Fairy Tales, Archetypes, and Self-Awareness

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Abstract

Can fairy tales and archetypal symbols help people become self-aware by observing movement patterns? Observation and analysis is based on the research of fifteen articles related to the topic of fairy tales, art therapy, and Adlerian psychology. Fairy tales will be discussed in terms of their universal applications to most human conditions. Similarities between fairy tales and art therapy will be highlighted. A review of how both art and story have played a role in Adlerian techniques, such as lifestyle analysis and early recollections, will be discussed. Overall, the researched journal articles indicate that narrative therapy and art therapy work well together in helping a client unravel their unconscious motivations. Based on this finding, a study involving 22 participants was conducted using the fairy tale of Hansel and Gretel and the art medium of clay. Following the research protocol, a self-report survey was administered to each participant during the process. The research was conducted to observe if this method would be a useful tool in the field of art therapy.

*Keywords:* fairy tales, art therapy, narrative therapy, Adlerian psychology, clay, polymer clay
Fairy Tales, Archetypes, and Self-Awareness

Can the use of fairy tales be an effective component when incorporated with art therapy and Adlerian psychology? The hypothesis of this paper addresses the question and contends that through the combined use of fairy tales and art therapy, used within the context of Adlerian psychology, movement toward insight and change will occur in the therapeutic setting. If this hypothesis is proven to be true, then the possibility of developing a new methodology for use in therapy can be explored using fairy tales and art therapy.

Based on a prior study done by Brown (2006) where both fairy tales and art therapy were given to a group of adults, there is merit for further inquiry. The outcome of the study by Brown (2006) indicated that both modalities helped to identify issues around the client’s personal issues. The combination of telling a story and then having the participants draw a scene from the story helped them to externalize their personal issues and provided a visual form that was previously unknown and unidentified to them (Brown, 2006).

This review will evaluate evidence on how fairy tales have been used effectively in therapy. Similarities between the use of fairy tales and the process of art therapy will be outlined. Also explored will be how fairy tales and art therapy have been used in Adlerian psychology. Studies have shown that art therapy and Adlerian psychology have been a successful combination. Studies have also indicated that the use of art therapy and narrative therapy in combination with Adlerian techniques have been successful. There will be an argument made for how fairy tales can be used as a substitute for narrative
therapy. Finally, the need for further research into the combined use of fairy tales and art therapy in conjunction with Adlerian techniques will be addressed.

**Fairy Tales**

Fairy tales, when used as a therapeutic tool, can stimulate the imagination, help identify underlying concerns, provide a context for relational connections, point to possible solutions, and provide a model of behavior that can help build confidence (Ucko, 1991).

**Universal Human Condition**

Fairy tales offer a personal identification to the universal human condition. The story gives the reader a sense of autonomy – an overall picture that others have had similar feelings to their own. This, alone, gives the client a sense of normalcy. Being able to live vicariously through the characters in a story and to use them as a mirror of their own lives can be a powerful therapeutic intervention (Brown, 2007). The basic tenet of the fairy tale is that they reveal human hopes, fears, and conditions. Drawing a connection to the story, the therapist can begin to reach the client on a very deep, emotional level (Ucko, 1991). As stated by Dieckmann,

Somewhere in the collective unconscious, beyond our personal memories, a layer of common human psychic energy exists which has the potential for development through the individual. Early childhood fairy-tales symbolically begin to form the rungs of a sort of psychic trellis which can be seen as marking stages in the individuation process; in this way, the person experiences the possibility of learning and gaining experience of the unknown, and often fabulous, inner world, as well as of the outer world. The stories show ways of experiencing the
possibilities of psychic functioning, which are beyond personal experience. (Dieckmann, 1997, p. 255)

Not only does the fairy story tell a tale of human conditions, but it also addresses potential solutions to basic human predicaments (Meyer, 2009).

**Overcome Resistance by Externalizing the Problem**

The connection to the collective unconscious in our common human psychic energy allows the fairy tale to become a vehicle that creates a safe space in which to address many sensitive issues without the need for uncomfortable self-disclosure (Ucko, 1991). By serving as an external structure, the fairy tale can offer possible solutions to transitional problems and anxieties. The client can project his/her identity into the story and can, therefore, indirectly address the underlying problems (Hill, 1992; Thomas, 1995). Within the safe confines of the story, the client can begin to recognize themselves, redefine problems, use the story as a way to model different communication styles, decrease resistance, and suggest possible solutions to their difficult problems (Ucko, 1991).

**Give Voice to Problems and Tap into Personal Issues**

A fairy tale can become an effective tool in addressing difficult issues, as well as developing a sense of self. It can give voice to expressing difficult, abstract, and complex problems (Brown, 2006). The story chosen by the client becomes a mirror of themselves reflecting behavior that is understood by the client. The tale becomes transitional language and a model for potential transformation (Hill, 1992). Used against the backdrop of the imagery in the fairy tale, by concentrating on the similarities between the patient’s life story and the fairy tale motif, the therapist can begin to shed light onto the
issue presented by the client. In the early stages of treatment, it can be a very helpful tool to orient the client (Asper-Bruggisser, 1983). Because fairy tales speak to human concerns, dilemmas, and situations that are universal, used as a therapeutic tool the story can tap into important personal issues (Brown, 2006).

**Fairy Tale as a Metaphor**

As Ucko (1991) suggests, the metaphors within the fairy tales are well suited to the counseling process. Both Freud and Jung described folk tales as “symbolic representations of life’s conflicts, struggles, and solutions” (Ucko, 1991, p. 414). Roesler continues that thought by stating, “Jung pointed out that personal myths, which are archetypal patterns found in mythology and fairy tales, could govern the life course of individuals, in most cases, unconsciously” (Roesler, 2006, p. 575). The aim of therapy is to bring the unconscious to consciousness. Through the use of metaphor and fairy tale, pieces of the unconscious can begin to be revealed to the client.

**Summary**

As a therapist, using an image from a fairy tale and then carefully observing the role that the client plays in relation to the story, can help sharpen perception (Asper-Bruggisser, 1983). For the client to see their issue mirrored in the characters of the fairy tale is a powerful therapeutic intervention (Brown, 2006). Not only does it give the client a sense of normalcy to be able to identify with an object outside of themselves, it also gives them a sense that they are part of a larger, universal human condition. As an external object, the story becomes a mirror reflecting choices and options for the client to explore within their own situation. As a metaphor, the story is a very effective tool to help unravel the unconscious and bring it to the surface.
There is a significant amount of research that has been done on the use of fairy tales as a therapeutic intervention. The outcomes of the research indicate positive results.

**Art Therapy**

Art, as a therapeutic tool, offers the possibility of nonverbal symbolic communication. Thoughts and feelings may emerge that can provide an alternative story for the client. Through the use of the alternative story, the client can begin to see their issue from a different perspective (Manicom & Boronska, 2003).

The creative process and the art product reflect what is going on in the life of the client. The art reproduces or highlights the everyday patterns of communication. The process of having the client create a piece of art, even as simple as a scribble drawing, and then asking them general questions about the object in front of them produces a limitless range of answers. The answer, whatever it is, can only reflect on the inner movement of the client (Sutherland, 2011).

**Overcoming Resistance and Externalizing the Problem**

When a client or family group becomes involved in a drawing task, many times, they seem to forget that the therapist is observing the actions. As a result, what is revealed to the therapist is behavioral and communication patterns that the client might not otherwise want outsiders to see or hear. In a very subtle, unobtrusive way, the therapist can begin to understand the world that the client or family members have created for themselves (Sutherland, 2011).

Creating art often has a calming effect and allows the client to relax and begin to let down defenses. The drawings begin to unravel the client’s story and are a representation of non-verbal constructs (Humphreys & Leitner, 2006). The meaning
contained within the art evolves out of the words that the client uses to explain both the process and the product. These words will come much closer to the truth than anything the therapist might have to offer (Sutherland, 2011).

Art can be an effective way to help in the process of externalization. The goal of externalization is to separate the client’s life from their personal stories (Carlson, 1997).

**Art Therapy and Fairy Tales**

A group study, conducted by Brown (2006), combined art therapy with the use of fairy tales. The experiential study began with the telling of a fairy tale. The group was then asked to draw one or two scenes that stood out in the story for them. Next, they were asked to describe their drawing to the group. After all of the individual descriptions were explained, the group was invited to make associations and connections between their drawings. What was discovered in the study was that through the use of both art and fairy tale, the clients experienced a deeper level of understanding and awareness. The fairy tale touched on presenting issues and concerns within the group and the group was able to demonstrate their experiences of commonality and universality around the issues. The story provided a framework and the art was a way to externalize their thoughts through the use of an image (Brown, 2006).

**Art Therapy and Narrative Therapy**

Art therapy and narrative therapy share many theoretical beliefs that are consistent with one another. Both are based in the belief that stories that lie hidden in our unconscious have a significant influence upon one’s life story. The goal of both therapies is to bring out the hidden aspect of the self. Art serves as a vehicle for the client to bring forth these hidden aspects (Carlson, 1997). Dobkin Dushman states, “Art therapy and
psychodrama move rapidly and powerfully to the core issues of one’s life, evoking strong emotions and inner search that can add a rich therapeutic dimension” (Dobkin Dushman, 1997, pp. 461). Art puts form into the imagined world. The imagined world of the client becomes the narrative of how s/he is actively living (Humphreys & Leitner, 2006).

**Art Therapy as Symbol and Metaphor**

Language and thought are symbolic constructions of the mind. The nonverbal sensations that are experienced at some level in the body are repeated and experienced in many different contexts. This sensation is then perceived and organized by the use of symbols. The symbol is then generalized to future events or relationships. Through the therapeutic process, these symbols are made present in the conscious realm and can then be explored. Nonverbal tools, such as art, help the therapist to know the unconscious aspects of the client’s core structure (Humphreys & Leitner, 2006).

Through the use of symbols to create metaphors, the client is able to explore the meaning of their world and express their view using hands-on interventions. This allows a gateway for the client to work toward personal resolution (Chelsey, Gillett, & Wagner, 2008).

The creative act helps to minimize conflict. Powerful feelings that might be unconscious can begin to emerge and be transformed into a picture. Translating these images into a metaphor can help aid the process of movement, change, and sublimation (Manicom & Boronska, 2003). Metaphors offer inroads toward the client’s unconscious in both a visual and verbal way. Attitudes and emotions that are evoked in the process of making art can be more easily understood when the art is viewed through the lens of a metaphor (Sutherland, 2011).
Summary

Art therapy can bring about a deeper understanding of the meaning one gives to their life events. It is a vehicle that can tap into one’s feelings, unknown thoughts, and lifestyle convictions (Dobkin Dushman & Sutherl, 1997).

Art making and narrative therapy are both action-oriented creative processes. Combined, they have the power to accelerate awareness of the client’s attitude toward life. By allowing the creative process to bring forth feelings and vivid experiences, the client can then see a framework from which to react and make new choices about thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Through awareness, the client can observe their behavior and, in turn, change the meaning given to their life experiences (Dobkin Dushman & Sutherland, 1997).

Similar to the use of fairy tales in the therapeutic experience, art can help the client overcome resistance by externalizing the problem and letting the art be the focus of discussion. In so doing, new ways of perceiving an old problem are created and then explored.

Adlerian Psychology

Adlerian therapy is rich in its use of personal stories. These stories not only offer the possibility of change, but they also offer new tools for interacting and coping (Sutherland, 2011). Techniques within Adlerian psychology that use story as a mode of intervention are lifestyle assessment and early recollections.

Adlerian Psychology and Art

Art, a tool that taps into the unconscious, quietly and visually reveals the private logic, mistaken beliefs and lifestyle convictions within the client. These concepts are key
to Adlerian psychology. The process of making art invites participation and encourages a feeling of belonging (Sutherland, 2011). Belonging is one of the key concepts in Adlerian psychology in addition to feelings of significance and safety.

**Adlerian Psychology and Narrative Therapy**

Adlerian therapy is rich in its use of personal narratives. Narratives are the basic material of lifestyle assessment and early recollections (Maniacci et al., 1998).

In a study done by Maniacci et al. (1998), art was used with the Adlerian technique of Early Recollections. The therapist asked the client to draw the feelings and observations that came from the retelling of their story. They were asked to draw what they remembered and then they were asked to draw how they would like it to be. When asked to draw their story, the process of art making created a clear picture of the real and imagined aspects of their lifestyle. Both the conscious and unconscious memories emerged in the art (Maniacci et al., 1998).

**Summary**

The Adlerian techniques of lifestyle analysis and early recollection meld easily with the use of art interventions to help describe the stories in a richer, fuller way. Again, because art allows room to externalize the experience, the client has an opportunity to delve deeper into meaning and awareness that are contained within life styles and early recollections.

**Limitations and Assumptions of Using Art and Fairy Tales**

Therapy is designed to overcome resistance, yet cooperation is based primarily on the client. Sometimes this can be elusive (Sutherland, 2011). When using art and story
within a group context there is always the possibility of someone not willing to participate fully and, consequently, be disruptive.

It is important for the therapist to choose a story carefully, taking into account the dynamics of the population. The therapist should be mindful of the overall presenting problems of the client/s and choose a story that will highlight issues without traumatizing the client in the process.

Another aspect to consider for the therapist is to be mindful and cautious of how men are presented and how women are presented in a fairy tale (Brown, 2006).

Finally there may also be limitations on what a client can do in terms of physically making art. The therapist should be mindful to choose a medium that would be appropriate for the client’s ability.

**Analysis of Findings**

Symbols and myths, the stories we create for ourselves, are the means by which we perceive life and make sense of it. The symbol, whether brought to the surface through art or through a fairy tale, may bridge the rational and the intuitive. The myth that we tell ourselves can also be understood as metaphor which points beyond the image. We experience reality through the meaning that we give to it (Dobkin Dushman & Sutherland, 1997). Using stories helps to put clarity around our lives and give it a meaningful foundation. The story serves as a frame, which creates coherence in all the different experiences in our lives (Roesler, 2006). To increase identification and rebuild connection with ourselves, it is valuable to use many of the physical senses. For example, when working with a client, using the combined activities of art and a fairy tale can help create new thoughts, sensations and behaviors (Hill, 1992).
Analysis One

There is very little research that details the combined use of art therapy and fairy tales. There is, however, significant amount of research on the effects of art therapy when used with narrative therapy. Positive results have been indicated by the research done on the use of art therapy with narrative therapy.

An argument can be made that fairy tales are a form of narrative. The argument is rooted in the ability of both narrative therapy and fairy tales to externalize the internal story of the client. Narrative therapy is based on the idea that people hold stories in their unconscious and that this story influences their outward behavior. Proponents of narrative therapy contend that the healing process begins once the client’s story is brought out of their unconscious and put into conscious form (Carlson, 1997). Fairy tales, holding universal human conditions within the tale, quickens the process of externalizing the story by the mere fact of offering a story for the client to relate to immediately.

It has been shown through the literature review that narrative therapy and art therapy have produced favorable results for the client. Based on that fact and the argument that both narrative therapy and fairy tales are a way to externalize the client’s issue, it would follow that fairy tales used with art therapy would be an effective therapeutic tool. Further study is needed to prove this argument opens the door for deeper conversation as to what is going on in her life.

Analysis Two

Based on the findings in the literature review, the follow statements are true: 1) the research shows that fairy tales, art therapy, and narrative therapy have been effective
tools when used independently with clients. 2) Adlerian psychology has used the combination of art therapy and narrative therapy with positive results for the client. 

If, in fact, narrative therapy and fairy tales could be used interchangeably (as indicated in Analysis One), it would then follow that art therapy and fairy tales used with Adlerian techniques would produce positive results. This argument warrants further research.

**Summary**

Considering the trends observed in the literature review, there is substantial evidence that supports the original question, which asks, “Can fairy tales be an effective therapeutic component when incorporated with art therapy and Adlerian psychology?” Fairy tales and art therapy share many of the same functions. The both tell a story of the client’s inner psyche. By the nature of what they are, they effortlessly externalize the client’s presenting issue, making the therapeutic process a little less threatening in the beginning stages. Both fairy tales and art use symbols and metaphor as a way to understand the message contained within. Adlerian psychology uses story as a therapeutic tool in both lifestyle analysis and early recollection. All three modes - fairy tales, art therapy and Adlerian psychology - are story driven as a means to help the client reach a deeper understanding of themselves. Based on this final analysis, further study of the original question is warranted.
References


