

ART AS PROJECTIVE MEDIUM IN DIAGNOSING PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

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ABSTRACT

From a qualitative study conducted with psychology- and art students in New York the researchers found that the students' drawings were mostly a reflection of their existing emotional status. From these drawings it became apparent that some students felt stuck because of emotional problems experienced. In South Africa art lecturers at a higher education institution observed that signs and symbols used by art students in their art could reflect possible emotional problems. We were invited to conduct research regarding the observed emotional problems of art students in their art. The research question posed was: "How can art as projective medium be applied for diagnosing psychological problems of art students?" The research objectives were to explore and describe the application of art as projective medium for diagnosing psychological problems of art students within an educational psychological perspective. A qualitative, explorative, descriptive and contextual research design was followed. Thirty male and female art students from a diversity of cultures participated. Their ages ranged from 19 - 23 years. Data was collected by means of art works (rose or rosebush drawings and recently completed comic strips); in-depth individual interviews focused on obtaining meaning from the art students regarding their art; field notes from observation and handwriting on unlined paper. Data was analysed within a descriptive approach. From the analysis of the data of the art students, a central theme was identified based on the life story about unresolved trauma during childhood. Major associated themes were "experienced abuse" and "rejection with resulting withdrawal". They are indicative of the possible psychological problems these students experienced. Art can thus be utilised as projective medium in diagnosing psychological problems. Suggestions are made to address the identified psychological problems.

OPSOMMING

Die navorsers het 'n kwalitatiewe studie van sielkunde- en kunsstudente in New York onderneem en gevind dat die studente se sketse meestal 'n refleksie van hulle bestaande emosionele status is. Hierdie studies het getoon dat sommige studente vasgevang is in emosionele probleme. In Suid-Afrika het kunsdosente aan 'n tersiëre instelling gevind dat tekens en simbole wat deur die kunsstudente in hulle kuns gebruik word, moontlike emosionele probleme kan aantoon. Ons is genooi om navorsing aangaande die emosionele probleme van kunsstudente soos aangetoon in hulle kuns, te doen. Die navorsingsvraag was: "Hoe kan kuns as projektiewe medium toegepas word om die psigologiese probleme van kunsstudente te diagnoseer?" Die navorsingsdoelstelling was om die toepassing van kuns as projektiewe medium in die diagnosering van psigologiese probleme van kunsstudente binne 'n opvoedkundige psigologiese perspektief te ondersoek en te beskryf. 'n Kwalitatiewe, verkennende, beskrywende en kontekstuele navorsingsontwerp is gevolg. Dertig manlike en vroulike kunsstudente uit 'n verskeidenheid kulture het deelgeneem. Hulle ouderdomme het gewissel tussen 19 en 23 jaar. Data is ingesamel deur middel van kunswerke (roos- of roosbos sketse en onlangs voltooide tekenprente); in-diepte individuele onderhoude wat gefokus het op die verkryging van begrip van die studente se kuns; veldnotas ten opsigte van observasie en handskrif op blanko papier. Data is geanaliseer binne 'n beskrywende konteks. Vanuit die data-analise van die kunsstudente is 'n sentrale tema geïdentifiseer, gebaseer op die storiëwêreld aangaande onopgeloste trauma gedurende kinderjare. Die kern-geassosieerde temas bekom was "mishandeling ondervind" en "verwerping wat lei tot ontrekking". Dit is aanduidend van die moontlike psigologiese probleme wat hierdie kunsstudente ervaar het. Kuns kan dus aangewend word as projektiewe medium in die diagnosering van psigologiese probleme. Voorstelle word gemaak om die geïdentifiseerde psigologiese probleme aan te spreek.

RATIONALE

The use of art as a medium of expression is as old as human existence, because this ability forms an integral part of being human (Janson, 1995:18). There exists a mutual interaction between the artist and artwork (Loock, 1999:4). When artwork is created, it reflects something of the artist's inner life-world. The implication is that artworks can be viewed as a meaningful form of projection regarding the context of the life-world the artist finds himself at that stage of his life.

Within a post-modern framework with a phenomenological approach, it means that the artworks represent the artist's personal perceptions regarding his/her life-world (Hassard, 1995:303). Jung (in Allan, 1989:20) indicated that he used drawings to describe and interpret his inner experiences. These drawings of Jung show that art possesses projective value. When it is analysed and interpreted correctly, it will expose something of the artist's subjective life-world (Groothuis, 1997:46).

The analysis of art can assist in gaining insight and understanding of the artist's life- and experiential world. In a qualitative study conducted with psychology- and art students in New York, Kaplan & Hofstra (1994:139-143) found that the student's drawings were mostly a reflection of their existing emotional status. The use of certain colour and symbols was positively associated with feelings of anger and aggression. From these drawings it became apparent that some students felt stuck because of emotional problems experienced. These emotional problems serve as obstacles in their daily activities. It seemed as if they were not able to optimise their potential.

The assumption can be made that persons with unresolved conflict, emotional problems or unresolved trauma, experience obstacles in the realisation of their unique potential. The contribution of this research will be to explore and describe how works of art contribute to identifying students' experienced emotional problems so that the educational psychologist can provide appropriate assistance when necessary.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Art lecturers at a higher education institution observed that signs and symbols used by art students in their art frequently depicted violence and sexual elements.

The art lecturers wondered if these signs and symbols could reflect personal exposure or indicate experienced aggression and inner conflict. These aspects were also observed in their behaviour and interaction with each other. The art lecturers invited the researchers to conduct research regarding the expression of possible emotional problems in artwork.

The research question was: *"How can art as projective medium be applied in diagnosing psychological problems of art students?"*

THE RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The exploration and description of the application of art as projective medium in diagnosing psychological problems of art students within an educational psychological perspective.

PARADIGMATIC PERSPECTIVE

This includes the researcher's meta-theoretical-, theoretical- and methodological assumptions.

• Meta-theoretical assumptions

In this research project the art students are viewed as whole persons in interaction with their environments. A person is viewed as mentally healthy when he/she functions "normally". This refers to a person's achievements and living up to his/her potential. The educational psychologist creates a context for the art student where he/she can actively participate in addressing identified emotional problems in order to enable him/her to develop his/her own potential and thus promote mental health.

• Theoretical assumptions

These are derived from phenomenology and the Gestalt therapeutic approach. The art student is viewed as the expert of his/her own life and can choose in what direction to change his/her life and take responsibility for this choice (Von Foerster, 1984:306). The art student's framework of reference regarding personal experience and the meaning allocated to it, is important for understanding the projected content in the art. The development of self-awareness in the art student already contributes to mental health (Perls, 1969).

• Methodological assumptions

Educational psychology is a practice-oriented science involved with the exploration, description and explanation of knowledge to address problems regarding human development and mental health. A functional approach (Botes, 1991:19) is followed in this research because the understanding and knowledge that will be attained through this research will be utilised to assist art students in addressing obstacles in the achievement of their potential and mental health. Measures to ensure trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985:290-327) will be adhered to, to ensure the truth-value of this research. Logical flow of ideas and justification of the whole research process will be ensured.

THE RESEARCH DESIGN

A qualitative, explorative, descriptive and contextual research design was followed (Mouton & Marais, 1992:45, 175; Mouton, 1996:103-169). An inductive approach was followed with no preconceived conceptual framework directing this research. The researchers used bracketing (placing all preconceived ideas aside) and intuiting (focussing on the objective of this research) (Burns & Grove, 1987:80).

RESEARCH METHOD

The sample, data collection, data analysis and literature control will be addressed under this heading.

Sample

A purposive sample (Burns & Grove, 1987:219; Creswell, 1994:15) was utilised in this research. The art students, observed by their art lecturer in a higher education institution, were included as part of the population. The criteria for inclusion in the sample were: the participants were enrolled as art students of a specific higher education institution; all respondents were required to give written permission before participating in the research and male as well as female students were included. A total number of thirty art students participated in this research. This included male and female art students from a diversity of cultures. Their ages ranged from 19 to 23 years.

Data collection

Data collection took place in two phases. During phase 1 a group of art students were exposed to a Gestalt-therapeutic exercise "The rosebush" (Oaklander, 1978:32-35) as projective medium. This is a visual exercise that attempts to guide a person to greater consciousness of his/her inner life-world. Students were requested to come in contact with the here-and-now environment and visualize a rose or a rosebush within a specific environment and draw the rose they saw in their mind's eye.

After completion of the exercise the students were requested to write their life-story (naïve sketches) (Giorgi, 1985:10-19) on unlined paper. The purpose of this exercise was to obtain their handwriting for graphological analysis. A student's handwriting is viewed as a projection of characteristic attributes and can indicate characteristics, dispositions and problems when analysed by a registered graphologist (Hargreaves, 1990:7).

In phase 2 individual in-depth interviews (Kvale, 1996:81-107; Marshall & Rossman, 1995:80-83) were conducted with students who voluntarily came forward. These interviews focussed on students' explanation of their rose drawing/rosebush drawing as a symbol of their own life, the meaning they attached to the rose and if they can see similarities with their own life or not.

Thereafter other recently completed works of art (mostly comic strips) of the students were discussed and they were requested to explain the meaning and message they wanted to convey through their work.

Field notes (Wilson, 1989:459) based on the researcher's observation, were made on completion of each individual interview regarding students' nonverbal communication, the ease with which the interview was conducted and the researcher's subjective experience.

Data analysis

The data that were analysed consisted of works of art (projective media: "the rosebush" and comic strips), transcribed interviews, field notes and students' handwriting.

See Table 1 for an overview of the data analyses

Table 1: Students' works of art, interviews, field notes and handwriting

Data collection	Data analysis
1. Art work: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Rose or rosebush drawing• Recently completed art (comic strips)	Descriptive data analysis Independent coder and researchers had consensus discussions
2. In-depth individual interviews focussed on obtaining meaning from art students regarding their art	
3. Field notes from observation	
Students' written life-stories in their own handwriting on unlined white paper	An independent graphologist registered at American Association of Handwriting analysis, analysed the art students' handwriting and provided a typed report for each

The art, individual interviews and field notes were analysed utilising Tesch's (in Creswell, 1994:154-156) approach. Themes, categories and subcategories were identified and discussed with an independent coder. A graphologist analysed the students' handwriting without prior knowledge of the other data that were analysed. During the analysis of the handwriting, the analyst looked for trends (problems, trauma, and psychological problems) that possibly occurred in the students' lives.

After the two sets of data were analysed, they were compared as a triangulation measure.

Literature control

The data was recontextualised (Morse & Field, 1996:106-107) by comparing it with relevant literature and research. This made it possible to identify similarities, differences and unique contributions (Poggenpoel, 1993:2).

Ethical measures

Ethical measures were adhered to and included aspects such as: the quality of the research; ensuring confidentiality and anonymity; privacy; informed consent; prevention of harm; right to withdraw from the research project and provision of a contact telephone number of a professional counselor if a student experienced a need for further discussion of emotional problems (DENOSA, 1998:1-7).

Measures to ensure trustworthiness

Guba's (in Lincoln & Guba, 1985:300-317) measures to ensure trustworthiness were adhered to. The four criteria and strategies applied, include:

- truth-value through the strategy of credibility;
- applicability through the strategy of transferability;
- consistency through the strategy of dependability; and
- neutrality through the strategy of confirmability.

An overview will now be provided on how the researcher applied the strategies of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability in this research project.

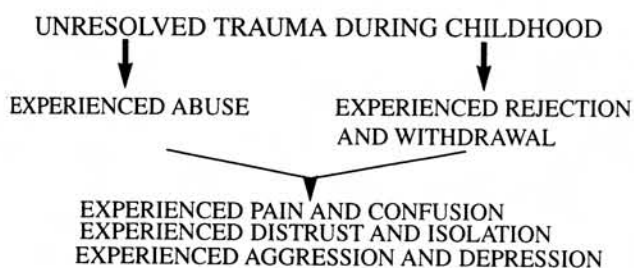
To ensure **credibility** the researcher spent time each day with the art students over a period of six months. The researcher wrote reflexive field notes throughout the research process over a period of twenty-four months. Triangulation was implemented by utilising different methods of data collection such as art works, field notes, interviews and graphology. Peer group reviews were conducted throughout the research by means of doctoral committees and the researcher delivered two doctoral seminars.

After data analysis the researcher did member checking by asking some of the respondents to check if the identified themes reflected what the respondents had verbalised in the interviews about their works of art. The researcher was prepared for the field by mastering qualitative research methodology in completing her fieldwork for her M. Ed. in educational psychology mini-dissertation. The researcher ensured **transferability** by providing a dense description of the results of her research.

Dependability was ensured by providing a dense description of the whole research process. **Confirmability** of this research was ensured by utilising triangulation of data collection and data analysis methods. The researcher also kept a reflexive journal on personal experiences and observations. During the collection and analysis of data she placed personal perceptions and expectations "between brackets" and did not utilise the data before an independent coder and a literature control verified it.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

From the analysis of the data of the art students the following was identified:



The central theme identified was based on the story line about unresolved trauma during childhood. The major themes are experienced abuse and rejection with resulting withdrawal (Loock, 1996). The story line with the supporting themes will now be discussed:

UNRESOLVED TRAUMA DURING CHILDHOOD:

Some participants explicitly stated that their childhood was traumatic, while others implied it and others tried to hide it, although it had been identified through their handwriting analysis.

Unresolved trauma during childhood related to their experienced abuse

The following direct quotations from the art students support this theme:

Unresolved trauma during childhood related to their experienced abuse

"I use dark colours and my comics are Uhm... things that happened in my childhood" and "in my comics two things are happening at once. You see, that is a child which is also grown up as well and ... its like a cycle of abuse going on ... on and on - psychological abuse it is."

Another participant said: *"The background, um, was dark.... Everything is like dark... it's almost like my past 'cause I didn't have a great childhood or anything."*

The graphologist commented: *"She had a very traumatic childhood. She had gone through terrible times and there was a great deal of fear in her with regard to her parents when she was a child."*

It appears as if the abuse visible in our society frequently takes place within families.

Unresolved trauma during childhood related to their experienced rejection and concomitant withdrawal

In a person's attempt to protect him-/herself against emotional pain, he/she frequently pushes others away or withdraws from others (Oaklander, 1978:269). This behaviour leads to a destructive cycle that started with experienced rejection, continued in the pushing away or rejection of others so that the child's experience is once again one of rejection. The following are quotations from respondents to highlight these identified themes:

Unresolved trauma during childhood related to their experienced rejection and concomitant withdrawal

"It is a red rose in a desert and its surrounded by rocks. It symbolizes my own unhappiness. I was adopted... I only found that out about a year ago... although I always sensed that something was wrong... feeling like I didn't belong there."

Another respondent verbalized: *"I always had the feeling I am not good enough... I... it felt like I was never accepted... rejected all the time."*

This theme is reflected in the participant's comic strip where *"earth is rejecting man... rejecting mankind."*

The abuse and rejection experienced by the art students during childhood that resulted in unresolved trauma made them experience different emotions like pain and confusion; distrust and isolation; aggression and depression.

Pain and confusion

The experience of emotional pain is frequently associated with the amount of thorns and the appearance thereof in the rose drawing.

On questioning the respondents about the meaning of the thorns, some referred to it as pain experienced personally while others viewed it as a defense mechanism whereby they wanted to prevent future pain. This is reflected by the following quotations:

Pain and confusion as defense mechanism

"the rose is full of thorns... uhm, looks can be deceiving - something so beautiful can hurt you badly... it is very much like my past" and "the thorns stop people from kicking down the rose."

Pain resulting in confusion

"Feeling bewildered... seeking for my soul" and "...my rose changes colour when the wind blows."

From the field notes the interviewer remarked that: *"...she burst into tears and said that she didn't know who she was, where she fits and how she must behave."*

Another respondent's confusion was voiced as follows: *"...things were ... a lot of time things were very mixed up."*

This confusion is clear in her drawing of two roses revolving around each other in space. She explains the drawing (see figure 1): *"There were two roses, black and red. They were swirling around each other in space... In darkness... just floating around. It left me bewildered. It was, like I realized I don't know where I am going, what I want... who I really am..."*

Figure 1 -BLACK AND RED ROSE REVOLVING AROUND EACH OTHER IN SPACE.



Another sub-theme associated with the students' experience of rejection and withdrawal is the experience of distrust and isolation.

Distrust and isolation

Distrust develops in a living environment where unresolved trauma and conflict exists (Middleton-Moz, 1989:27; Middleton-Moz, 1990). It is the interactive dimension and social contexts of each individual respondent that can provide the explanation for the development of distrust as observed in this research. Distrust leads to a feeling of isolation because of the uncertainty that exists regarding the measure by which other people can be trusted.

This also leads to self-chosen isolation (withdrawal from others) so that the pain and the disappointment and the feeling of being let down can be prevented. Most of the participants verbalised that their roses were totally alone with nothing surrounding them. Respondents made the following statements:

Distrust and isolation

"Like the rose, I am alone. I am always alone - even when I am with other people I am alone." and "I tend to keep things to myself... To be on my own... It's better not to trust others." (Refer to figure 2)

Figure 2 - ROSE SMALL AND IN LEFT CORNER OF PAGE AND FRAMED



"I lock myself from others." (Refer to figure 3)

Figure 3 - ROSE IN LEFT CORNER WITH STORMY BACKGROUND - ALMOST BLACK



"I never open up to other people... maybe I am too scared to trust." (Refer to figure 4).

Figure 4 - ROSE LEFT IN CORNER AND FLOATING



The experience of aggression and depression by respondents is another sub-theme also associated with their experience of rejection and withdrawal.

Aggression and Depression

In this research the colour of the roses drawn by the participants were predominantly black, while only a few were red. Kaplan & Hofstra (1994:139) refer to the links between the use of colour and emotion. The colours, black and red, are associated with feelings of aggression and/or depression. The pressure used to draw lines, is frequently of importance. The two emotions, aggression and depression, can be viewed as two sides of the same coin. Depression can be viewed as anger directed to the inside of the person, while aggression can be viewed as anger directed to the outside of a person - in other words the internalisation or externalisation of the emotion (Loock, 1996:51).

The aggression and depression of the respondents were also reflected in the comic strips in terms of the use of colour, the selection of themes or life-events that were depicted. The following quotations highlight the depression and aggression expressed:

Aggression and Depression:

"I painted people gray. We say, a machine is going to take over the world, things like that but um, we are just as cold as them. You know cold feelings, we kill and stuff like that - physically and emotionally we kill others."

And "Nobody believes you when you talk about that...I mean about rape. The out of control feeling of the woman in the story is actually my own. You get numb...look blasé to others, you know, or vicious - like the sharp thorns of my rose...and the lock that locks away everything one should not talk about." (Refer to figure 5)

Figure 5 - ROSE ON ROPE WITH THORNS AND LOCK



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The research findings indicate that all the participants in some way had been exposed to trauma as children. Abuse, in different forms had been present in their lives. Based on the literature it seems that trauma during childhood can lead to a distorted perception of the self, because destructive interaction took place and relationships broke down.

FURTHER APPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS

This research has been conducted within an educational psychology context. The findings can be utilised to suggest guidelines for educational psychologists and other psychotherapists to assist art students, as well as other young adults with unresolved childhood trauma (Loock, 1999:148-153). Art work and psychotherapy sessions can be used to create a context where young adults can address the unresolved childhood trauma as well as the results of this trauma: pain, confusion, distrust, isolation, aggression and depression. These serve as obstacles in the optimisation of these young adults' potential and mental health.

The psychotherapist can create a context for the art student as young adult to address the unresolved childhood trauma by: letting the art student tell his/her story so that symptoms are normalised (Whitfield, 1990:61; Bradshaw, 1993:115); rephrasing the story so that guilt feelings are resolved (Thompson & Rudolph, 1992:15) and destructive behavioural patterns changed.

The identified obstacles (pain, confusion, distrust, isolation and aggression) can be viewed as the result of broken relationships during childhood because of abuse. Restoration of relationships with the self and others should be the approach to address the obstacles experienced. This means that the art student as young adult should be guided to view him-/herself realistically. In other words, the art student should become conscious of his/her talents, unique characteristics and the choices he/she has. The role of the psychotherapist is to assist the art student as young adult to become conscious that he/she cannot manage his/her external world completely, but that he/she can take charge of his/her internal world, that what he/she thinks, feels and behave. He/she does not have to react as a victim of the past, based on his/her distorted self-perception. He/she can take charge, discover his/her own self and life purposefully.

CONCLUSION

The results of this research indicate that art (rose or rose bush drawings; comic strips) and graphology (as triangulation measure as projective medium) can be utilised in diagnosing psychological problems of art students. The following central theme, major themes and associated themes were identified. The central theme identified was based on the story line about unresolved trauma during childhood. The major themes relating to the unresolved trauma during childhood

are experienced abuse and rejection resulting in withdrawal. This lead to experienced pain and confusion; distrust and isolation as well as aggression and depression. They are indicative of the possible psychological problems these art students experienced. Art can thus be utilised as projective medium in diagnosing psychological problems as described in this research.

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