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CONFERENCE PRESENTATION ON INNOVATIVE PRACTICE



Art therapy with couples: integrating art therapy practices with sex therapy and emotionally focused therapy

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the benefits of art therapy with couples, integrating sex therapy and Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) premises, and illustrating the use of creative and expressive tools to uniquely assess and foster relational and intimate bonds. While art therapists have long worked from systemic and creative frames, previous art therapy research explored attachment or dyadic art making, has not often explored its application within couples' therapy treatment. From a clinical perspective, however, anecdotal accounts of art therapy interventions with couples working on intimacy and relational issues and growing development of (non-art therapy) couples' treatment models, such as EFT and sex therapy support the potential usefulness of art therapy with couples. This paper, therefore, first introduces the theoretical premises of art therapy with couples, offers intervention examples, and then discusses considerations for art therapists preparing to work with couples or research such interventions.

Plain-language summary

Supporting couples in therapy is an important and distinguished endeavour from working with groups, individuals, and even from working with a parent-child dyad. This practice, where art-based interventions were developed and informed by current evidence-based practice, expressive sex therapy and Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT), offers specific art therapy considerations and practice descriptions intended to support the relational bond. Specifically, after offering a context and rationale for the clinical approach referencing significant literature, illustrations of (1) the use of art to assess couples' needs, (2) exploring sexual attitudes, histories, and desires, (3) assessing challenges and sensitivities, (4) understanding attachment injury and supporting reconciliation, and (5) responding to discrepancy in needs, desires or expressions are discussed as key aspects. The need for specific professional training and education for effectively working with couples, as well as implications for research and conclusions then follows.

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Introduction

Context

Couples therapy can involve layered, intriguing, and challenging work. According to Johnson, Makinen and Millikin (2001), traditional couples' therapy used to be predominantly verbal although growing evidence supports experiential and integrated bonding in therapy is more effective. In art therapy, there is limited discussion of how or why to incorporate art making with couples (Ricco, 2007). However, creativity – both in terms of creative thinking and creative production – is uniquely tied to our survival as a species, as well as our connection to our communities, our loved ones, and ourselves as we recover from life's challenges and traumas (Chapman, 2014; Dissanayake, 2012; Metzl, 2009). By integrating art in couples' therapy models, we provide couples with tools in which their unique, intuitive, and expressive sense of core issues, feelings, and meanings immediately come to the foreground through art making. This paper describes research informed

practice, where art-based interventions were developed and informed by current evidence-based practice, applying EFT and sex therapy principals to couples' work.

Theoretical framework

Dyadic art making within the context of couples therapy and sex therapy was first found to be beneficial four decades ago, when Barth and Kinder, (1985) and Sarrel, Sarrel, and Berman (1981) utilised art making with couples to feel comfortable in exploring interpersonal aspects of their relationships, attitudes, emotions, and fantasies. Among others, art therapy pioneers Hanna Kwiatkowska (1967), Helen Landgarten (Harriss & Landgarten, 1973), Harriet Wadeson (1973) wrote about working with couples through joint drawings and assessing sexual or marital challenges in art therapy. Janice Hoshino (Kerr, Hoshino, Sutherland, Parashak, & McCarley, 2008) continued to develop couples art therapy practices with couples, and Dina

Ricco (2007, 2016) created a treatment model for Marital Art Therapy, by combining Gottman's Sound Relationship House Theory with Art Therapy techniques.

Recent systematic exploration regarding the use of joint drawings in couples supports previous anecdotal reports, but do not often explore the effectiveness of art therapy treatment with couples. So, for example, art therapy researchers found that the use of joint drawings – both in terms of process and product – can be an effective, supportive, and psychologically sensitive tool to assess relational dynamics, attachment needs, conflict management, and emotional needs (Snir & Wiseman, 2010). Similarly, Shamri-Zeevi, Regev and Snir (2019) found that art-based parental training, which trains parents to work with art materials, discuss art making, etc enabled 'parents to connect better with their children's experiences, and voice more approval of their children' (p. 192). Art therapy research had also continued to explore early attachment experiences that can be assessed by specific art directives (Yoon, Betts, & Holttum, 2020) or aided by art therapy treatment (Boronska, 2000), but had not typically been investigated within the context of couples' treatment. The use of SexSmart Body Maps (Zoldbrod, 2015) or the Body Map Protocol (Lubbers, 2017) is additional examples of drawing tasks/protocols that could help couples explore intimacy needs but have not typical been applied to art therapy with couples.

At the same time, evidence-based couples therapy models help prepare clinicians to support couples effectively, EFT, for example, was developed as a therapy specifically for couples experiencing distress (Johnson, 2014) and is currently established as an evidence-based couples' therapy modality (Greenman & Johnson, 2013; Wiebe & Johnson, 2016). In EFT, attachment is seen as an underlying theory that supported the treatment focus of EFT (Greenman & Johnson, 2013), where romantic partners are the primary source of attachment, and distress in the romantic relationship is often a manifestation of attachment difficulties. EFT approaches couples' dynamics through a here-and-now perspective, focusing on emotional expression and reception by partners (Wiebe & Johnson, 2016). Couples are taught to recognize their experience and attune to their partner, rather than solely listening to their own reactions to an experience (Wiebe & Johnson, 2016). This emphasis of EFT is reflected in the process of joint art making, where here-and-now interactions are observed and recorded as visual interactions in the art product (Hinkle, Radomski, & Decker, 2015). The symbolic, emotional, and experiential interventions of EFT may be heightened by pairing it with art making and reflective clinical work, which is at the heart of art therapy in joint sessions with couples (Kerr, Hoshino, Sutherland, Parashak & McCarley, 2008). Similar to research on attachment

theory, the majority of joint art-making procedures have been studied with parent-child dyads or family drawings (Gavron & Mayseless, 2018; Goldner, Gazit & Scharf, 2017). There exists a solid body of evidence suggesting EFT is an effective couples' treatment (Greenman & Johnson, 2013; Johnson, Makinen & Millikin, 2001), and knowledge of principals of optimal sexuality, communication patterns, and barriers (Kleinplatz & Menard, 2007), which could directly inform art therapy work with couples. Art Therapists have specifically called to '... raise their awareness of their own and their clients sexualities' (Dudley, 2001)

Practice description

Learning about similarities of EFT and expressive forms of sex therapy (Ogden, 2013, 2015) to art therapy while seeking additional certifications, helped develop art therapy techniques and assessment tools for couples over the last decade. Albeit anecdotal, these illustrations are intended to support art therapists in considering their interventions with couples, to seek additional knowledge and research art therapy couples' work systemically.

During my own work with couples, which is takes place within a private practice setting in Los Angeles, CA, I consistently find art making – both process and products – to be immensely useful in the clinical assessment and treatment. Interestingly, art therapy is not how first come to me; Often couples find their way to my office through referrals related to the additional trainings I have in EFT or sex therapy. These training, and the referral intention help us create clear goals, while already during our introductory session we discuss how I would like to engage them in art making to enhance the process. The following interventions, while not formally and systematically researched, are informed by my work with couples over the last decade and are meant to illustrate ways I integrate couple's art therapy with the evidence-based practices of EFT and sex therapy premises I learned.

Example #1: The Use of Art to Assess Couples' Needs

In my first session with couples, I often introduce a joint verbal and non-verbal task, which was originally formulated by Helen B. Landgarten (Harriss & Landgarten, 1973). After the drawings are completed, we explore each partner's experience of engaging in the task and what symbols/meanings emerged for them. In such a way, the partners can identify their unique contributions as well as explore their interconnectedness in the shared space. According to Snir and Wiseman (2010), the art made offers a new perspective to look at their interactions – who did what, when, and what was the response – which connects their experiences with me with ones outside of therapy. This

simple, creative task offers a wealth of information about the couple's relational dynamic, attachment styles, and communication (Metzl, 2016). The art made also becomes a lasting anchor when, a few sessions after the original conjoint drawing assessment, the relational dynamic replays itself. In such a way, the images capture the couple's processes and help us to externalise the essence of their conflict through a shared reality.

Example #2: Exploring Sexual Attitudes, Values, Sexual History, and Desires

Within my art therapy practice, couples often report that they have never fully explored their sexual connection, desires, challenges, or wants, whether or not they have sought previous therapy. As sex therapist Gina Ogden (2013, 2015) found, exploring sexual needs/wants can offer a key to couples' bonding, and expressive and holistic tools are of great advantage when clients explore sexuality related issues, which often carry shame, fear, and moral judgement. When couples come to therapy, they navigate their own layered experiences with intimacy which needs to be understood (see 'taking a sexual history' in Buehler, 2013), as well as facing their partner's sexual experiences and needs. Because of the need to openly communicate about sexual aspects while taking into account the above barriers, it is particularly useful to use creative tools to explore sexual experiences, values, and desires.

Depending on couples' needs and communication styles, I may use a more structured visual-expressive anchor during this process. For example, I often use visual psychoeducation charts, such as the 'Circles of Sexuality' model created by Dennis Dailey (1981), to begin. I briefly review the model to clarify any terms – such as definitions of sensuality, sexualization, sexual identity, etc. – and then ask each client to create their own chart, modifying the circles to show their importance and symbolically name their wants, needs, sensitivities, and history. In particular, I asked them to adapt the 'Circle of Sexuality' diagram using colours, shapes, and words to illuminate what was important to them regarding their sexuality and to respond to the different aspects depicted. The parallel creative, yet structured work, provides a frame for a verbal dialogue, in which the partner has an identified role as an 'active listener and seer', about their partner's creative response.

Example #3: Assessing Challenges and Sensitivities While Making Corrective Experiences

It is claimed that understanding our physical, emotional, cognitive and spiritual presence with another is key to connecting (Johnson, 2014; Ogden, 2015). There are a variety of existing protocols that body mapping, such as the SexSmart Body Maps

(Zoldbrod, 2015) and the BodyMap Protocol (Lubbers, 2017). While each of the above protocols uses different materials, sizes, directives, and their objective differs slightly, both assist clients in facing sexual and somatic traumas creatively. While I do not use a standardised protocol, I similarly invite couples to use figure outlines to symbolically identify the needs, sensitivities, boundaries, body perceptions, and the stories their body holds. I 'invite' rather than 'direct' how to follow this suggestion to allow for flexibility around shameful or less articulated experiences. The concrete structure with the invited visualisation opens communication regarding when, what and where they experience and desire. The art process and product seem to help couples explore issues such as skin hunger or touch hunger, which Field (2014) defines as the negative neuropsychological outcomes of not having been touched by another over time, while soothing and releasing the frustration surrounding it.

Art making can offer a space to explore discomfort with one's body image, pain and pleasure, and anxiety about being desired, setting boundaries, as well as times when they desire closeness or separateness, how they experience and communicate their needs, etc. Communicating about their intimacy, relational dynamic, and understanding their individual issues (past traumas, current medical issues) offers opportunities to practice attunement, with the therapist first modelling – and then guiding clients in – reflecting, validating, asking questions about emotional and relational meaning, reflecting an understanding of the experience, focusing on the here and now, creating shared metaphors, etc. These interventions are based on EFT (Greenman & Johnson, 2013; Johnson, 2014) and support couples in creating corrective attachment experiences with one another.

Example #4: Attachment Injury and Reconciliation

Attachment injuries are one of the more common reasons that individuals seek couples' therapy, and often relate to experiences such as betrayal, infidelity, and abandonment (Johnson, Makinen, & Millikin, 2001). Therapists must navigate the devastating experience of loss of an attachment bond and the accompanying intense emotions and disrupted functioning, while maintaining a containing and expressive space. Creative expression as a therapeutic tool, takes people directly to the heart of the issue while offering containment as well as expression. An art piece can offer couples a different way to view their hurt as separate from the partner while still connected to their relationship. The art can express strong feelings (such as anger, sadness, fear) without threatening or projecting those onto the partner, giving the partner the space needed to relate to the issue and develop understanding. Addressing attachment injuries

requires that the therapist provide safety and care while powerful emotional content can be processed. Beyond therapeutic rapport and structure, the art naturally draws the partner in, creating perspective through its visual cues separating the attachment injury from the partner. Thus, the art allows partner to witness the hurt, and respond to it, while physically seeing the partner as more than the cause of the injury. From a neurobiological perspective, art engagements can activate mirror neurons – the type of neurons that support intuitive attunement in response to another – which then foster relational identification of aspects of ourselves in another (Chapman, 2014; Hass-Cohen & Findlay, 2015).

Example #5: Discrepancy in Needs, Desire or Expression

Another common challenge that brings couple to therapy, and specifically sex and couples' therapy, is a felt discrepancy in sexual/romantic desire or expression. In these cases, using creativity to help couples explore their desires and their sexual expression (or lack thereof) can be surprisingly helpful (Ogden, 2015). Through the use of art, individuals are able to explore – first individually as they work side-by-side – their own understanding of their needs and wants, and how they act on those creatively. This process is often experienced as empowering, as it liberates them from the 'stuck place' they have reached (Metzl, 2016). It can offer a wealth of insight through the artmaking experience itself, as well as through the subconscious aspects of the self that can show up in the created images. Then, the couple is invited to explore the art that each of them has made so they can consider any similarities and differences in their work, explore possible meeting spaces, examine the potential for change, and consider how they might respond to one another sexually.

Clinical reasoning: offering a creative space to be together

Overall, it is important for therapists to create a non-judgmental therapeutic space in which curiosity and compassion foster psychological explorations through creative tools. EFT research affirms that people intuitively know that when they feel judged, fearful, or ashamed, and are much less likely to take risks, try new strategies, or openly share experiences with others (Johnson, 2014). The premise of EFT is that we heal best in the presence of others who care about us. EFT prioritises creating a humanistic, experiential, non-pathologizing space (Greenman & Johnson, 2013) – one in which both partners can begin to trust each other – in order to explore their relational 'cycle' with one another. In order to create a structured yet non-judgmental space, it is important to offer the clients media choices and co-creating directives.

Focusing on verbally exploring the experience of making the art instead of focusing solely on the final product, can be helpful. Curiosity about the media choices and symbolic responses that clients have can be modelled so that partners can engage therapeutically with one another (Shamri-Zeevi, Regev, & Snir, 2019). In addition, the art therapist can engage in a shared exploration, modelling individuation and psychological separateness, as well as relational and empathic connectedness.

When considering whether to create a space for art-based interventions in the context of sex and couples' therapy, therapists must first explore their own training and familiarity with art materials, art directives, materials, and explorations thereof. It is important for therapists who are not trained in art therapy to understand that only qualified art therapists can lawfully offer 'art therapy' to their clients. Rather, they could frame it as an intentionally selected creative intervention that couples can use to explore or process an issue (as Zoldbrod, 2015 illustrated) and therapists may want to seek out further training and consultation from a registered art therapist if the creative intervention does not produce the reaction they anticipate. In addition, scope of their practice and the clinical fit is consistent guides in attempting to integrate different modalities.

Certification, consultation, and seek resources

It is important for art therapists to undergo additional training when working in specialised areas such as sex therapy, e.g. the American Association of Sexuality Education Counselling and Therapy (AASECT), provide sex therapy certification courses. Therapists may also benefit from specialised supervision e.g. in Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT), in order to better understand the intervention and how to integrate this with art therapy

Consultation with sex-therapists or Gottman couples therapy trainers may also be beneficial to therapists, helping them ground their work and provide additional perspectives and resources. Similarly, educating oneself about these frames through relevant publications (see reference list below) and seeking resources specifically related to particular clients' needs (such as sex positive parenting, non-monogamous / a-typical relationships, couples identifying as sexual minorities, and cultural sexual practices) anchors interventions in established practices and knowledge.

Considering socio-cultural and economic contexts

Considering the clients' socio-cultural and economic background is an essential component to effective couples' therapy, including consideration of their unique and shared cultural norms, expectations and

barriers. It is also important for the therapist to be aware of their own cultural frames regarding couples: intimacy, attachment, societal expectations and personally perceived norms.

Among other variables, understanding communication norms related to geographic, linguistic, and cultural experiences growing up, societal pressures, gender roles, perception and knowledge about sexuality (Buehler, 2013), explorations of minority identity as it impacts family composition, previous traumatic experiences (Pifalo, 2009) or addictions impacting the couples (Wilson, 2000). In addition, spiritual and physical desires and limitations impact one's capacity for intimacy (Ogden, 2015), and need to be explored.

Finally, when clients identify as belonging to a particular cultural group, sexual orientation or expression, which differs from that of the therapist, it is important for the therapist to seek additional knowledge and skills to best serve her clients in general (McGeorge & Stone Carlson, 2011) and as it applies to art therapy practices (Barbee, 2002; Beaumont, 2012). The art therapist can also consider art as a language, one with which different clients experience different proficiencies, and one which the response could be culturally layered (Markmann-Zinemanas, 2011). It would be important to assess the purpose, timing and methods of art making so it is attuned to both partners and is developmentally and culturally relevant.

Implications for research

Whilst this paper outlines research informed practice, and similar to what Ricco (2016) had attempted to do with integrating art therapy with the Gottman method for couples' treatment, systematic research in this area is needed, to provide concrete evidence of its benefits for clients. The potential of integrating theoretical, clinical and experiential materials to benefit couples' therapy practices has been illustrated by evidence-based couples' therapy models such as Gottmans' method (Gottman & Gottman, 2017) and EFT (Greenman & Johnson, 2013). Our field would likely benefit from similar solid research designs to assess the effectiveness of art therapy couples work beyond anecdotal evidence.

A growing number of art therapy studies also attempted to explore attachment, closeness / relational bond (Bat Or, Ishai & Levi, 2015; Frame, 2006; Goldner, Gazit & Scharf, 2017; Snir & Wisemann, 2010) and can also offer a creative frame to evaluating attachment related progress when used more systematically across conditions and different couples.

One of the benefits of learning from established evidence-based models and integrating art-based interventions with them is that these practices often include built in assessments of progress/effectiveness, with established norms and measures a clinician

could use. Specifically, EFT offers a step by step plan with an estimated number of sessions which couples often need to move between them. While every couple is different, being able to assess where clients make progress and when / where they seem more stuck could be very useful. Similarly, both EFT and Gottman's Couples Therapy methods discuss ways therapists can assess communication, attachment, and goals between and within sessions. These measures include more standardised questionnaires which are offered as part of the training or general clinician's transparent evaluations of movement between expected stages of treatment. Similarly, sex therapy models often structure conversations about sex around Permission, Specific Suggestions and Information regarding Sexuality, and finally moving toward Intensive Therapy (often referred to as the PLISSIT model), when the issues at hand warrant that. Art made in therapy helps to archive the clients' movement and stagnation, metaphorical themes, and concrete responses to each other. Such gradual exploration of sensitive issues while transparently involving clients in reflecting on their progress is inherent to reflecting on art made in treatment, and such ongoing or periodic assessment also empowers clients to name hesitations, preferences, and perception of effectiveness while repairing bonds and instilling hope.

Conclusion

The use of art can be a powerful addition to couples' work. Infusing traditional talk therapy with creative interventions can change the dynamics and offer clients a new and creative dimension, within which to explore their concerns. The use of art assessments and interventions with couples can help explore relational dynamic, illuminate and open conversation around gender role and expectations, as well as sexual issues. When exploring relational issues, art making can help make attachment (current and past) more visual and concrete (Snir & Wiseman, 2010), assist in building non-verbal communication and expose communication challenges and roles, as well as clarify a shared vision through creative attunement/repair. When exploring sexuality and gender roles, art making can assist in articulating the unarticulated (shame, guilt), assess the severity of symptom or behaviours contributing to a sexual challenge (such as sex addiction and pain disorders), promote insight work into the aetiology of sexual challenges, gender roles and expression, within the socio-cultural impacts of gender expectations and norms with which one grew up as well as the couples' shares socio-cultural world. Ultimately, creating art offers a novel perspective, one that transforms the couple's dialogue from a 'blame-shame' dynamic, into one of curiosity.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Einat Metzl, PHD, LMFT, ATR-BC is a licensed marital and family therapist (MFT) and a registered art therapist (ATR). She is a therapist in private practice and an associate professor at Loyola Marymount University's graduate Marital Family Therapy / Art Therapy program. Einat is committed to expanding art therapy research and bridging our current paradigms of art therapy with related discipline. Her previous work explored the interwoven and collective knowledge of wellness connected to Art therapy, sex therapy, disaster mental health, resilience, play therapy, inter generational trauma, leadership and diversity, couples' therapy, and coping with loss.

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