

*Article 24*

**Members' Perceptions of Using  
Expressive Arts in Group**

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Expressive art has the potential to be a language (Gladding, 1997; Mills & Daniluk, 2002; Rogers, 1993) and for counselors, who choose to use it, expressive arts can provide an additional means of communication with clients. Communicating through the use of expressive arts in a counseling setting includes the use of color, art, music or movement to express thoughts, feelings and behaviors (Rogers). Using expressive arts in counseling is process oriented, encourages social interaction and increases self awareness (Gladding) making it ideal for use in group counseling settings. This article will: (1) describe the efficacy of utilizing expressive arts in group counseling to enhance communication; (2) discuss the research conducted by the authors which include methodology and preliminary findings; and (3) provide examples of expressive arts activities that can be used by counselors in their group counseling work.

Counseling, in a traditional sense, has primarily been facilitated through talk therapy (Mills & Daniluk, 2002; Rogers, 1993). There is a lack of research that explores other means of communication in counseling. In the 1970s, Natalie Rogers, founder of the Person-centered Expressive Arts Therapy Institute, began to experiment with using non-verbal methods of communication in a group setting (Sommers-Flanagan, 2007). It was during this time of

experimentation that Rogers uncovered the healing power of art and non-verbal communication in a counseling context. The use of expressive arts in a safe and supportive environment offers clients a new way to enhance awareness and communicate what they might not be able to say in words (Rogers).

The use of expressive arts in counseling with a variety of clients is evidenced within the literature (Dee, Perkins, & Oden, 2004; Denton, 2006; Rogers, 1993; Sommers-Flannagan, 2007); however there is a paucity of qualitative research addressing the use of expressive arts in an adult group counseling setting. Korlin, Nyback, and Goldberg (2000) investigated the outcome of symptoms, interpersonal difficulties, and health potential of 58 in-patient, psychiatric patients. The subjects participated in a structured creative arts group over a 4-week period. The results of the study indicated that 88% of the participants in the study had significant improvements in all instruments and most subscales of those instruments. The results of this study support the efficacy of using expressive arts as an additional means of communication in a group counseling setting to increase self awareness and facilitate personal growth. The Korlin, Nyback, and Goldberg study was an empirical study that investigated outcome, but did not address the direct experiences of the group participants using expressive arts. In addition, the researchers found limited research that specifically addressed the use of expressive arts in a group counseling setting. The focus of this study was to develop a rich description of master's degree counseling students' perceptions of the use of expressive arts in a small group experience. Data obtained from this study can be used to provide direction for future research in this area of group counseling.

## **Methodology**

### *Research Question and Data Collection*

In order to develop a rich description of students' perceptions of using expressive arts in group counseling, a qualitative methodology was used to investigate the research question, "What are the experiences of participants using expressive arts in group?" According

to Neuman (1997) qualitative research has an emphasis on meaning and this study seeks to understand the meaning that the participants' attribute to the use of expressive arts in the small group process.

To understand meaning a phenomenological methodology was utilized, specifically a hermeneutical approach to phenomenology (Van Manen, 1990). Hermeneutic phenomenology attends to the description of the phenomenon of study, but also to the interpretation of the phenomenon or lived experience. Van Manen purposes that using language to describe the phenomenon is an interpretive course of action. Six master's level counseling students self-selected to participate in this study. The researchers facilitate two rounds of individual interviews, as well as a focus group, for the purpose of increasing trustworthiness of the study through member checking. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) member checks increase the trustworthiness of qualitative studies because it allows subjects to confirm that the findings of the study accurately portray the experience. Individual interviews consist of open-ended questions designed to illicit reflection on group member's experience of incorporating expressive arts in the small group process. Data gathered from the study has the potential to assist counselors in the efficacy of using expressive arts in the group counseling setting, as well as assist counselor educators in the instruction of group facilitation.

### *Data Analysis*

Phenomenological research captures the lived experience of several individuals experiencing the same phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). The researchers will be using Van Manen's (1990) hermeneutical approach to capture the lived experience of group participants. Essentially, hermeneutical phenomenology attends to describing the phenomenon of study and also interprets the phenomenon or lived experience of the participant. Van Manen purposes that using language to describe the phenomenon is an interpretive course of action that utilizes a lengthy interview to obtain rich, descriptive information. Interview transcriptions were analyzed for phenomenological themes to capture the lived experience of group participants.

### *Validity*

According to Maxwell (2005), the key to validity, with regard to qualitative interpretation, pertains to possible threats to the researcher's interpretations of the phenomenon. Qualitative validity is much different than the quantitative guarantee of validity which posits that validity can be obtained through a set of logical procedures. Qualitative researchers view validity as a relative term that is a goal, not a guaranteed result (Maxwell). Using Van Manen's (1990) approach to phenomenology does not call for the researcher to take a scientific, removed approach to research. In fact Van Manen states, "To establish a strong relation with a certain question, phenomenon, or notion, the researcher cannot afford to adopt an attitude of so-called scientific disinterestedness" (p. 33). The researchers took steps to ensure trustworthiness and accuracy of the lived experience portrayed in this study (Creswell, 2007).

### **Preliminary Findings**

For the first round of interviews each participant was asked the following questions: (1) What has it been like for you personally to explore expressive arts as a means of communication? (2) Describe any personal changes you can attribute to using expressive arts in group counseling; and (3) What thoughts or feelings are most prevalent for you when using expressive arts in group counseling?

These open-ended questions were asked for the purpose of gaining a rich description of participant experiences using expressive arts in group counseling. The first round of interviews was conducted prior to the fifth group session.

Interview sessions were transcribed and independently coded by the researchers to identify themes that emerged from the interviews. After independent coding the researchers met to discuss parallel themes. It was found that awareness, safety, and connection emerged as consistent and parallel themes.

The first theme, *awareness*, referred to the ability to articulate new insight about ones self as facilitated by incorporating expressive arts into group counseling. Expressive arts were also found to provide

another meaningful way of communicating and understanding more fully self and group members. For example, one participant stated how meaningful it was for him to discover more about himself through symbolic expression. He stated:

I would say that (expressive arts) has drawn more out of me than I would have shared otherwise. Well, like as far as judging my art, I guess I realized it is not something I just do with art, it is something I do with everything. I was aware that I was self judgmental, but doing it with art kind of made me look at it in a different light. It brought up for me some issues of self-consciousness and what other might think.

Another participant shared how it gave her the ability to clarify what was happening for her in the here and now moment. This participant stated:

One day I came in and was feeling dull and as I drew my picture it started having meaning to me and I started to understand how I was feeling. I didn't have a word for it before I started and then the art took on its own meaning for me. It explained, or represented for me how I was feeling and helped me to verbalize what was going on for me in the moment.

The second theme that emerged, *safety*, was used to define group members' experiences of using expressive arts as a safe way to express deeper thoughts and feelings. In addition, safety was used to identify greater risk taking experiences facilitated by having expressive arts as an additional mode of communication. One participant discussed having difficulty expressing feelings, but also stated that having another mode of communicating made it safe to express feelings. This participant likened the freedom that he experienced through dance in another setting to his experience of using expressive arts in group counseling. The participant stated:

Yeah, it does feel safer because the attention is on the object of art, rather than on me. That is why it feels

safer to do that. I can talk about the art as long as it is not directly about me and I can say there are boundaries here. The art is able to share what is normally kept hidden.

Another participant suggested that the expressive art helped her process what she was feeling and thinking and the group format provided a safe place to articulate those thoughts and feelings. Participants also described the combination of group and art as providing a place for them to feel safe in taking greater risks in what he or she chose to share. The expressive art gave participants the freedom to articulate thoughts and feelings about self that would have otherwise been difficult to verbalize.

The researchers noted that the feeling of safety in the group brought about more connections throughout the group process. During the group process participants were asked to create a collage, on the exterior of a bag, representing what they show people on the outside. What they keep hidden was on the inside of the bag. Participants were told that it was their decision whether or not they decided to share the inside of the bag. As a result of this activity, one participant took a risk and decided to share, which in turn was impactful for the group. One participant stated:

I had not decided if I was going to share the inside of my bag or not, so that was encouraging. I thought if she can share that, then I want to make that connection too, partly because I felt safer to make the connection.

The safety facilitated by using expressive arts allowed members in the group to feel more connected with one another, so a third theme emerged, *connections*. The theme, *connections*, was used to describe how expressive arts allowed participants to connect further with one another. The expressive arts facilitated more meaningful connections between group members because meaning took place at a deeper level through verbal and visual means.

One participant said it was easy for her to feel comfortable and less afraid to share because she enjoyed the connections she was

making when others shared their art both verbally and visually. The visual element added a greater understanding which fostered connections in the group. This participant stated:

I think when we were sharing and we could connect with people regarding what they were saying about what they created, just that feeling of we are all sort of alike in some ways. We share feelings: maybe we haven't experienced it the same, but the feelings are all there. We basically have similar fears, joys, and self-perceptions. We noticed that all the women had body image issues. You know feeling...connected [to the group].

### **Expressive Art Activities Used in this Small Group Experience**

One of the challenges of using expressive arts in a group counseling setting is deciding how directive to be. The researchers of this study chose both directive and non-directive modalities when using expressive arts in group. Deciding when to use an indirect versus direct approach depended on the developmental stage of the group.

During week one, the art activity was non-directive. The only directive given to participants was to practice being non-judgmental toward self. This was structured through positive affirmations reflected on prior to engaging in the expressive arts activity. They were also encouraged to attend to the here and now throughout their process. Participants were given a variety of mediums to choose from, for example: watercolors, acrylic paints, pastels, oil pastels, clay, a variety of papers (tissue, patterned, textured), colored pencils, markers, crayons, chalk, paper punches, stamps, yarn, and glue.

During weeks two and three the activities became more directive with the purpose of highlighting the concepts of group. The activities used were the here and now and Johari's Window (Luft & Ingham, 1955). The here and now was facilitated through encouraging participants to focus on their thoughts and feelings in the moment while using a mandala as their framework. A mandala is a circle drawn on a piece of paper which can represent connection with

self and others (Rogers, 1993). For the purpose of this activity, the mandala was used to represent being centered in the here and now moment. Each participant was given a sheet of paper with a circle at its center. They were allowed to use any of the above listed materials to engage in the expressive arts process through focusing on the here and now. Week three, Johari's window was implicitly described using a paper bag metaphor. Participants were directed to use magazine clippings, paper, etc. to define what they show to others on the outside of the bag. On the inside of the bag, participants were encouraged to depict the part of the self that they keep hidden: feelings they were fearful of showing to other group members. They were told that it was their decision whether or not they disclosed anything on the inside of the bag.

In weeks four and five, group participants were encouraged to engage in open expressive art activities in pairs and as a large group. In an open activity group members were directed to choose various creative mediums discussed above. In week four, group members were asked to select a partner. Pairs engaged expressively with each other depicting their current experience in the group using the mediums previously described. The following week they were asked to engage expressively as a collective group and were directed to depict the level of perceived risk-taking done by each group participant. They decided to express their perceived risk-taking through a group sculpt. The purpose of these collective activities was to engage participants in active reflection of the group process. Overall these tools can be utilized in a variety of group contexts to bring enhancement of individual awareness, safety, and connection in group counseling.

## **Discussion**

The present findings are preliminary and representative of the themes that emerged from the first round of interviews directed at answering the research question, "What are the experiences of participants using expressive arts in group?" The researchers plan to engage in a second round of interviews and follow-up the results of

both interviews with a focus group to ensure that themes accurately depict the experiences of the participants.

This research enhances existing literature regarding the use of expressive arts in group counseling by providing evidence that is grounded in research practice. The researchers were only able to identify one previous study that used empirical findings to highlight the experiences of group participants; however that study did not directly articulate the experiences of the participants. A qualitative gathering of information regarding the experiences of participants engaging in expressive arts fills a gap in current literature because it articulates and expands on the rich experiences that are not inherent in quantitative studies.

A limitation of the research is that this study was conducted in an educational setting. The small group experience is designed for master's students training to be counselors. Therefore, it is difficult to generalize this experience to clinical settings. Future research would replicate the current study in school settings and mental health agencies to further articulate the benefit of using expressive arts as a modality in group counseling.

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