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Application of art therapy in adolescence: photo-novel analysis as an expressive technique

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Abstract

Objectives: Analyse the practice of art therapy in adolescence, with particular reference to traumatic and difficulties in affective regulation.

Methods: Application of the photo novel as an expressive and therapeutic technique, finalized to the achievement of Self-awareness and integrated identity.

Results: Art therapy is a practice that allows the emergence of traumatic experiences and emotional contents, difficult to express through verbal production. This technique can be particularly effective with adolescents, for their identity and in Self-construction.

Conclusions: Art therapy is effective in education and psychotherapy. Given the high presence of adolescents with possible traumatic experiences and difficulties in emotional expression, it would be desirable to use Art Therapy as a support tool in the school environment.

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1. Introduction

Art therapy uses the visual arts to promote individual well-being and socio-emotional balance (Della Cagnoletta, 2010). The medium is represented by the materials manipulated by the subject according to the emotional state, which the therapist inserts in a frame of meaning. The main feature of art therapy is based on the possibility of discovering inner images, through the realization of a tangible product that has the function of a transitional object, related to the psychological and pathological conditions (Settineri et al., 2017, 2018b). This object allows the individual to establish a distance between internal emotional experience and knowledge of

reality, while at the same time maintaining a link between the external object and the internal experience (Bitti, 1998).

The creative process and the artistic product are central (Mignone, 2006): the first facilitates the emergence of experiences and feelings, expressed also in a chaotic and raw form. The second represents a tool to create a connection among the internal and external world, between patient and therapist, favoring Self-integration (Siegel, 2015).

The products represent the mirror of the internal world and become an instrument for expressing deeper thoughts and emotions (Jung, 1960; Verardi, 2009); this aspect gives art a therapeutic value (Naumburg, 1966; Toma, 2016). The analyst relates to the patient by evaluating his unconscious manifestations, as if they were a work of art; this form of "aesthetic" communication could present psychological problems, which will be examined by the therapist (Robbins, 2000).

Art therapy is therefore used both as a form of expression of repressed emotions and as a practice for reworking, due to the cathartic function (Burns & Waite, 2019; Malchiodi, 2011).

Within our article, we will proceed with the analysis of the basic principles of art therapy and its use in adolescence, with particular reference to the photo-novel technique.

2. Art therapy in adolescence

The purpose of art therapy is to highlight conflicts and promote Self-awareness and Self-acceptance in relation to others (Beaumont, 2012).

Through forms and colors, images and sounds, this practice allows to overcome the limits of consciousness, favoring the possibility of removing anxiety (Kost, 2019) and restructuring Ego (Stefana, 2013).

All this happens thanks to the re-actualization, in adulthood, of the aesthetic and creative experiences shared since early childhood with the mother, mediator of the child's first experiences. The aesthetic pleasure of the adult is based on those symbolic images shaped by the mother and it will be thanks to art therapy that they will find new meanings (Bollas, 1987).

Following the development process, this transformative potential is shifted to other concrete or conceptual objects, which will promote a change of the Self and in this case the artistic activity occupies a leading role.

As highlighted by Milner (1952), the creative act is represented by that moment in which "to paint requires an empty space, an empty frame". In this framework, the subject's internal

contents can emerge in the form of images, colors, sounds, metaphors of the process of Self-awareness (Milner, 1989) and Self-restructuring (Gambini, 2007).

Among the phases of the life cycle, adolescence represents the most important creative moment, in terms of de-structuring and re-structuring of the Ego: during this period, individuals must form their own identity, which requires the integration of personal beliefs, values, motivations, goals and social roles (Marcia, 1980), together with aspects like mood and Self-esteem (Merlo et al., 2018).

According to Bauman (2012), who describes modern society through the theorization of the "liquid" personality model, the contemporary adolescent is a "non-content", marked by a sense of inadequacy in the face of a potentially infinite freedom (D'Alessandro, 2008).

The art therapy activity constitutes a protected space, which allows to mentalize and get in contact with all parts of the Self, so in the relationship with emotions and unconscious experiences useful for the construction of identity (Carpendale, 2009; Rubin, 2010).

As stated by Moon (1998), "making art is a natural way to experience Self-exploration, Self-expression and Self-revelation", so the artistic product is a tool to search for identifying models (Sandomenico, 2010).

In order to promote the aforementioned processes in adolescents (Malchiodi, 2003), a reference is made to different theoretical approaches such as expressive, existential and narrative (Beaumont, 2012).

The first focuses on the possibility of creating a therapeutic space in which the adolescent receives the materials necessary to promote free expression; the second focuses on experiential learning and the possibility of searching for the meaning of life, through the artistic product (Moon, 1998).

The narrative approach finally focus on the symbolic meaning of the subject's creations, through the expression of their own dilemmas within real stories. This approach can be useful on a Self-exploratory level: in fact, narrative techniques allow adolescents to distance themselves from their emotional problems, telling personal stories from different points of view (Riley & Malchiodi, 2003).

In general, among the techniques mainly used in art therapy we can mention all the graphic arts, from drawing to writing, dance, music, theater and cinematography.

With reference to the graphic arts, a combination of expressive, existential and narrative approaches are evident in the art journaling technique (Ganim & Fox, 1999), a practice that mixes artistic expression with reflective writing in the form of a newspaper (Ramsay & Sweet,

2008). This activity allows the observation, in order to favor Self-knowledge and socio-relational adaptation (Hieb, 2005).

From reflexive writing combined with the creation of images, another technique used in adolescence emerges and will be analyzed in the next paragraph: the photo novel.

2.1 Application fields: phototherapy and photo-novel

Photography is a form of visual art, with symbolic and imaginative value.

Through photographic elicitation (Harper, 2002) it's possible to stimulate imaginative-emotional connections, removed contents and latent information, recalling significant memories about personal history (Kunimoto, 2004).

The use of photographic material favors a process of Self-awareness (Hill, 2013) and therapeutic emancipation in the patient, making him the protagonist of the experiences that emerge and become tangible (Olliffe & Bottorff, 2007).

Through the concept of "breaking the frame", Samuels (2004) uses a photo-guided path in which the participant is a significant collaborator in the therapeutic process (Van Auken et al., 2010); through photography, the individual can capture meaningful images, offering information to the specialist to understand and interpret his inner world (Bignante, 2010).

The use of one's photographs in the clinical setting or being subjected to the vision of others' photos represents a connection with the unconscious, which manifests itself in the form of emotions, memories and images (Weiser, 2000).

The techniques are essentially five and correspond to the different types of relationships that the individual establishes with the camera (Weiser, 2004):

- Photographs by the patient or photographs by others, chosen for himself: patients can take photographs according to a personal initiative or at the request of the therapist. The activity consists in searching for hidden symbols, information and meanings, of which the patient was unaware at the time of shooting.
- Photographs taken by others: photographs taken by others provide information on the image and on the possible discrepancy between Self and hetero-perception.
- Self-portraits: these Self-portraits can represent past moments, be performed during sessions or become a homework task. The observation of one's Self-portraits, carried out when the subject doesn't feel observed and judged, favors the activation of an internal dialogue and a process of elaboration of the deepest emotions.

- Album or family photo: within the family albums, the photographs follow a temporal order and immortalize significant places and people. The disposition of each individual in the photo shoot often shows the role covered within the family system. The family photos therefore allow the subject to see himself within his own story, evaluating experiences, memories and ties, through different points of view.
- Photo-projectives: this last phototherapy technique is based on the world view that surrounds them. Indeed, there are "unconscious lenses" that influence perceptions, thoughts and feelings. Photo-projections represent an effective tool to stimulate the process of Self-awareness (Weiser, 2000).

Working with images favors insight processes and represents a privileged way of accessing internal narratives, through the creation of an inner dialogue with one's Self (Belgiojoso et al., 2016). This technique is the basis of another type of art therapy activity, particularly in adolescence: the photo novel.

The photo novel is a story made up of photographs, taken on a set similar to the cinematographic one. The image production is entirely up to the person involved in the work, who can perform various roles such as the director, photographer or actor. This depends on the distance that the patient or therapist intends to maintain from the emotional experiences activated; in fact, when a framing is conceived, the emotional, affective and relational dynamics are exposed (Rossi, 2009).

The main objective will be to promote the free expression of emotions and experiences, sometimes traumatic, which the individual cannot express, except through expressive arts (Appleton, 2001; Callieri, 2000).

The use of photo novel, depending on these characteristics, is particularly effective among adolescents and especially within school contexts (King, 2016).

Through the narration of their history, adolescents can work on the meaning of their product, which becomes a metaphor for the construction of Self and identity (Cavallo, 2007).

In this context, psychologists must facilitate communication and the sharing of emotions within the group, intervening on emerging problems, adopting active listening strategies and lack of judgment. The therapist should in fact represent a sort of artistic mediator, which facilitates relational dynamics and communicative exchanges.

At the end of the creative production, the aesthetics of the artistic product will not be evaluated but the process that allowed unconscious experiences and thoughts to be expressed in a shared space (Coppelli, 2001).

Adolescents structure their story according to certain relational dynamics and critical nodes; in this sense, the narrative "voids" have symbolic value and are highly significant (Cavallo, 2007). Within the photo-novel practice, tools such as dramatization and role-playing can be used to promote Self-awareness, empathy, coping strategies and cooperation (Giusti & Ornelli, 1999).

2.2 Phenomena in adolescence

Adolescence is a transitional phase between childhood and adulthood, with significant physical and psychological changes that lead to the definition of a new identity (Erikson, 1968). This definition involves reflective and exploratory dynamic processes (Beaumont, 2012), aimed at achieving internal consistency and optimal psychological functioning (Adler et al., 2016; Lillevoll, Kroger, & Martinussen, 2013).

During the exploration process of the possible selves (Erikson, 1968), some adolescents remain in a state of crisis for a prolonged period of time, experiencing emotional deficits and difficulty adapting (Marcia, 1980; Schwartz, 2001).

In this sense, art therapy can facilitate the expression of one's individuality through a process of creative stimulation, which leads the subjects to reach a state of awareness and acceptance of the Self (Rubin, 2010). In particular, through the aforementioned techniques, it's possible to help the individual to face specific problems: the lack of elaboration of traumatic experiences and the dysfunctional expression of one's emotions.

With reference to the first factor, it's known that the trauma is stored in memory in the form of images and this makes the artistic expressive techniques particularly suitable for its elaboration (Appleton, 2001). In contrast to the defensive and repetitive aspects typical of responses to trauma, art therapy in fact involves the adolescent in an exploration of novelty since through the creation of the artistic product, experience emerges from memory and takes shape.

In this sense, the figurative tools are particularly suitable for bringing out repressed emotions, which cannot be expressed through verbal communication (Riley, 2001).

We are aware of the ways of structuring the Self through different forms of expression. Some of these modalities refer to integrated and general complexes (Frisone, 2019), as in the case of global expressions in which the subject expresses the entirety of his own representation of the Self (Jung, 2007). In the particular case, a difference is due. We identify different perspectives, one of which identifies representative possibilities of the Self as they adhere to a method that allows the detection of precise graphic signs useful to the psychodiagnostic interpretation (Koch, 1952). Other terms of Self-structuring, instead consider the dynamism of the expression

of the lived. Common traits refer to the symbolic expression of psycho-traumatological evidence, as in previous treatises.

The fact that they take shape and express substantial imaginative nuclei, leads us to consider the common traits as essential for psychological and psychopathological understanding. Our focus is focused not only on these expressions but also on their modes of intersection with emotional facts, even when they are impeded in their exercise and in their modulation due to psychopathological structures. The case just mentioned is for example that of alexithymia, a "specific disorder of affective and symbolic functions", characterized by the inability to recognize and verbally describe one's own and others' emotions (Sifneos, 1973).

Taylor, Bagby, and Parker (2000) have considered alexithymia a disorder of the processing of affects that interferes with the processes of Self-regulation and reorganization of emotions; the tension produced by unprocessed emotional states could explain the tendency of alexithymic subjects and in particular of adolescents, to assume compulsive behaviors. From this point of view the use of substances or alcohol, psychosomatic disorders, food binges could be seen as aspects of the same phenomenon: the dysfunctional attempt to regulate a non-mentalized and therefore often painful emotion.

In fact, the alexithymic condition is highly correlated to disorders of a psychological nature, characterized by the presence of externalized symptoms such as deficits in impulse control and aggressive behaviors (Moriarty et al., 2001) and internalizing symptoms such as anxiety and depression (Di Trani, 2013).

High levels of alexithymia are also found in adolescents with eating disorders (Merino et al., 2002; Zonneville-Bender et al., 2004), alcohol or substance dependence, Self-injurious behavior (Paivio & McCulloch, 2004) and phenomena of somatization (Rhee, 2005), which are often the consequence of a dysfunctional use of suppressive mechanisms (Settineri et al., 2016).

This research confirms the importance of emotions in the structuring of internal representations, especially during adolescence.

In this sense, as already highlighted, art therapy is particularly effective in treating these subjects thanks to the use of non-verbal techniques, which allow the symbolic expression of internal contents (Muijen, 2001). The difficulty in non-symbolized identification and emotional regulation represents the focus of the intervention, which is aimed at supporting in the adolescent the Self-reflexive skills necessary for mentalization and the subsequent identification of emotions (Caretta et al., 2007).

3. Discussion

Within our study it was shown that the identity crisis that occurs in adolescence, generates confusion in the Self and in its own context (Nicolò & Zavattini, 2003; Settineri et al., 2018a).

According to the conception of Anna Freud (1936), which linked to the Freudian structural model underlined the importance of somatic changes during puberty and their effects on the mental plane, adolescence is represented by an urgent and immediate "struggle" against the emotions.

The salient aspect of this period in fact concerns the biological, psychological and social transformations that adolescents have to face: with reference to changes of a psychological nature, our attention has focused in particular on the difficulty of processing possible traumatic experiences and dysfunctional expression of one's emotions. Such an affective lability is connected to the difficulties of structuring the sense of identity and the integration of differentiated aspects of oneself (Flannery et al., 1993).

Starting from these premises, the need to help adolescents to explore, externalize, elaborate and resolve negative thoughts and feelings emerged, in order to reach an integrated Self and a stable identity. This objective can be pursued through the use of art therapy, a psychological treatment that involves creative visual art as a form of expression of emotions, needs, feelings, difficult to express verbally (Stern, 1979).

Art Therapy is a tool of support in the therapeutic field and favor a healthy and balanced development, through the images and the most profound representations of the Self (Widmann, 2004). The foundation of the therapeutic arts focuses on the possibility of translating emotions into creative acts (Greenspan & Benderly, 1997) while the element of fantasy that intervenes in artistic expression, represents a "molding agent of identity" (Gallino, 2010).

The work produced is configured as a transitional object and takes the form of a link between the unconscious and the conscious world (Widmann, 2004).

Artistic expression becomes a process in which there is an intensification of meditation and concentration and in which one comes into contact with a deep part of the Self (Migliorini, 2006). Within this setting, the adolescent therefore has the opportunity to explore sensations and new tools through colors and shapes, which become a metaphor for experimenting with new attitudes towards oneself and life.

Therefore, in our study it emerged how a creative process also becomes a transformative process, assuming a therapeutic aspect: in fact it is "in the creative being that the individual discovers the Self" (Winnicott, 1971) and elaborates traumatic and emotional experiences.

Within this context, we examined the photo novel, a visual art technique, which favors the attainment of Self-awareness through the tangible expression of latent contents (Olliffe & Bottorff, 2007) and symbolic constructs, which oscillate between the image and the word. This method therefore represents a sublimation strategy that derives from the expression of affect: Kahn (2003) highlights how the affect has a heuristic power that includes the irrational logics through which the trauma is expressed in its quantitative power through the ways of quality.

The elaborate that derives from it is a large concentration of symbolic objects with different meanings, not in agreement with the different ways of affection; affects consume a lot of energy to be represented, externalized and therefore satisfied (Sechaud, 2005). In this sense, given the high spread of traumatic experiences, the school world should pay more attention to this sphere and implement reinforcement strategies for the Ego.

4. Conclusion

The techniques related to emotional experience therefore seem to us a good first step in the field of health protection, as highlighted by Grecucci et al. (2016). In the educational and psychotherapeutic field, in particular, the study suggests proposing to the adolescent an emotional regulation through the aforementioned techniques, in order to allow the subject to express their emotions and integrate the parts of the Self, through expressive arts.

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