearance of feelings of nostalgia in the pictorial and literary productions
Cyclic time	Sense of belonging to the realm of the living creatures
Canalization of archaic aggressiveness	Change in the relation archaic aggressiveness / elaborated aggressiveness in the texts
Development of a mature narcissism and a more realistic view of oneself	Change in the facets of the Alter Ego and in the identification figures
Socialisation	Appearance of social and humanitarian preoccupations in the texts

7. SYNTHESIS AND CONCLUSION

In the context of a research project focused on people being excluded and marginalised (homeless people, long-term unemployed people, prisoners or people being released from jail, inveterate addicts, refugees and asylum seekers) [19], for whom anamnesis has shown that they had encountered repeated traumatic biographic events since their childhood, we could show that the pictorial and literary works created in the course of art therapy sessions allow addressing the trauma by detour, allowing to both conceal and unveil the splitted memories and integrate the authors' severed facets of personality, enriching their representation of themselves and developing their mentalizing capacities [20].

Thus, arts psychotherapies seem appropriate to help people who have experienced repeated traumatic events since their childhood build or recover their identity. This consolidation process can intensify from the moment when the person is up against the public, provided that nothing is enforced and that one's own rhythm is respected. One hence has to take into consideration the traumatised subjects' specific vulnerability and encourage them to take this step at the right time, without giving in to peer pressure.

The artistic productions become a support of projections both of the client and the therapist. Throughout the therapeutic process, they create meaning and enhance understanding in a manner that is not intrusive. They are best suited in the context of cognitive-psychodynamic [21] or existential psychotherapeutic approaches [22-24].

The special status of the artistic production allows using it as a tool of research, bridging the gap between the criteria of objectivity and subjectivity [4, 5]. With the help of the rating scales it is possible to pass from the qualitative analysis of the artistic production to quantification and the use of inferential and multidimensional non parametric statistics that are suitable for the treatment of non-metric data. Likewise, it is possible to compute rank correlations with psychometric scales, projective tests and external validation criteria, as well as interrater coefficients. Thus, the most intimate and subjective expression of the clients can be combined with the rigor and objectivity of the experimental approach.

The use of this kind of rating scales can help demonstrating the interest of creative arts in the promotion of public health [25-27]. In the currently debated question of the evaluation of psychotherapies, they can open tracks for future research.

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