Holistic arts-based social work

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Introduction

While art therapy is usually conducted by graduate-trained professionals with a degree in art therapy, arts-based methods denote the application of art therapy techniques, and are accessible and used by a more diverse group of helping professionals such as social workers. Arts-based methods can include activities such as drawing, painting, creative writing, working with clay and more. I have been studying the benefits of arts-based methods in holistic social group work for almost 10 years. Along with members of my research team, I developed an arts-based mindfulness group programme that facilitates the learning of mindfulness using experiential and arts-based methods such as drawing, painting, making collages, creating with sand, using music, practicing Tai Chi movements, sculpting with clay, listening to guided imageries and creative writing (Coholic 2010). This research was primarily focused on the needs of marginalised children and youth (children involved with child welfare or mental health systems), but we also explored our programme with indigenous women (Coholic et al. 2013) and with adults experiencing mental health challenges (Coholic et al. 2014). At the beginning of my research career, when I first started exploring the processes and benefits of holistic social group work, our group work was facilitated and studied with women, and teenage girl participants involved with child welfare. Since spirituality and other existential topics are often difficult to articulate in words, it made sense to utilise arts-based methods to explore and express these topics.

Arts-based methods in social work

What do social workers think happens when the arts are applied in practice, research and teaching? This question was considered by Sinding, Warren and Paton (2014), who offered a framework for understanding why social workers utilised arts-based methods. First, these authors explained that arts-informed social work ‘gets stuff out’ (Sinding et al. 2014: 197), which means, in part, that sometimes language cannot capture or express people’s experiences but art-making can help a person express their thoughts and feelings. For example, Harley and Hunn (2015) wanted to understand how spirituality was a source of hope and coping for Black adolescents. They used photography in their research as a safer method for the youth to share their personal
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material; the photographs were symbolic representations of issues, feelings and themes. In fact, using creative methods with youth has long been accepted within helping professions as it is understood that youth often communicate their thoughts and feelings nonverbally through creative activity (Goodman 2005).

Sometimes the point of ‘getting stuff out’ might be to develop self-awareness and understanding, which certainly reflects one of the goals of the group work that I have studied in my research programme. Indeed, developing both personal and professional self-awareness is often stated as an outcome of arts-based methods (Bartkeviciene 2014). With reference to helping social workers develop therapeutic presence, Jacobs (2015) argued that the art of social work practice resides in the relationship, and contemplative practices are important in helping social workers develop the therapeutic and transitional (transformational) space. To promote contemplative practices, she encouraged social workers to use art, music and poetry, as these activities can evoke emotion, promote empathy and understanding, and provide solace.

Second, art creations and art-making can also help us to understand another’s world, encouraging us to see or know things in a different way using our emotions and senses (Sinding et al. 2014). Importantly, in this manner, arts-based methods are used not only to help people express themselves but as part of social change and justice activities. For example, in their research with incarcerated Aboriginal women, Walsh, Rutherford and Crough (2013) explained how arts-based methods such as creative writing, photography and digital storytelling enabled participation in research in relevant ways that were inclusive. The research products were egalitarian and ready for social and political action. Foster (2012) used poetry to promote social justice as poetry can promote alternative discourse and challenge dominant ideologies. A poem might impact people on an emotional and spiritual level, and thus, can promote empathy based on these emotional responses. Moxley (2013) argued groups that face oppression can develop personally and contribute to social action through art-making; an avenue of self-expression in which people can individually or with others establish their worldview and construct positions from which they can criticise or illuminate degraded aspects of their lives that others do not notice.

Social work educators have also used arts-based materials such as films to provide an opportunity for students to deconstruct narratives that are understood as a product of communal, socially acquired understandings (Keddell 2011). In this manner, theories can be viewed as fluid metaphors derived from lived experience rather than universal, absolute templates. As Keddell (2011: 410) has stated, ‘Arts may encourage a more inductive, interactive, and less rigid use of formal theory’. Walton (2012) also used arts-based methods to encourage breadth and criticality in student reflections on professional communication, which provided a deeper and more detailed level of theoretical analysis. As she noted, there may be a false assumption that the aim of arts work is emotional expression at the expense of analytic understanding.

Walton (2012) also remarked that it is odd that social work remains almost entirely fixed on talk and text when a sustained strand of thinking has characterised the profession as needing intuition and creativity. Similarly, Damianakis (2007: 526) reported that she had found ‘no systematic investigation on the ways social workers incorporate the arts … into their knowledge, values, and practices’. There certainly is a lack of arts-based social work intervention research, although perhaps the same could be said in general about intervention research within social work. This being said, earlier writings by social workers such as Goldstein (1992; 1999), Irving (1999) and Siporin (1988) discussed how the arts could help people come to terms with the meaning of life, underscore moral and spiritual issues, endorse diverse ways of understanding marginalised experiences and enhance the quality of the therapeutic relationship (Damianakis 2007). Interestingly, the same has been said about spirituality, in that spiritually–influenced social
work can help people address the meaning of life, emphasise moral issues, engage marginalised peoples and non-Western cultures and promote therapeutic presence (Coholic 2016).

Certainly, working with non-Western cultures is a strong rationale for the incorporation of both arts-based methods and spirituality, particularly in social work practice but also in research and education. Moxley (2013) stated that it is puzzling that the arts are not well appreciated in social work, given the centrality of diverse art forms to culture building. Art is a fundamental aspect of culture; art-making may emerge within a group as its principal source of pleasure, interpretation and coping. Huss (2009) used group art-work with Bedouin women, explaining that traditional women living in Westernised cultures do not disclose their problems directly to social workers outside of their own cultural group. Art enabled the women to express themselves in a culturally sanctioned form, with the aim of shifting the understanding of people in power and redirecting interventions. The women’s art embodied cultural understandings of problems and solutions.

Similarly, in our work with Aboriginal women, their culture could not be conceived of separately from their spirituality (Coholic et al. 2013). Arts-based methods enabled the women to express and develop their cultural/spiritual understandings of their life experiences. For one example, we encouraged the women to draw what they imagined during a guided imagery activity. In describing their drawings, one woman talked about being supported by an ‘eagle woman’ who gave her a feather and told her that she was her friend, teacher and guide, and that she should not be afraid to ask for help. The woman explained that the eagle woman stated, ‘You can do it…you are beautiful and the goodwill is coming’. Another woman who had a similar experience said:

I headed up towards the sun … I began to feel another presence … the great eagle, he soared with me … He hovered over me, like protection. I felt safe, I felt strong and sacred … the way the eagle flies, so light but with such power, no words, just love.

(Coholic et al. 2013: 160)

In harmony with understanding how a particular population and/or culture communicates, one should use methods that are relevant and meaningful for a specific group. For instance, in our experiences, many marginalised and vulnerable children can become easily frustrated and disengaged, have poor listening skills and trouble remaining physically still (Coholic 2011). They are not yet equipped to learn mindfulness from a traditional perspective that relies upon abilities to pay attention, sit still and complete homework outside of the group experience. However, arts-based activities provide an excellent way to assist these youth to develop skills such as paying attention to one’s thoughts and feelings (Homeyer 2003), and expressing these aspects of one’s life experience to understand them with more depth. This understanding (self-awareness) is crucial for many reasons including the ability to regulate one’s emotions as opposed to reacting to them and acting out. Importantly, arts-based and creative methods can help people to express themselves in ways that reflect their capacities and build strengths thereby reflecting a strengths-based approach. They are also great methods of engaging people in helping processes (Leckey 2011; Olson-McBride and Page 2012) and in group work (Haen and Weil 2010).

We have applied arts-based methods for all of these rationales but also because arts-based methods are effective and beneficial. Art therapists have argued for the benefits of art for client change and positive outcomes since the 1970s (Malchiodi 2007). Creative activities have always been evident within mental health, and the arts have an important role to play in improving the health of individuals (Leckey 2011). A critical review of arts-based practices found that these methods are of high benefit especially in the areas of self-discovery and expression (Van Lith et
Specifically with reference to resilience, arts-based counselling techniques can lead to improvements in this area in addition to wellbeing (Pearson and Wilson 2008), and can improve self-esteem and resilience in adolescents and young adults (Jang and Choi 2012; Roghanchi et al. 2013). Macpherson, Hart and Heaver (2016) argued that even short-term visual arts practice interventions can improve youth resilience.

**Arts-based methods and spirituality**

At the beginning of my research programme, I was interested in learning the benefits of spiritually-influenced group work. We developed a group that had as its overall goal, the development of self-awareness and self-esteem (Coholic 2005). We used a variety of arts-based methods including creative writing, collaging and working with dreams, drawing, working with clay, painting and mindfulness-based activities. Our rationale for using arts-based methods reflected the work of researchers cited earlier in this chapter in that arts-based methods can help people express their thoughts and feelings, and learn about themselves and others. Thus, it seemed an ideal way to assist participants to develop their self-awareness and build group cohesion. Importantly, creative activities are especially relevant methods to use when spirituality is part of the work because spiritual experiences and ideas, which can be embodied and emotional, are often difficult to articulate in words. Similarly, Moxley (2013) argued that art is about emotion and is an important tool for elevating consciousness. Referring specifically to research, Foster (2012) argued that employing art requires a particular ontology; a valuing of experience, feeling, imagination and intuition (often we tend to value logic, numbers and reason more). The same could be said about incorporating spirituality into social work; that we need to be interested in exploring more abstract experiences that may be felt and intuitive.

Mindfulness-based practices and discussions have also been an important part of the group work from the beginning of my research, because mindfulness is a holistic philosophy and a spiritual practice for many people, and it has to do with building self-awareness and self-compassion. Briefly, mindfulness is activity that encourages awareness to emerge through paying attention on purpose, non-judgmentally, in the present moment (Kabat-Zinn 1990). Also, mindfulness has to do with exploring who we are, with questioning our view of the world and with cultivating appreciation for the fullness of life’s moments (Gause and Coholic 2010). Indeed, in our early work, we found that mindfulness-based practice was perceived by group participants to help them develop their self-awareness and foster compassion, positive self-esteem and feelings of gratefulness (Coholic 2006). An ability to be mindful can help a person to view negative thoughts as passing events rather than valid reflections of reality (non-judgmental awareness), and it may promote flexible responses as opposed to ruminating about the past (self-regulation of attention). These abilities can assist an individual to build aspects of their resilience through the application of psychological, social, cultural, physical and spiritual resources. Teaching mindfulness by way of arts-based methods has helped us teach this philosophy and practice to vulnerable youth. Mindfulness in social work is a new and growth-area of practice and research, and social workers are taking up mindfulness in creative, strengths-based and holistic ways.

**An example of a holistic arts-based activity**

We have always incorporated discussions and arts-based activities about dreams into our group work. In an earlier paper, we discussed the connections between dream work and spirituality, pointing out that dreams can provide rich material to work with, and that many cultures believe dreams to be influenced by transcendental forces (Coholic and LeBreton 2007). For instance,
some people and/or cultures believe that dreams can contain premonitions or divine messages, or that dreams are a way to communicate with ancestors and others who have died.

Collaging a dream is a particularly effective way to capture and explore it. With a dream in mind, we encouraged participants to look through magazines and cut out any pictures or words that resonated with them, and importantly, not to think too much about this process. Once the collage was constructed, the analysis of it took place. In one group that we studied, Mary produced a dream collage that contained the following words: ‘change’, ‘spirit’, ‘soothe your soul’, ‘doors open everywhere’, ‘that’s the way the wind blows’, ‘taking care of heart and soul’, ‘air’, ‘go with your gut’ and ‘moments matter’. The pictures in the collage included a woman with outstretched arms, a couple canoeing, a wooden path through a forest, butterflies, a woman having a massage, a couple hugging and looking into each other’s eyes, and three other lone women looking introspective.

Interestingly, Mary was nervous about discussing her dream collage with the group because she thought the dream signaled that her marriage was in trouble. After processing the dream with the group members, her understanding shifted and a narrative emerged that she was at a moment of critical change in her life but she was not listening to herself; interestingly, she drew in a picture of an ear because she could not find one in the magazines. She concluded that she needed to listen to her spirit/soul and make decisions that were going to be best for her. The dream collage and analysis enabled her to develop self-awareness about her current life situation; a situation that she realised was linked with her spiritual growth.

Within social work, spiritually-influenced practices include topics and processes related to helping people make meaning or sense of significant life events and/or stages, and assisting people to cope. Making-meaning is a process that requires deep reflection (Sheridan 2009). In fact, within social work, spirituality is linked with the human quest for a sense of meaning and purpose (Nelson-Becker and Canda 2008). Thus, as described in the previous example, arts-based methods provide excellent means for engaging in introspective discussions aimed at developing insights about one’s life; they help to bring richness and depth into conversations. Additionally, arts-based methods can be used to explicitly facilitate discussions and considerations about spirituality, and may be able to capture some of the person’s experiences with spirituality that might be difficult to verbally explain. Simply encouraging participants to draw a picture of what spirituality means to them will usually garner fruitful and interesting discussions.

Thus, arts-based methods do not have to be complicated. For example, ‘We are all connected’ is an arts-based activity that aims to help group members learn about each other and develop group cohesion. The activity also promotes the idea that while we are all different and diverse, we share commonalities in our experiences, desires, challenges and so on. I have used this activity with adults and it works just as well as with children. Using wooden clothespins and a variety of arts supplies, group participants were encouraged to decorate the clothespin to represent and symbolise themselves. They coloured the clothespins with pastels, glued objects to them, used glitter glue and a variety of other arts supplies. When the group had completed the task, each member shared what their clothespin represented or meant, and then the clothespins were clipped to a string that was hung somewhere in the group room. By hanging the clothespins together, we represented our connection.

The following dialogue was from a group with 12-year-old girls; it very briefly illustrates how the activity can promote personal sharing and discussion about similarities. Also, since the girls introduced a description of their ‘soul’, one could continue to explore in more depth how they understand their ‘soul’ and what that means to them opening space in the group for existential and spiritually-influenced discussions.
Sally: I coloured all the bottom pink because everyone says that’s the colour of my soul.
Facilitator: Oh, interesting.
Kim: Mine’s blue.
Facilitator: So [to Sally] how does pink represent your soul?
Sally: ‘Cause apparently, you know how people say pink is a love colour?…Stuff like that. It’s because I’m really loveable (laughs).
Facilitator: You girls have talked a lot about feelings related to colours…
Kim: You know what blue meant to me…blue represents caring, and people say that I have a blue soul because I care about others. I care about me…
Steph: I drew music notes ‘cause of singing and instruments. And then I wrote dance, and drew a tree because I like nature.
Facilitator: Well that’s neat. We both have blue and trees, right? And you’ve got the music like Sally has. So we can start seeing some connections between us, right?

The enjoyment of arts-based methods

When I began my work in the area of holistic arts-based group work, I did not anticipate how enjoyable and different working with arts-based methods would be for participants in our groups, and since the beginning, this has been a consistent finding in our work with both adults and children (Coholic 2014). For instance, women struggling with substance use explained that the arts-based mindfulness group was different because they had ‘fun through it all’ and that ‘it doesn’t have to hurt, at the moment, for you to be able to grow’. One woman stated that she was ‘longing for a group’ where she could ‘deal with my issues in a positive way’ (Coholic 2005: 798–9).

More recently, we explored the benefits of our group programme for improving mood and coping in adults seeking mental health services. We found that perceived benefits included the improvement of effective coping strategies, self-awareness, feelings of self-compassion and abilities to focus and pay attention. Importantly, the participants reported on the strength of their group cohesion and the support they felt from the other group members, and they felt very engaged by the methods. Participants commented on the diversity of the group members, stating ‘accepting that, embracing that; that was fun, exciting’. Another woman explained that the group enabled her to reconnect with her creativity and to use art as a therapeutic tool for self-expression: ‘I wrote so much stuff down. Everything that was in my head. It was like I had an enema or something!’ Yet another participant explained that the art-making helped him develop self-awareness: ‘It’s that whole idea a picture is worth a thousand words and a piece of what we’ve produced is worth all the feelings and all the subconscious and all the thousand words that could come out of us’ (Coholic et al. 2014).

These comments illustrate that arts-based methods can help people develop skills and abilities in an enjoyable and creative manner. Furthermore, the enjoyable nature of arts-based methods engages people in a helping process and helps to build respect and understanding among group members. Consistent with our experience working with marginalised children, we experienced very low attrition from the arts-based mindfulness group with these adults.

In a recent paper, we noted that the average rate of attendance for vulnerable children attending our group programme was 11 out of 12 group sessions (our group programme is 12, two-hour group sessions long) (Coholic and Eys 2016). Clearly, once the children were engaged with the programme, we did not have difficulty keeping them engaged. Indeed, holistic arts-based methods not only engage sometimes difficult to reach children, but the most important element of a programme might be that it involves activity children enjoy so that they will devote effort and time to it (Flook et al. 2010).
Arts-based methods can also facilitate the learning of skills that children can build upon, without focusing on pain-filled experiences (Coholic et al. 2009). This is not to say that there will not be pain and suffering in our work but for children (and adults) who experience serious challenges at school, work and home, and feel isolated and alone, the experience of having fun can keep them emotionally receptive so that positive messages can slip through their defenses (James 1989). Currently, we are assessing our arts-based mindfulness group programme with youth attending a short-term in-patient mental health programme. They recently commented on how the arts-based methods are enabling them to connect with one another and discuss issues in a meaningful manner with more depth compared with the rest of their treatment, not to mention that it is a lot of fun.

Summary

Given the difficulty we sometimes experience in engaging people in social work helping and change processes, the attrition rates we suffer in our work, the diverse clientele we work with, and the serious and difficult nature of much of what we do, it begs the question why social workers do not utilise arts-based methods more? To some extent, arts-based methods and spirituality are similar in that, for many of us, these topics and approaches were not part of our social work education and training. That being said, over the past 15 years, this has begun to change. However, a lack of exposure to these topics understandably leaves many social workers unsure of how to proceed. At the same time, social workers are trained to be creative and critical thinkers with open minds, and we have the skills required to use holistic arts-based methods in effective ways. For example, we are trained to assess situations holistically and non-judgmentally. Should someone create something that is of concern (such as a drawing of a death), we have the skills to explore the feelings, thoughts and behaviours that might have led to the creation. Importantly, there is a solid literature and burgeoning research studies to draw on in these fields, which can be used to help develop one’s practice and address the need to work from an evidence-informed stance.

Finally, it is important to understand that one does not have to be an artist to utilise arts-based methods. We are not teaching our clients how to make art or art techniques. Arts-based methods and creations should be used as tools for exploration, teaching a concept, exploring an issue, sharing and discussion. The products of these processes should not be ‘interpreted’ such as some art therapists might do with art produced by a client. The art-based activities can be used as a way to explore the theme of a session, unlike an art class at school where a piece of artwork might be assessed according to the use of a specific technique. Arts-based methods do not have to be complicated or require special supplies or equipment. Finally, engaging with our own creativity can be fulfilling, bringing joy and meaning into our work. This should not be underrated in a profession that demands so much of us.

References

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