The use of art within a groupwork setting

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Abstract: As pa|rt of the commitment to social approaches in the promotion of mental health and well being, the use of the arts has been increasingly adopted as a means of enhancing the sense of self worth, achievement and creativity amongst participants and as such is regarded as a valid alternative to talking and physical therapies. However, within the mental health field, existing research has tended to focus on psychotherapeutically orientated models of art therapy rather than on the use of art as a therapeutic activity in its own right. Such research has also concentrated on the treatment of pre-existing mental health problems rather than on the issue of prevention. It is therefore the purpose of this article to help to redress this neglect by examining the work of an activity orientated art project and its role in promoting the mental health of 'at risk' groups, both in terms of its impact on individual participants as well as on wider group processes.

Keywords: mental well-being, health promotion, art, therapy, social approaches, group cohesion.

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Background

Within mental health practice, the role of groupwork in promoting the well being of individual members has been well recognised and addressed (Manor, 1999). However, opinions differ as to the relative merits of different types of groupwork, there traditionally being a separation between activity orientated groups on one hand and verbal therapy on the other (Finlay, 1999). A similar division has been apparent in the therapeutic use of the arts with some practitioners adhering to traditional medicalised concepts of art therapy of the type advocated by Naumburg (1966). In this medicalised approach to art therapy, little attention is paid to the process of art production with emphasis instead being placed upon the discussion of the product and its role in assisting the externalisation of thoughts and feelings, which may have otherwise remained unexpressed (Otway, 1993). However, this reliance on word based therapy serves to marginalize the therapeutic value of performing the artwork itself. This value was recognised during and shortly after the Second World War when artists took materials into sanatoria for invalids from the armed forces. These artists introduced painting as a form of constructive and creative occupation for patients, finding that painting, especially within a group setting, contributed actively to participants' mental well being (Liebmann, 1989).

This recognition that the process of participating in artwork is an important aspect in promoting change has been reflected in groupwork research which has found that activity orientated groups can facilitate greater levels of communication and symptom reduction than verbally orientated groups (DeCarlo and Mann, 1985). It has also been reflected in the recent growth of socially rather than medically orientated 'art for health' projects which focus on the use of art as a therapeutic agent in itself and on prevention rather than cure (Matarasso, 1997). For while traditional forms of art therapy have tended to be surrounded by a mystique and regarded as the preserve of those with specialist training in the field, activity orientated art projects are much more versatile and are developments in which most health and social care practitioners can potentially play an important part. However,

in spite of these developments, much research into art therapy has continued to focus upon psychotherapeutic approaches and the benefits to be gained from more socially orientated 'art for health' projects have been correspondingly neglected (Lewis, 2001). Also neglected is the impact of the art activity on wider group processes and its role in promoting the supportive capacities of such groups. It is therefore the purpose of this article to help to redress this neglect by examining the work of a socially orientated art for health project and its impact on participating groups and their members.

The project

A period of arts sessions were provided to local groups who were identified by the National Service Framework for Mental Health (Department of Health, 1999) as being 'at risk' of developing mental health problems. With this goal in mind a number of suitable groups in the locality were approached and the project discussed with group members. From these negotiations, three groups were eventually selected as being able and willing to take part in the project. It was decided to work with existing groups for a number of reasons. For example, it improved the opportunity to provide a sustainable arts project for the participants as funding would be more easily sought through an organised group and project coordination and monitoring could be more readily facilitated. Following their selection each group was allocated an artist who visited each group for around ten weekly sessions.

It is important to evaluate the impact of such projects if the availability and sustenance of appropriate levels of investment is to be secured (Health Development Agency, 2000). With this goal in mind, an independent evaluator was appointed and project participants were interviewed during the first and last art group sessions on their initial expectations and subsequent experiences of their involvement with the use of a semi structured interview format. A reflexive approach was adopted in these interviews in which emergent themes were identified and pursued. From these interviews, full transcripts, fieldwork notes and case studies were produced and an ongoing analysis of qualitative material was

carried out with the use of the 'constant comparative method' (Bryman, 2001). In order to promote the validity of the data collected, a variety of methods and data sources were also used. One to one interviews with group members were complemented by focus groups. Interviews with participating artists and group leaders were also conducted at the beginning and the end of the project. Ethical issues of anonymity, confidentiality and informed consent were strictly adhered to throughout the fieldwork with group participants being given the choice as to whether or not to take part in the project evaluation. All agreed, although some members of the drop in centre requested that their individual interviews were not tape-recorded. There follows an account of these findings including the details of project participants, group decisions and goals, the art group sessions and project outcomes.

The three participating groups

1. A single parents' support group, a long established group that aimed to provide social contact and support to its members. It had a stable membership of around ten women all of whom took part in the art project. Their ages ranged from late twenties to late fifties and due to childcare responsibilities, the majority were not in paid employment.
2. A drop in centre, which provided practical support and counselling to a large and transient membership who experienced a variety of problems including drug and alcohol abuse and homelessness. Of this transient membership three men and three women became regular art project participants, all were unemployed and their ages ranged from early twenties to early sixties.
3. A recently established support group targeted at teenage parents. It aimed to promote members' confidence and self awareness, ultimately guiding them into work or further education. It had six regular female attenders all of whom took part in the art project.

Common themes and concerns

In spite of the diversity of project participants, common themes and concerns emerged. Financial issues were one such concern with the majority of group members being reliant on state benefits:

> *You just tend to be sat in the house especially if you are a single parent, you are on income support, you've got no money to go anywhere, even say if you just want to walk round town, you can't because you are limited, you haven't got the bus fare* (single parent group member)

> *Most of them can't pay their bills. Quite a lot are ex offenders because they have stolen to feed their habit, be it alcohol or drugs* (drop in centre leader)

Even those with jobs experienced money problems due to low rates of pay, as a child minder said:

> *I mean I'm self employed but I'm on a very low wage and by the time I've forked out for the things that I need and the mortgage, there's no money left … I need to work over 60 hours a week to break even. I work for about £75 a week* (single parent group member)

Much research has highlighted the close relationship between ill health, disability and material deprivation (Palmer et al, 2002). For example, the Black Report (1990) showed that inequalities in the incidence of ill health have been widening since the 1950s and that this trend was principally related to growing material inequalities. In accordance with this, a significant proportion of participants claimed to suffer from a disability, others experienced long term health problems with subsequent implications for the quality of their life:

> *It affects the quality of my life and you've got to be a hundred percent with the children … I mean when you're ill and self employed you don't get paid* (single parent group member)

Mental health problems were also an issue for participants. For

example, the single parents felt that they were vulnerable to such problems primarily because of the stress they experienced as a result of their childcare role, with many members claiming to have no time to themselves away from their children:

> *You have your children and you become an adult in an adult's world and at night time, you put your kids to bed and you're either doing housework or making a shopping list and you're just too tired to do anything* (single parent group member)

More severe mental health problems were experienced by members of the drop in centre:

> *Oh we have a lot of very depressed people. I mean the Samaritans come in here because we have an average of two potential suicides a week, at least* (drop in centre leader)

The presence of social support has been identified by much research as being an important aspect of 'social capital' and a crucial factor in reducing the risk of mental ill health (Brown and Harris, 1978). However, contrary to the mutually supportive portrayals of working class life traditionally espoused by sociologists (Young and Willmott, 1962), more recent research observes that deprived social groups are less likely to have access to informal support than the better off (Graham, 1991; Oakley and Rajan, 1991). This is due, for example, to geographical mobility serving to undermine this support as well as growing social polarity, leading to the further isolation and marginalisation of vulnerable groups (Dorling and Rees, 2003). As such, many participants claimed to lack informal support and experienced stress as a consequence of this:

> *I had lost both my parents in the space of three months. In the month in between my husband started divorce proceedings, he went off with another woman. It was just too much to cope with on my own because I had no other sort of family* (single parent group member)

For the teenage and single parents, this lack of support was exacerbated by the fact that they lacked the practical and emotional

support of a partner, while also feeling themselves to be stigmatised and ostracised by the wider community. More overt forms of social marginality were apparent amongst members of the drop in centre, many of whom were homeless:

> *Quite a lot are suffering from rejection because many have been thrown out of the family home… A lot of people have felt that their parents have never loved them; they have perhaps been bullied at school. Some have been sexually and physically abused in the home environment* (drop in centre leader).

As Doel and Sawdon (1999) observe, an important alternative source of support can be derived from social groups in the community and their role in providing members with support and a sense of belonging, thus enabling them to cope more effectively with their personal, group or community problems. All participants claimed to experience such benefits from their group:

> *It's friendly and very open. And another thing is that you can express your feelings and you know that it stays in this building. It doesn't go anywhere else unless you are comfortable with what you are saying. I think that we are all in the same boat as well. We all had children young so I think that is another reason* (teenage parent group member)

More practical support was offered by the drop in centre:

> *Very few have relevant life skills. Just simple skills like knowing how to eat a meal, knowing to put rubbish in a bin instead of throwing it on the floor, that kind of thing. Basic life skills we try and teach as we have them in the centre* (drop in centre leader)

Group decisions and goals

An important factor in promoting the participation and empowerment of group members is to enable them to determine their own goals and actions (Mullender and Ward, 1991). As such, participating groups were not only given the choice as to whether

or not they would take part in the art project but also on the type of art they would like to become involved in, with possible options including creative writing, drama, photography and painting and drawing. Following group discussions, all chose the latter option. A number of reasons were given for this. A major factor was that most people acquire experience of drawing and painting during childhood. Many participants wished to further pursue this lost aspect of their past lives. Furthermore, in contrast to other forms of art, painting and drawing was regarded as a medium in which participants would be unlikely to have been perceived as failing. For the drop in centre literacy problems were also an important factor in their decision.

Exhibiting work produced in traditional art therapy has long been a subject of debate with some therapists believing that such exhibition creates a misplaced assessment of the aims of the activity. However, others feel that the aesthetic and productive aspects of art and the activity of producing it are highly important within the art therapy process (Byrne, 1978). In accordance with this latter view, all three participating groups maintained that a sense of achievement and creativity with the opportunity to exhibit their work was a further factor influencing their decision to select painting and drawing as their preferred form of art. This clarity of purpose helped participants to envisage the fulfilment of personal aims and goals (Northern and Kurtland, 2001) thus enhancing their levels of motivation in the project. As such, all groups hoped to exhibit their work in some form, with the single parents aiming to produce a calendar to which each member would contribute a piece of artwork. While the teenage parents group appeared to be quite politicised in their view of the art project, feeling that exhibiting their artwork would enable them to publicise their collective situation and express their feelings of oppression to a wider audience. For the drop in centre members, their plans for exhibiting were less specific. This could have been attributable to its large, transient and diverse membership, which undermined the possibility of rigid goal setting (Vinter, 1967).

The art group sessions

The therapeutic use of the arts is often associated with Freudian theory and verbal psychotherapy with participants' artistic efforts being commonly followed with a translation of pictured ideas into words. However, the three artists taking part in the project saw themselves primarily as artists, not therapists. As such, verbal therapy was not practised within the group sessions, with the artwork and the process of creating it being seen as an end in itself. For example, the artist for the teenage parents group hoped that the work would improve the members' confidence, help them to relax and give them a break from their children. She thus planned to introduce the group to different types of paint and methods through the use of still life, mask making, glass painting and puppetry:

> *I haven't got any big ambitions that they will go into the arts themselves*
> *but I think they will believe in themselves a bit more through doing art*
> (teenage parent group artist)

Similar methods and aims were expressed by the artist for the single parents group whose sessions progressed through the stages of basic drawing, basic painting, using a transfer grid and calendar painting.

In contrast, the artist for the drop in centre, followed a less prescriptive approach than the other groups. This was due to the nature of the group with the sporadic attendance of the drop in centre members making the adherence to rigid structures and goals impractical. Initial attendance was also hindered by group members' suspicion of strangers, their possible unfamiliarity with modes of creative expression and what the artist felt to be the intrusiveness of centre workers, who would sometimes enter art sessions and comment on participants' artistic efforts. The approach of the drop in centre artist was therefore aimed at building up rapport and trust, publicising the group within the centre and at promoting participants' confidence, decision-making and group work skills as well as their spontaneity and creativity. They were thus given total freedom as to the types of materials

used and the materials were left for the participants to use at the end of the project. The success of his approach was indicated in the attendance levels, which after a slow start stabilised to around six regular participants.

Problems and issues

The major problems associated with the project were organisationally related issues. Thus a number of delays were encountered in the process of group selection. For example, a support group for older Asian men was provisionally recruited to the project, however, they later decided to withdraw in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks taking place in New York during 2001, as they felt that their main priority during this time was to support each other. Ethnic diversity was therefore not achieved with the three participating groups having a predominantly white membership. In addition, problems in gaining access to suitable groups meant that the commencement of the art project was delayed. This meant that the sessions were interrupted by the Christmas holiday period leading to a possible loss of momentum in the work being undertaken. While this interruption did not affect attendance for two of the groups, art sessions prior to Christmas for the teenage parent groupwere poorly attended due to the fact that group members had acquired other seasonal commitments:

> *I think getting them altogether is not easy, especially at this time of the year with shopping and jobs they have got at home. And a lot of them help with childcare within their own families as well and there are a few seasonal jobs that have cropped up* (teenage parent group leader)

One of the artists also commented on having to pay for art materials herself before claiming it back:

> *It would be good in the future for this sort of project to have a budget, a petty cash budget, for equipment* (teenage parent group artist)

Problems in evaluating the effectiveness of therapeutic interventions are widely recognised by practitioners due, for example, to the impact of extraneous variables upon such interventions (Huntington, 1999). As such, it was recognised that any possible benefits experienced by participants may have been due to other factors such as the provision of a crêche worker throughout the duration of the project and the self-selection of project participants. This is especially the case for the drop in centre members, only a minority of whom took part in the project. In this respect, greater methodological rigour could have been achieved in the project evaluation through such things as the establishment of statistical data indicating the social and psychological well being of participants, both before and after the project, or through the use of a 'control group' of individuals who chose not to take part in the art activity. Such measures would have provided an objective baseline from which to measure the subsequent impact of the project. They would also have facilitated a greater degree of comparison between the reactions of different participating groups and group members. However, due to the small scale of the project, it was thought to be incompatible with quantitative methods of research. Thus, with the exception of a form eliciting the demographic details of participants, methods used in this evaluation were solely qualitative. Moreover, time and resource constraints combined with ethical issues meant that only those participating in the project were included in its evaluation.

Project outcomes

The term 'therapeutic' can be broadly defined as a 'healing', 'beneficial', 'curative' or 'restorative' activity. In accordance with this, despite the fact that they lacked a verbal psychotherapeutic content, group members experienced the art sessions as being therapeutic. For as Dalley (1984) maintains, all stages of art activity can be seen to contribute to an overall therapeutic effect, for art activity is spontaneous, self-motivating and self-sustaining as the person becomes absorbed in what they are doing. Many participants spoke of this 'therapeutic' experience, observing the

way in which they found the art sessions 'relaxing' and beneficial to their 'peace of mind'. This could in turn be seen to have a positive impact on their mental well-being:

I have found it relaxing because you could get rid of your pent up emotions by actually channelling it into something (teenage parent group member)

For the teenage and single parent groups this therapeutic experience was facilitated by the availability of crêche workers during the period of the arts project:

The only time we get a crêche worker is when we are actually doing something (single parent group member)

Thus as Otway (1993) observes, due to their role in society as carers, many women are prevented from recognising their own need for support and time to themselves and are therefore denied possibilities for creative expression outside their nurturing role.

In addition to the therapeutic benefits of the art process itself, was its role in allowing participants to acquire and develop skills in art. Thus, although initial levels of artistic confidence and competence varied between different groups and participants, this acquisition of skills could itself be considered therapeutic, having a positive impact on participants' self confidence and esteem:

As individuals we've developed skills that we didn't know we had in the first place (drop in centre member)

Moreover, while the art sessions were primarily concerned not with the quality of the work but with the therapeutic value of producing it, when work becomes the focus of praise and enthusiasm, this can itself be therapeutic (Dalley, 1984). As such, the positive impact of the arts project was further facilitated by the sense of achievement that participants experienced in having created something tangible and valued by the group. This sense of achievement was most clearly apparent amongst the single parents group whose sessions were consistently well attended throughout the duration of the project. This success may have partly been

attributable to the nature of the art sessions, which were clearly structured to the final goal of producing a calendar. It may also have been due to the tightly knit and long established nature of the group, members' relatively high levels of artistic confidence and their good relationship with the artist who was known to the group prior to the commencement of the project. Thus, as Hilgard *et al.* (2000) observe, in such therapeutic activities, therapist and participant variables interact with intervention methods, making it difficult to assess which are related to a successful outcome.

A truly therapeutic experience is one that outlasts the session itself rather than one which offers only immediate and transient distraction (Hilgard et al, 2000). In accordance with this, group members' acquisition of skills and sense of achievement was not simply confined to their experiences within the art sessions, with many members further continuing their artwork either within or outside the group:

> *Some of the members have actually purchased some paints and done their own paintings because they find it so relaxing* (single parent group leader)

Again, this process was most apparent in the single parents group with the group artist agreeing to continue providing art sessions for the group at a reduced fee. Nevertheless, all participating group leaders were investigating ways in which art activities could be further pursued within the group after the project had finished. As the single parent group leader said of the art project:

> *It just seems to have flown. That's a downside really. It hasn't been long enough* (single parent group leader)

Previous research has observed the way in which art carried out within groups rather than with individuals can be advantageous to the art activity, serving to facilitate the acquisition of artistic skills in a cost effective way (Liebmann, 1989). The findings of this research would further suggest that the use of art within a groupwork setting can also have a positive impact on the workings of the group itself. For example, it served to promote

participants' sense of belonging, group cohesion and collective esteem, characteristics which have been found to be major curative factors in group work (Doel and Sawdon, 1999). Moreover, in spite of the dichotomy commonly drawn between activity and verbally orientated group work (Finlay, 1999), it also served to enhance the communication between group members. For example the single parent group spoke of the way in which the art project helped to promote group cohesion, not only through their common purpose and goal of producing a calendar, but also through its role in facilitating interaction between group members. This, in turn, helped to overcome the selectivity and anonymity of interaction, which can often develop in larger groups (Vinter, 1967):

> *When you're all sat as a group doing something, you go home warm, thinking there's people out there that care whether you're dead or alive* (single parent group member)

> *We've all done brilliant pieces of work haven't we and as a group we've interacted with each other, haven't we, mixing colours and all that sort of thing* (single parent group member)

This role of activity based group work in facilitating interaction between group members and in promoting the supportive capacities of the group as a whole highlights the way in which the traditional dichotomy drawn between verbal and task orientated group work is in fact blurred. For as Finlay (1999) states, both elements may be on offer in any one group but shift according to what the group is doing and according to how group members respond. Such group work should also play an increasingly significant part in the mental health promotion of vulnerable groups (Reverand and Levy, 2000). This is not only due to social trends that have undermined traditional sources of informal support for such groups (Dorling and Rees, 2003), but also due to trends in community care policy and social care practice, which place emphasis on individuals rather than contexts (Phillips, 2001). For, in spite of its advocacy of social inclusion, integration and participation, the practical implementation of community care policy tends to reflect the individualistic approach of the medical model. This is because

it places great emphasis on individual need, casework and the achievement of independence with little reference to the individual's relation to others. As Baldock (2003) observes, these trends have been exacerbated by the consumerisation of welfare services leading to an increasingly individualised and isolating form of poverty amongst vulnerable groups.

Conclusion

Although art therapy and groupwork practice is often associated with verbal techniques or 'talking circles' (Doel and Sawdon, 1999), this article has demonstrated the way in which involvement in group activity can, in itself, have a sustained and positive impact on the mental and social well being of participants. As such, participants in the art project experienced many positive benefits from their involvement, finding the process of art creation to be a therapeutic and relaxing experience while the acquisition of skills and sense of achievement served to promote feelings of confidence and self-esteem. Group processes were also affected with participating groups experiencing an enhancement of the social relationships between respective members, relationships which can themselves be seen to be an important factor in promoting mental health. These multiple benefits to be gained from the art activity suggest the need for more widespread and sustained funding for this accessible, versatile and cost effective means of health promotion within a community setting. They also help to highlight the continued relevance of group work to contemporary social care practice, in spite of its marginalisation in recent years.

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