

**Person-centered Expressive Arts Therapy: Content Analysis of Expressive Arts Therapeutic  
Groups for Emotionally High-risk Adolescents**

School of Social Sciences  
Caritas Institute of Higher Education

By Vivian Tink Chuk LAI, Hing Kwan TO, & Zita Wing Yiu WONG

July 2017

*All Rights Reserved*

## **Introduction**

The purpose of the present research on a person-centered expressive arts therapeutic group is to investigate how this humanistic approach to art therapy serves the group participants, namely, emotionally high-risk adolescents who are regarded as sub-clinical in psychiatric service in Hong Kong. The group was organized by the Caritas Charrette Center based on the person-centered expressive arts therapy first proposed by Natalie Rogers (1993).

The foundation of the therapy is based on the humanistic principle originated by Carl Rogers (2001). The person-center approach emphasizes certain qualities of the therapist including empathic, authentic, being open and caring. A person-centered therapist believes that all human beings strives toward growth and have the capacity to do so. Holding the faith towards the inner ability and strengths of human being, the therapist of the person-centered expressive arts therapy aims to lead the participants to utilize different art forms or any nonverbal and metaphorical expressions to express their inner feelings. It is believed the process of art creation under the warm and caring context created by the therapist enhances the participant to overcome the inhibitions one imposes onto the self in order to discover, or rediscover, one's inner feelings, strengths, potentials and direction. Following is the delineation of the research method, results, and implication.

## **Research Methodology**

There is the quest for how expressive arts can be an intervention for adolescences to achieve emotional wellness. According to Rogers (1993), person-centered expressive arts is a holistic approach that facilitates people to get in touch with one's feelings and intuitions through the use of various art media, such as visual arts, music, drama, dance/movement, and poetry, etc. The expressions and discoveries are not confined in verbal expressions but could be nonverbal and metaphorical.

The study is divided into two parts: the first part is a reliability test of a batch of self-rating measurements on anxiety, distress and depression. These measurements included the Medical Outcome Study (MOS) – Anxiety (Stewart & Wart, 1992), 12-item General Health Questionnaire

(GHQ-12) (Chan, 1993; Montazeri, et. al. , 2003), and The Center for Epidesmiological Studies – Depression (CES-D) Scale (Radloff, 1977). In addition, it is hypothesized that participants after joining the person-centered expressive arts therapy group would be improved in the anxiety, distress and depressive level, to be captured by the self-report measurements. The second part employs the qualitative research approach to capture the vast feelings and experiences that the participants would get in the process of artful expressions. This approach allows the researcher to make good use of the rich expressions of the participants rather than reducing the data into a few variables in quantitative analysis.

### **Research Question**

For the first part of the research, it aims at evaluate the reliability of the Medical Outcome Study (MOS) – Anxiety (Stewart & Wart, 1992), 12-item General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) (Chan, 1993; Montazeri, et. al. , 2003), and The Center for Epidesmiological Studies – Depression (CES-D) Scale (Radloff, 1977). It also questions the impact of the person-centered expressive arts therapeutic group on the person’s well-being manifested by one’s extent of the anxiety, distress and depression level. The second part of the research aims at understanding the phenomenon of the growth of adolescences through the use of expressive arts. It explores the themes among the verbal and nonverbal expressions of the group participants.

### **Research Setting**

The research participants participated in the person-centered expressive arts therapeutic groups that were held in 2016. There will total of 94 participants included in the part one of the study. For the qualitative research, the analysis included two groups each consisted of 6 consecutive sessions that lasted for 2 hours. All sessions were held in the classrooms of secondary schools that the participants attended. Each group was co-led by one expressive arts facilitator and one social worker. All sessions were videotaped. Activities included warm-up, music improvisation, song writing, visualization, improvisational movement, body relaxation, dramatic acting, story-telling, mask making exercise, other individual artwork creation, group co-creation and group sharing.

The themes of the sessions focused on the body and emotion. For the body, it included grounding, development of body awareness, and exploration of body sensations. For emotion, it included awareness and exploration of emotion, containment of emotion, expression and release of emotion, exploring various ways to handle mental and emotional disturbances or stress, and discovery of personal resources and self soothing. Finally it is the development of the sense of autonomy through the exploration of body, mind and emotion.

### **Sampling Method**

Participants were referred by the school social worker to join the expressive arts workshop due to their emotional disturbance issues, other participants were recruited upon their completion of a batch of self-report measures included the Medical Outcome Study (MOS) – Anxiety (Stewart & Wart, 1992), 12-item General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) (Chan, 1993; Montazeri, Harirchi, Shariati, Garmaroudi, Ebadi, & Fateh, 2003), and The Center for Epidemiological Studies – Depression (CES-D) Scale (Radloff, 1977). For the qualitative analysis of the groups, 11 participants from two schools showed interested in committing in the 6-session expressive art therapeutic group.

### **Procedure**

Upon the referral from the school social worker, participants attended a one-session workshop that introduced the concept of using expressive arts to facilitate one's understanding of own emotion. Interested participants who consented to partake in the research and to participate in the expressive arts therapeutic group signed a consent form for their participations and being videotaped. All filled in the MOS, GHQ-12 and CES-D before and after they attended the six sessions group. The 94 collected self-report were undergone reliability analysis and t-test for pre- and post-group comparison. For the two groups for qualitative analysis, their videotape were transcribed and analyzed after the 6 sessions.

### **Result**

Part 1: Scale reliability analysis and pre- and post-group t-test

Table 1. The reliabilities of the measurements

Scales	$\alpha$	Test-retest (Pre test – Post test)
Anxiety		.71
Pretest	.89	
Posttest	.93	
Post maintenance	.95	
GHQ-Positive		.61
Pretest	.70	
Posttest	.83	
Post maintenance	.86	
GHQ-Negative		.62
Pretest	.86	
Posttest	.83	
Post maintenance	.87	
Post case	.87	
Depression		.81
Pretest	.89	
Posttest	.90	
Post maintenance	.91	
Post case	.87	

According to table 1, the results exhibit that all the measurements contain high reliability.

All the scales perform moderate high test-retest reliability.

Table 2. Paired sample *t* – test between pretest and posttest

Scales	Pretest		Posttest		<i>t</i>
	M	SD	M	SD	
Anxiety	3.81	1.59	3.82	1.95	-.08
GHQ Negative	2.04	.77	1.88	.66	1.42
GHQ Positive	2.78	.56	2.55	.74	2.93**
Depression	3.75	1.79	3.13	1.53	3.35**

\*\* $p < .01$

According to table 2, there are significant difference pretest and posttest in GHQ-positive and depression. For the GHQ-positive, participants develop positive attitude in coping stress. Therefore, they perceive less stress in posttest ( $M = 2.55$ ,  $SD = .74$ ) than that in pretest ( $M = 2.78$ ,  $SD = .56$ ;  $p < .01$ ). The results show that participants perceive less depression in posttest ( $M = 3.13$ ,  $SD = 1.53$ ) than that in pretest ( $M = 3.75$ ,  $SD = 1.79$ ).

Part 2: Following is the content analysis of the transcribed videotapes. Major themes and sub-themes were derived from the data.

Table 3. Qualitative analysis of themes and sub-themes

<b>Theme</b>	<b>sub-theme</b>	<b>Example Quotes</b>
Awareness	Meta-cognitive awareness	I did not had much thoughts during the visualization.
		I usually take care of the blues on my own.
		I always focus on the dark things around me rather than the positive things.
		I tend to hide my unhappy thoughts.
		There's lots of things going through my mind that I cannot understand. I will be happy when I can sort out those things/issues.
		When I cannot achieve what I aimed for, I am desolated and disappointed. I would reflect on my failure.
		My mind is disorganized; though I want to be happy, it is impossible due to all these dark and mess inside my head.
		I want to relax myself to calm down my mind.
		Too many things are tangled up in my mind.
	emotion awareness	I was touched, excited and happy when I went to a concert the first time.
		I was happy during my visualization.
		I was impressed when I ventured to the new world during the visualization.
		I was nervous but satisfied when I performed alone.

		I felt excited when I was on a roller coaster.
		I was high after learned to ride a bike.
		I was scared when I had my first menstruation.
		I don't like to see things too clearly since the clear sight would get me frustrated. I don't want to be frustrated.
		I hate myself; I can never be up-to-standard.
		I am so frustrated for all the entangled problems in my life.
		when I hide too much, I feel sad.
		I feel lonely and sad.
		I was disgraceful and even I did not like myself.
		I am emotionally fluctuated.
		I feel happy when I can overcome my emotional blocks.
	sensation awareness	I visualized purple, pink, then grey breathe.
		I was relaxed during the visualization.
		I entered a time tunnel during the visualization and saw my great grandmother.
		I felt dizzy but still comfortable.
		I did not see any colors during the visualization.
		I got this severe headache.
Release	Emotion expression	I usually take care of the blues on my own.
		The lyrics help me to release my feelings.
		I have vented out my blues.
		I am please that I can write out my feelings. I feel much better now. I like writing!

		After twisted those scrapes, it released my unspeakable feelings.
		The ash in my creation represents my negative emotions. Now they are externalized and no longer IN me.
		After making the artwork, I am physically tired, emotionally refreshed.
		I just wrapped up my disgraceful emotions as a gift for people I hate.
		After I put all the emotions inside my creation, my melancholy is softened.
		The creative process helped me to vent my emotion. It satisfied my aggressive need and now I can exhale from a softened heart.
		I feel delighted now after the torn of the paper; its like my unhappy is being torn away.
		It feels wonderful to express my emotion through creation.
		I like using various materials to express myself during the creative process.
	Self-expression	I am sentimental
		this (drawing) is me
		I am ocean
		inside the mask is a color that I like
Insight	Acceptance	I hated my nickname but now I accept it ("this is me")
		I don't like to see things too clearly since the clear sight would get me frustrated



		I found the reality side was blocked so I chose the fantasy world in my visualization
		We gain sometimes and we loss sometimes. We cry and we smile
		I am serious when I opt to
		we are serious while also easy going
		I had both happy and unhappy sides
		I am perfectionistic but I can also be carefree
		There are so many things I cannot bear, that I am not satisfied with but they are out of my control
		I am this imperfect person, but unique
		when I overcame my psychological obstacles, I felt special
		I can show others that I am confidence and perfect. I have lots of ideas and want to accomplish a lot. I allow this to show up in my mask rather than embellishing it. Too much embellishment suffocates.
		Art is a way to take care of myself; it helps me to endure all those shadows, the previously unacceptable parts, of myself.
		Now I am more open to express myself and share my thoughts and feelings with others. I am more confidence to be proactive in interpersonal interactions.
		Hope and fear goes hand-in-hand; I can have them both in me.

		Light and darkness always coexist. As my emotions, I am learning to accept the coexistence of emotions that I like and dislike such as hope and fear.
	Self-direction	I like to do this and that (e.g. play, sleep, watch cartoon, etc)
		I have strong performance desire
		I want to utilize my talents
		I want to be "this"
		when I success, I would be happy
		I want to be a cheerleader for others
		Deep inside I want to, and I know I can, find my inner child, the pure one, who can be truthful to my own existence and be the real me.
		After expressing myself through the art creation, I am clear about my own thoughts and how I want to live and be.
		I can aim high and do well. I will persist for want I truly want.
		I want to look for things that I can feel comfortable with in my daily living.
		I am consciencious about my performance because I worry that I might not be able to meet other's expectations. I don't want to disappoint them.
		Sometimes I worry that what I do would create troubles to others. I don't want others to dislike or abandone me.

	Universal connectedness	simplicity is beauty; everyone is beautiful
		Although we are all complicated, we are all the same.
		I like it when we can share openly during the group process. The interaction among the groupmates here is different from talking about schoolwork and staff. We truly interact with all of heart and mind.
		I want to continue this kind of interpersonal interaction: instead of keeping a distance with others like I used to do, I can be chill and soften those rigid boundary.
		When I am with the group, it helps me to conquer my fear.  I no longer am self-conscious about my behaviours but know that we hold different views and all is fine.

**Themes.** Three themes are derived from the data including awareness, release and insight. In the expressive arts therapeutic group, the participants were guided to explore the self through paying attention to one's, feelings, behaviors and even one's intuition (Rogers, 1993). It enhances the participants' cognitive, emotional and sensation awareness that reflect the participants' growth of self understanding. Self awareness has been found to be a buffer for depressive symptoms since it helps in regulation of self, mood, and emotion (Jimenez, Niles, & Park, 2010). Research had found many other benefits of mindfulness including physical health, enhancement of wellbeing, academic achievement and attention, just to name a few (Sanger & Dorjee, 2015).

**Awareness.** Among the three types of awareness, utterance on emotional awareness appeared most frequently. It includes noticing different kinds of emotions, such as happiness, sadness, feeling frustrated, fear, hope, stress, fatigue, and anger, etc. Such awareness happened after the visualization, movement exercise, song writing and mask making exercises during the group.

For example, one of the group members was aware of her frustration over the different difficulties in her life. The frustration even though was felt when the participant faced with the hardship in daily life, much attention was devoted to find a solution rather than given to recognizing the frustration. The creative process during the group opened up the time for the participant to get in touch with her frustration so she can decide what she would like to do with such feeling.

Sensation awareness required the participants to pay attention to their body. This type of awareness happened exclusively after the visualization and movement exercise. It is hypothesized that those exercises helped the participants to connect the body, mind and emotion. For instance, during the visualization, the facilitator explicitly told the participants to pay attention to different sensation such as what one sees, hears, smells, feels during the visualization. Such guidance directed the participants to slow down and feel one's body. One participant reported feeling dizzy while also comfortable when she experienced the visualization in her mind. Others reported they saw the light, or heard the birds chipping during the visualization. The sensation awareness is beneficial for the participant to connect oneself to the moment-to-moment experience and hence, being self-aware and eventually would expend the self-relationship to interact with the environment (Mehling, Wrubel, Daubenmier, Price, Kerr, ...& Stewart, 2011).

Finally there was the meta-cognitive awareness. According to the theory of mind literature, meta cognitive awareness or meta-cognition is defined as thinking about thinking (Favell, 1979; Brown, 1987). Rogers (2001) stated that the person-centered expressive arts therapy helps one to discover one's feelings; it was not expected that cognitive awareness would be one of the themes during the group process. However, since thoughts and feelings are interconnected (Beck, 1967), it may be the explanation for the cognitive awareness observed even though the group process emphasis on feeling expression. In the group, the group member reflected on their thinking process. For example, more than one participants were aware that they had many thoughts simultaneously coming to their mind while others were aware that they tended to suppress those thoughts that would make them unhappy.

**Release.** The second theme was release, which included the expression of a range of emotions and the expression of who one is. Rogers (2001) stated that release follows art expression. With the expressive arts exercises carried out in a nonjudgmental atmosphere, the participants were encouraged to be honest to one's thoughts, feelings and behaviors. In turn, it facilitated negative emotion expression and the acceptance of the real self. According to the American Psychological Association (2016), traits or characteristics influence how one thinks, feels, and behaves. By being aware of one's thoughts, feelings and behaviors through expressive arts, the participants gained understanding of their true characteristics or traits which in turn was expressed freely through expressive arts. One of the exercises from the group was paper-tearing; the exercise facilitated the participants to release the pent up emotion through acceptable destructive behaviors of tearing paper, reflection and sharing. One participant reflected that the destructive behavior of paper-tearing was physically taxing, nonetheless, she felt good after it since the behavior helped her to get out the suppressed and negative emotions inside. The aggressive behavior paradoxically allowed her to feel relax and calm afterward.

**Insight.** The third theme was about the insights that the participants gained from participated in the expressive arts groups. These insights included self-acceptance, knowing what one is striving for, that is, the self-direction, and a wider connection with the others or the universe. Some of the insight was found even during the first group session. It was remarkable that two of the participants mentioned that they both hated their nicknames but eventually accepted the names. They realized that though the names were not what they wanted, they can change their attitude and accept the negatives because "I am me". In a group song creation exercise, the participants came up with the lyric that was full of self-acceptance, both the positive and negative sides of themselves and everyone. It seemed that group interaction and the expressive art intervention helped the participants to view themselves more positively, to accept the less-positive side of themselves, their emotions and others.

The subtheme of self-direction contains the participants' wishes, that is, what they want from themselves. During the expressive art exercises, participants were asked to think about what they want and wish in life and hence, allowed them to examine their values. These basic values guide a person's action and decision-making process (Schwartz et al., 2012). Some of the presented values are self-focused, such as the value of self-direction; some are social-focused, such as the universalism.

Among the values mentioned by the participants, self-direction appeared most frequently. This fits well with the objective of the person-centered expressive art therapy. Rogers (1993) stated that it is believed that human are self-directed hence the humanistic approach to art therapy is one way to help the participant to let the self-direction unfold during art expression. According to Schwartz, et al. (2012), self-direction can be subdivided into the self-direction of thought and self-direction of action. It refers to the seeking of freedom to let one's creativity and ideas to flourish or to be able to carry out certain actions. It is hypothesized that since the participants were all at the stage of searching for their identities, the freedom to think and to act is especially important as such exploration helps in building identity (Marcia, 1966).

Achievement is defined as a personally beneficial value that involves meeting the social standards (Schwartz, et al., 2012). The presence of this value and wish shows the importance of social approval is to the adolescence. Research has found that social measurement that one imposes onto oneself influences one's self-esteem (Vasile, 2013). Social approval can be a double-edged sword that it enables one to feel good while can also lead one to devalue oneself when such approval absence. One participant mentioned that when her family did not praise her for the good mark she gained from school, she felt bad and sad. Another observed value was hedonism, the wish to seek pleasure and gratification (Schwartz et al., 2012). This concept is close to the self-direction subtheme that both emphasize seeking pleasure according to one's penchant rather than by following the social standards. One example of the hedonistic wish was "I want to look for things that I can feel comfortable with in my daily living".

The participants' value included not only those that benefit the selves but also those that concern with the wellbeing of others. The subtheme of benevolence and universalism appeared as many times as the self-direction subtheme. Benevolence is defined as working for the good of the in-group members while universalism is the understanding and accepting people who are different from the self (Schwartz et al., 2012). One participant beautifully said that "simplicity is beauty; everyone is beautiful", which showed her connectedness and acceptance of people around her as well as to herself since "everyone" includes herself.

### **Conclusion**

From the quantitative analysis, the reliable self-reports showed that participants developed positive attitude towards coping with stress after participated in the person-centered expressive arts group. They perceived being less depressive which consistent with the rich result gathered from the qualitative part of the research.

From the qualitative analysis, it is showed that the participants were able to embrace both the positive and negative sides of themselves and for others when they were given the chance to get in touch with themselves and interact with others. Embody one's feeling through nonverbal and metaphorical expression grants one to release even the most unwanted emotions and transform them to be something meaningful and even aesthetic. The use of expressive art provides a platform for the participants to examine and to reflect upon the self that contains multiple facets. There are the shadow side, the welcomed side; the rational side, the emotional side; the potential side, the expressed side; the latent side, the overt side. When these facets are discovered and integrated, one is transformed and the meaning of life is seen from a different light.

It is suggested that future research can include the analysis of group participants' feedback over their experience of the expressive art therapeutic group. Such analysis can reveal the long-term effect of the group as well as knowing from the first person's point of view how the group transforms the person.

## References

- American Psychology Association (2010). *Personality*. American Psychological Association.  
<http://www.apa.org/topics/personality/> Accessed 3 Aug 2016.
- Beck, A. T. (1967). *Depression: Causes and treatment*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Brown, A. L. (1987). Metacognition, executive control, self-regulation, and other more mysterious mechanisms. In F. E. Weinert & R. H. Kluwe (Eds.), *Metacognition, motivation, and understanding* (pp. 65-116). New Jersey, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Chan, D. W. The Chinese General Health Questionnaire in a psychiatric setting: The development of the Chinese scaled version. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 28, 124-129.  
 Doi: 10.1007/BF00801742
- Flavell, J. H. (1979). Metacognition and cognitive monitoring: A new area of cognitive-developmental inquiry. *American Psychologist*, 34, 906-911.
- Jimenez, S. S., Niles, B. L., & Park, C. L. (2010). A mindfulness model of affect regulation and depressive symptoms: Positive emotions, mood regulation expectancies, and self-acceptance as regulatory mechanisms. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 49, 645-650. doi: 10.1016/j.paid.2010.05.041.
- Marcia, J. E. (1966). Development and validation of ego-identity status. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 3(5), 551.
- Mehling, W. E., Wrubel, J., Daubenmier, J., Price, C., Kerr, C. E., Silow, T., Gopisetty, V., & Stewart, A.L. (2011). Body awareness: A phenomenological inquiry into the common group of mind-body therapies. *Philosophy, Ethics, and Humanities*, 6(6), 1-12. Doi: 10.1186/1747-5341-6-6.
- Montazeri, A., Harirchi, A. M., Shariati, M., Garmaroudi, G., Ebadi, M., & Fateh, A. (2003). The 12-item General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12): Translation and validation study of Iranian version. *Health and Quality of Life Outcomes*, 1, 66-69. Doi: 10.1186/1477-7525-1-66.



- Radloff, L. S. (1977). The CES-D scale: A self-report depression scale for research in the general population. *Applied Psychological Measurement, 1*(3), 385-401. Doi: 10.1177/014662167700100306
- Rogers, N. (1993). *The creative connection: Expressive arts as healing*. Palo Alto, CA: Science & Behavior Books.
- Sanger, K. L., & Dorjee, D. (2015). Mindfulness training for adolescents: A neurodevelopmental perspective on investigating modifications in attention and emotion regulation using event-related brain potentials. *Cognitive, Affect, and Behavioral Neuroscience, 15*, 696-711. doi: 10.3758/s13415-015-0354-7
- Schwartz, S. H., Cieciuch, J., Vecchione, M., Davidov, E., Fischer, R., Beierlein, C.,...Konty, M. (2012). Refining the theory of basic individual values. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 103*(4), 663-688. Doi: 10.1037/a0029393
- Stewart, A. L., & Ware, J. E. (1992). *Measuring functioning and well-being*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Vasile, C. (2013). An evaluation of self-acceptance in adults. *Social and Behavioral Sciences, 78*, 605-609. doi: 10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.04.360