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The Role of Art in Art Therapy

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The modern basis of art therapy is rooted in the fields of art and psychological therapy. Characteristics and theories of each of these fields contributed to the attempt to create a new entity for the new field (Malchiodi, 2003). This paper will attempt to identify the role and place of art in art therapy by using the historical developments in both disciplines, the original approaches that were developed in the area of art therapy and combining them with the experiences of art therapists.

The integrative approaches associate the nature of the therapeutic interaction with the therapist and with the overall experiences that therapists bring to the therapy session (Wadson, 1987). This notion suits the understanding that the nature of research should match its goals and the target audience that would benefit from it (Metzel, 2008). Following those ideas, we can suggest looking at the role and place of art in art therapy through the views and approaches of art therapists based on their professional experience. The current research is based on principles of qualitative research that uses descriptive, explanatory and inductive methodology (Shkedi, 2007).

In an attempt to address the research question, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with ten art therapists. Based on the therapists' experiences the role of art was identified as an alternative form of communication in addition to the verbal channel. They saw in the creative process an array of therapeutic and diagnostic elements as well, but they also recognized its value as part of a holistic process. The therapists described a point of view that saw experience as comprised of different concepts along with its ability to combine different levels of experience. They call attention to the ability to return to the art creations and view them again after a period of time which enables the therapists to apprehend a more complex perception of the creator as a whole (Markman-Zinemanas, 2010; Wadson, 1987).

In their reports the art therapists emphasized the integrative nature of the creative processes and the way in which it enabled flexibility and versatility that were needed to adapt to clients and their therapeutic goals. This integrative or eclectic stance casts doubt on the ability to reach a common agreement on the subject of the role and place of art in art therapy. However, even without this agreement, or perhaps thanks to its lack, art therapy is today a field that accommodates great diversity. Various developments in the field of psychotherapy; the professional basis of integrative approaches in this field; and developments in the world of modern and postmodern arts – all of these make art therapy, founded in both art and therapy, a therapeutic field that has as its essence flexibility and multi-dimensionality that are required of therapists today. As such, art is capable of containing disparate, hybrid and multi-faceted elements of postmodern identity in the creative process (Huss, 2009).

Keywords: Art, Art Therapy, Art Therapist, Art as Therapy, Arts in psychotherapy, Integrative approaches.

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