

Case report

The role of art in the amelioration of mental health problems: Vignettes from PakistanBasharat Hussain¹, Muhammad Tahir Khalily²

Abstract. *This paper explores how art can ameliorate mental health problems. We present two interview-based vignettes from the Islamabad/Rawalpindi city which illustrates the therapeutic role of artwork in helping two individuals understand and cope better with their psychiatric problems. The contents of these two vignettes were examined in the context of artwork through which the two individuals attempted to comprehend their psychiatric problems while using art as a therapeutic intervention. They depicted their artwork gradually over time as they improved and minimized their psychiatric symptoms. They functioned independently and coped with their psychiatric problems.*

Keywords: artwork, amelioration, mental health problems, Pakistani.

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INTRODUCTION Historically, art therapy is an intervention drawn from psychoanalytic theory. It is a creative method that provides a safe and unthreatening way to express thoughts, emotions and memories, which may be difficult to express verbally (Howie *et al*, 2002). Art therapy may have both curative and diagnostic value (Fink *et al*, 1967). Artwork has been found especially helpful in the treatment of the psychosocial consequences of childhood trauma (Eaton *et al*, 2007) helping to project and fantasize the reality of a negative childhood experience and to resolve the memory of traumatic events and associated emotions (Avstreich & Brown, 1979; StThomas & Johnson, 2002) in a non-threatening environment. The process is often unstructured and unconstrained, allowing individuals to express their emotions in a socially approved manner towards achieving self-actualization in order to grow emotionally and spiritually (Wolf, 1995). Art therapy enhances self-esteem (Ponteri, 2001) in a non-judgmental manner (Branch, 1992). It helps in understanding psychiatric symptoms (Julliard, 1995) and lessens the severity of psychiatric symptoms through self-catharsis (Reynolds *et al*, 2000). It may also reinforce or enhance internal locus of control (Rosal, 1993). Art therapy can be used in addition to psychotropic medicine or talk therapy for the treatment of psychiatric problems (Dere-Meyer, 2011). Artwork communicates non-verbally where the thoughts or feelings of the individuals presented in concrete form connect cognitively or visually with inner experiences. The paintings become powerful tools for manifestation of disturbing thoughts and bizarre imagery, which can be related to the individual's mental or emotional state (Hacking, 1999).

METHODS We explored two vignettes in the Islamabad/Rawalpindi city, which illustrate the therapeutic role of artwork in the amelioration of mental health problems. The two participants provided informed consent (Davies, 2001) and were interviewed separately. Our data include their creative work as portrayed in this paper.

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VIGNETTE 1: IMPROVEMENT OF BIPOLAR DISORDER BY PAINTING

Ms AB, a single woman aged 60, grew up in an urban background and lived with her elder sister in Rawalpindi. She was the fifth of six siblings, four brothers and two sisters. She was awarded her Master’s degree in Fine Arts in 1985 from Punjab University, and subsequently worked for social welfare organizations from 1987 to 1998. At age 30, she developed psychiatric problems after the sudden death of her fiancé a week before the wedding. Two months later, her mother passed away. She could not sleep, forgot things, heard voices, developed distrust, and felt pressure in the head. Following prolonged bereavement, she was diagnosed as suffering from bipolar disorder (Shah, 2008). In addition, she had medical problems such as auditory impairment, hypertension and diabetes. She had been taking psychotropic medicines, but did not report a family history of psychiatric problems. Once she was admitted to a local hospital and subsequently in a mental hospital for a few days, during which she had psychiatric treatment. However, she continued with art, which helped her to cope with her psychiatric condition. Art, she said, “gives me strength, spirit and also purpose in life. Without art, my life is boring”. She drew and painted many things from still objects to human figures. She had started her professional career in figurative art, and once a day she was working on non-figurative and abstract art. In her most recent painting exhibition, flowers were the main focus in different types and shapes, where the Lily was found frequently.



Table 1 Picture 1



Table 1 Picture 2

“Playing with colors is my passion, as it gives me respite from my depression. I have made a point not to use grey in my paintings because that color signifies depression and I already have enough of that and anxiety in my life.”



Table 1 Picture 3



Table 1 Picture 4

It was a challenge for me to start all over again, but art has helped me a lot to bounce back in life with self-confidence and courage. Art provides comfort to my mind and it can be helpful for me to cure myself. I had lost my memory but nature and colors forced me to capture them on the canvas”.

She then worked on abstract art. The theme was “life and death”. She used circles as a symbol and mostly primary colors to match her personality. Grey for her depicted the death, red life and grey and blue in combination fear. Art, she said, helped her to reduce her psychiatric problems. Her psychiatrist advised her to paint as much as she could.



Table 1 Picture 5

Collateral findings

Her consultant psychiatrist commented that she was “a strong woman with her life revolving around color, palette and brushes who had gone through many ups and down in her life, but thankfully found her passion in art” (Khan, 2011).

The Director of the programme *Hunerkada* Islamabad described her as “the most punctual and responsible member of the *Hunerkada* team with a singular agenda to draw and paint despite the occasional discomfort because of her ailment”. During an interview, she told a journalist, “My paintings are like companions that provide solace in moments of distress” (Khalid, 2000).

To summarize, she found that art therapy triggered her positive automatic thoughts while replacing the negative during the healing process. To coin a phrase, it became a source of ‘mental ventilation’ as she learned self-coping skills.

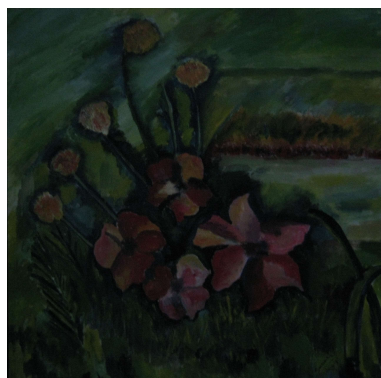


Table 1 Picture 6

Through examination of the painting of the first picture, our findings indicated that vertical movement suggested determination and resilience over a long time (Levy, 1958). The continuous changing in direction of strokes suggested insecurity feelings (Wolff, 1946), and vague lines, interrupted strokes suggest uncertainty and vacillating tendencies (Levy, 1958). The short discontinuous strokes suggested impulsive excitable tendencies and placement of drawings at low page indicated depressive tendencies

with defeatist attitudes (Jolles & Beck, 1953).

The irregular contour of head suggested possible psychotic conditions (Machover, 1949) and head drawn at last suggested severe psychological disturbance (Levy, 1958). Hair emphasis suggested aggressive assaultive tendencies (Shneidman, 1958) and sexual preoccupation (Levy, 1958). The slash line mouth suggested verbal aggression (Goldstein & Rawn, 1957) and omission of neck suggested inability to handle impulses rationally (Buck, 1950). The paintings also indicated that over cloth figure suggests a strong need for social approval and dominance. It also indicated inclination toward psychopathy (Machover, 1949).

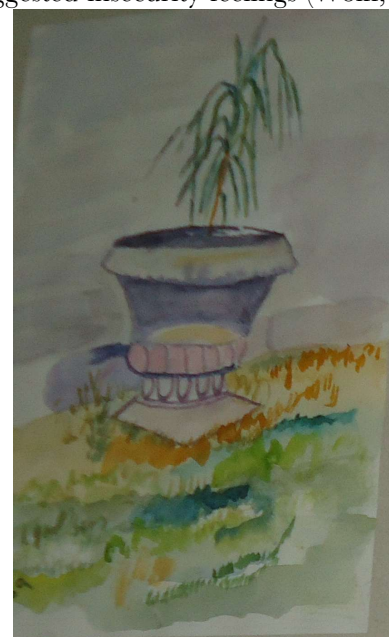


Table 1 Picture 7

Table 1 Simplified findings from case and control studies reviewed relating to content of picture

Picture	Type	Subject matter	Year
Picture 1	Surrealistic (Recalled memory)	Mother and children's	1995
Picture 2	Surrealistic (Recalled memory)	Children at home	1995
Picture 3	Surrealistic (Recalled memory)	Child is sleeping	1996
Picture 4	Surrealistic (Recalled memory)	Irrational thoughts during illness	1990
Picture 5	Still life	Nature study	2008
Picture 6	Still life	Nature study	2008
Picture 7	Still life	Nature study	2009

VIGNETTE 2: IMPROVEMENT OF CONVERSION DISORDER/ ANXIETY BY ART WORK

Mr AD was a 55 years old, married man. He had nine siblings, four brothers and five sisters and his birth order was the seventh. He had an urban background and earned a Master's degree in Fine Arts in 1986 from Punjab University. He was working as an artist and a teacher. At the age of six years he had emotional problems when his mother passed away to whom he was very much attached. He detached himself from the rest of the family and spent time alone.

He reported that he was shorter than his other siblings and considered this as one reason for being bullied at an early age. He shared how he had low social interaction, shyness, fears and lack of confidence. He spent time alone usually in the forest. He told how he had fits and breathing problems. He reported that his parents had consulted a physician who had diagnosed conversion disorder and prescribed psychiatric medicine for a short period. There was no family history of psychiatric problems, but he had hypertension.

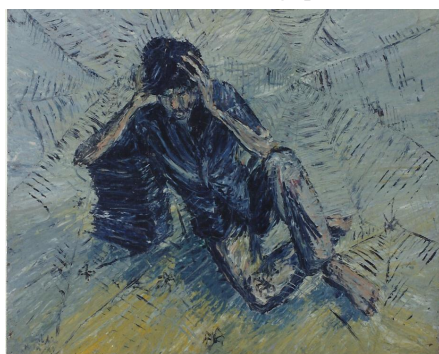


Table 2 Picture 1

He started drawing and found that during artwork he felt relaxed, and that his emotional symptoms were minimized. Art helped him to manage his psychiatric problems, and

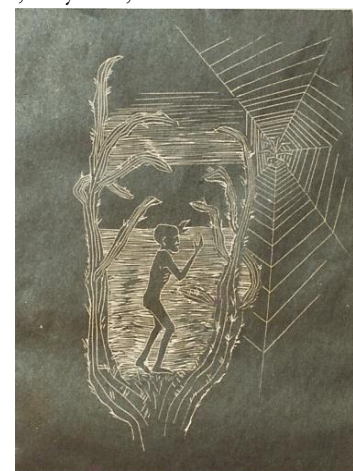


Table 2 Picture 2

consequently discontinued psychiatric medicines. A sensitive person, he described how he had “become depressed when I see injustice in society and see people in trouble. Then on return to home, I paint them. In this way I normalize myself”. He reported that he no longer had such symptoms, was functioning appropriately, and coping with life stresses effectively.

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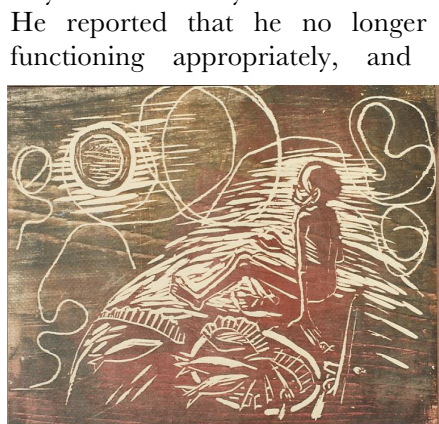


Table 2 Picture 3



Table 2 Picture 6



Table 2 Picture 5

It was his father who had encouraged him towards art being 21 years when he was admitted to the Masters in Fine Arts after which he had had no significant further symptoms. As he stated during the interview, “Art takes you at that stage

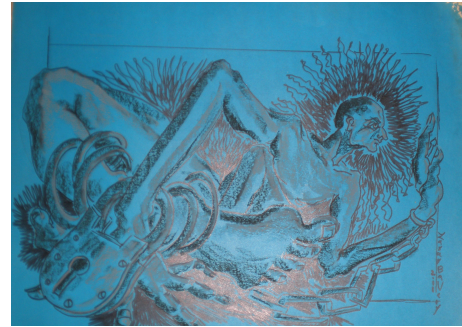


Table 2 Picture 4

where time and space become zero and you feel that moment/time”. He reported that whenever he felt some disturbance in his mind or sadness, he started drawing as a coping strategy to alleviate tension. This helped him to relax. He acknowledged how he depicted his problems and fear in his painting about which he also wrote - mostly about himself. In early days, he reflected, “people used to paint, draw and write, but nowadays they had left all these things behind

resulting in the development of psychological problems. Self writing was a good way to release your distress, thoughts and emotions”.

Collateral findings

Here we quote another artist’s remarks “it was like as if someone who had experienced loss of personality was trying to reconstruct himself in this picture”

His teacher, in appreciation of his work said, “He has developed creative sensibility. His paper-cut seems almost alive and effective; there is much of freshness and charm found in his work. He explores and experiments with various designs of still life in paper-work, reflecting a feeling for organizing artistic design with balance and creativeness. In his work, every shape, color and line has a purpose.

Placing figures in relationship to each other, in space, is what interested in him”.

An associate artist, in appreciation of his artwork added, “His work reflects his nature, his personal concerns and social issues. Symbols and colors convey inner and outer layers of the artist, thus relieving him of the boxed issues. His subject matter reflects the same. This catharsis helps him not only to feel light but also helps spectators to find him”.

During the interview, he mentioned how “the problems of the world like deafening noises, huge crowds, atmospheric pollution, enmity among men and internal conflicts can be resolved only through development of the aesthetic sense and contentment with his lot. My art work focuses on all of these problems”. His paintings expressed humanism. He had worked on landscapes, nature studies and portraits under varying conditions of lights. In use of the colors, he had the predilection for the violets and blues. When he painted he engrossed himself fully in his work and let his true self dictate to him.



Table 2 Picture 7

Table 2 to show the simplified findings from case and control studies reviewed relating to content of picture

Picture	Type	Subject matter	Year
Picture 1	Expressional and symbolism	Abnormal pattern of thinking in youngster	1980
Picture 2	Expressional and symbolism	Every child born in cactus	1981
Picture 3	Expressional and symbolism	Injustice in the society	1982
Picture 4	Expressional and symbolism	Self prison.	2011
Picture 5	Expressional and symbolism	No freedom of expression	2002
Picture 6	Expressional and symbolism	Dependency	2002
Picture 7	Expressional and symbolism	Skull and snake into the world flowerpot	2008

The examination of the painting of case vignette 2: Findings indicated that curve line emphasized striving towards a healthy personality (Buck, 1948). The unhesitating strokes determined the ambitious tendency (Levy, 1950) and uninterrupted straight strokes were associated with quick, decisive and assertive persons (Hammer, 1958). The sketchy strokes suggested needs for precision (Jolles, 1952) and dim facial features suggested withdrawal tendencies, timidity and self-consciousness in interpersonal relations. The unusually emphasized chin suggested possible compensation for feelings of weakness (Levy, 1958). The omission of neck suggested inability to handle impulses rationally (Buck, 1950) and unusually large hands suggested compensating for feelings of inadequacy (Jolles, 1952). The swollen hands suggested inhibited impulses (Machover, 1955) and the hand drawn last suggested feelings of inadequacy and a reluctance to make contact with the environment (Buck, 1950). The detailing of joints of fingers suggested compulsive tendencies and obsessive control of aggressive tendencies (Levy, 1958). Large feet have been associated with psychosomatic and peptic ulcer ailments (Modell & Potter, 1949), while feet and legs drawn first and detailed more than rest of the figure suggest depression and feelings of discouragement (Levy, 1950). The disproportionately large trunks may have implied many unsatisfied drives and motives (Buck, 1950).

CONCLUSION The contents of these two vignettes were analyzed in the context of artwork through which the two individuals attempted to understand their psychiatric problems while using art as a therapeutic intervention. They portrayed their artwork progressively over time as they improved and minimized their psychiatric symptoms. They functioned independently and coped with their psychiatric problems.

The findings of this study cannot be generalized because of its unstructured design. Its extraction may be confined to this study. It suggests, nevertheless, how creativity by individuals with artistic skills of artwork can play a significant role, in conjunction with other remedies in the rehabilitation of individuals suffering from psychiatric disorders.

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