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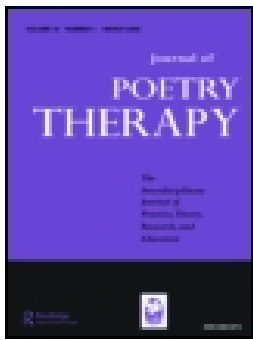
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Therapeutic metaphors and personal meanings in group poetry therapy for people with schizophrenia

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ABSTRACT

This article concerns the therapeutic potential of metaphor in group poetry therapy, concentrating on the poetry therapy process of people diagnosed with schizophrenia. The data was collected in a one-year poetry therapy group. The main questions were: (1) What kind of therapeutic potential can metaphors offer in group poetry therapy? (2) What are the personal meanings and evaluations that the participants give to the therapy process and its effects on their lives? (3) What are the most significant elements in poetry therapy from the viewpoint of the client? The analysis was based on the Grounded theory method. The results showed that the most significant therapeutic factors of the process were social interaction, safety, and written self-expression. Writing in a group setting, especially through collaborative writing, had many positive effects on the clients. It allowed them to experience life's worth raising their hope. Metaphors and collaborative writing made it possible to discuss difficult personal experiences.

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The [National Association for Poetry Therapy](#) defines poetry therapy as the intentional use of the written and spoken word for healing and personal growth. The term “poetry therapy” refers not only to the use of published and original literary works but also to the interactive use of literature and therapeutic writing. *Schizophrenia* is a mental disorder often involving a breakdown of thought processes and poor emotional responsiveness. The common symptoms are auditory hallucinations, paranoid delusions or disorganized speech, and thinking. It causes significant social and/or occupational dysfunction. The disorder affects cognition, but it also usually contributes to chronic problems with behavior and emotion. Social problems and additional conditions like anxiety are common. There are many possible combinations of symptoms, which has triggered a debate about whether schizophrenia is a single disorder or a combination of several discrete syndromes (Alanen, 2018.). A *therapeutic metaphor* is a “metaphoric image, that is, analogous to a situation in the client’s life. It can be movement, voice or image” (Moon, 2007, p. 8). Literature is always metaphorical. Metaphors can help people to discover and create meaning in their lives (Moon, 2007, p. 8).

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Background of the study

Both authors of this article have instructed poetry therapy groups and also worked with schizophrenic patients. Juhani Ihanus, then, as a clinical psychologist, started his first groups at the end of the 1970s. The longest duration of his semi-open poetry therapy group for schizophrenic and other psychotic patients was three years. During his academic career, he has trained new biblio/poetry therapists at the University of Helsinki continuing education programs. Karoliina Maanmieli (formerly Kähmi) has worked with mental health patients for 20 years and has instructed poetry therapy groups for mental health patients since 2001. For both authors, schizophrenia and its relation to language have always been keen research and practice interest. Language impairment is a common feature of schizophrenia; in some cases, it causes the inability to understand metaphors, and they become understood mainly literally. On the other hand, some people with schizophrenia use language in poetic ways, adding personal metaphors, neologisms, and rhymes to their speech and writing.

There are some earlier studies on the clinical utility of poetry therapy for the treatment of schizophrenia. In the 1970s in Japan, Imori (1997) found out that so-called *haiku* therapy helped people suffering from schizophrenia. The formal restrictions imposed in haiku writing made it possible to structure chaotic thoughts. Hiroshi Tamura has used a Japanese-linked poem, *renku*, in his therapy for schizophrenic people, and he has noted that haiku and renku help express oneself clearly and coherently. It also prevents linguistic impairment and effusions. Metaphors, ambiguity, and figurative language are typical means of expression in Japanese poetry. These aspects assist personal growth and well-being. (Tamura, 1998, 2001; on Haiku Meditation Therapy, see also Sky Hiltunen, 2005)

Shafi's (2010) article "Poetry therapy and schizophrenia: Clinical and neurological perspectives" published in *The Journal of Poetry Therapy* refers to four prior studies. He reports that poetry therapists have integrated poetry into various clinical methods like linguistic psychotherapy (Tamura, 2001), cognitive therapy (Collins et al., 2006), existential psychotherapy (Furman, 2003), and psychoanalytically oriented psychotherapy (Hallowell & Smith, 1983). Shafi concludes that these case studies have demonstrated the clinical utility of poetry therapy for people with schizophrenia. He claims that poetry can improve cognitive, linguistic, and emotional functioning in schizophrenia.

None of these former studies considers poetry therapy and schizophrenia from the point of view of the client. In Kähmi's (2015; also a preliminary report, Kähmi, 2013) doctoral dissertation, the goal was to give voice to people with schizophrenia and to find out what meaning they attach to the poetry therapy process. In this research, one of the main interests was in the metaphors used in group poetry therapy. The basic assumption was that figurative language is therapeutic. By using metaphors, it is possible to tell, for example, how it feels to be haunted by delusions or hallucinations. The third aim of the study was to consider ways of developing and putting into practice a poetry therapy model that supports the rehabilitation of schizophrenia.

Realization of the study

The data of this study were collected in a one-year poetry therapy group. It includes poetry therapy client interviews, texts written in the poetry therapy sessions, and a

learning diary and notes by the group facilitator (Karoliina Kähmi/Maanmieli). There were 36 poetry therapy group sessions. The sessions were held once a week, and there were 11 participants in the beginning. Three of them soon stopped visiting the group, and one of them moved away in the middle of the process. The remaining seven members of the group participated the whole year of 2011. After the poetry therapy process, the participants were given semi-structured interviews to get feedback on their group experiences.

The analysis was carried out using Grounded theory (GT; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Grounded theory means a systematic methodology involving the discovery of theory through the analysis of data. Grounded theory almost operates in a reverse fashion from traditional research. The analysis does not start with a hypothesis, rather the first step is data collection. From the data collected, the key points are marked with a series of codes extracted from the text. Then the codes will be grouped into similar concepts. The next thing to do is to form categories, which form the basis for the creation of a theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Rather than linking to evidence-based research, this study has gathered practice-based evidence for further research and theory construction.

There were many routines in the poetry therapy sessions. Every session began and ended in a similar way, the participants told about their feelings and thoughts using picture cards. According to the members of that group, the routines felt safe, and it was easier to tell about feelings using a picture. We had a coffee break in the middle of the session because the participants' ability to concentrate was not very good. The coffee break was important for them; it was a relaxing and informal social situation.

The writing tasks we had in the group were always structured: for example, participants wrote collectively in turns or wrote on the basis of a poem or a picture or by using words that were given beforehand. Such routines and regulations made writing easier for the participants. During the year, the lack of social skills and the inability to listen to each other were the main problems that complicated the sessions. To solve that problem, more interactive exercises were used to develop social skills and to make concentration easier. Every session was concluded by asking what the most significant thing in each session was.

Therapeutic metaphor

Metaphor is a great therapeutic tool. Moon (2007) presents that metaphor has at least five therapeutic aspects. First, therapeutic metaphors help to find new dimensions. Secondly, Moon claims that metaphors are safe, because their message is not literal. If the listener, viewer or reader is not ready to receive the hidden message of a metaphor, they can think that a goblin, for example, is just a fairy tale character, not a mirror of themselves. The third benefit is that everyone can see a metaphor in their own personal way. The fourth advantage is that when a client, not a therapist, makes an interpretation of a metaphor, the responsibility for the life change is the client's own. The fifth advantage is that therapeutic metaphors are phenomenal and experiential. Moon states that metaphoric communication is often a touching and unforgettable experience (Moon, 2007, pp. 9–11).

We agree with Moon and recognize that some therapeutic metaphors our clients used many years ago are still alive in our minds. For example, one client who was abused as a child wrote a fairy tale of an owl (in Finnish *pöllö*, which means both the bird [owl] and the

“fool”). In the beginning, the writer told how the owl looked, and it turned out that the outlook of that owl was like her own. Then she should tell whom the owl would like to get back at. She wrote, “The owl would like to get back at the evil spirits who took the laughter away from the owl when she was six years old.” The portraiture was, in fact, not only about an owl but also about the client herself.

Metaphor is not only a means of creating poetry, but our word system and thinking are based on metaphor, as Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) cognitive metaphor theory suggests (Bolton & Latham, 2004). The metaphor may be the only way to illustrate experiences that are hard to verbalize (Bolton & Latham, 2004). Schizophrenic delusions are examples of experiences that are often beyond the reach of words. Language in connection with the schizophrenic processes of expression includes transitions, displacements, and condensations whose logic is difficult to follow for other people. People affected by schizophrenia often use words based on primary process thinking; one word can contain a complicated network of overincluded meanings.

To elucidate and understand a metaphor demands complex cognitive processing and emotional self-regulation. However, metaphor is not only a mode of language and cognition, not only a figure of speech, but it has great potential for transformations, evoking creative acts. Current metaphor research stresses the experiential and interactive aspects of metaphoric expression. Shared metaphors in group poetry therapy refer to potential mutual understanding. As Ihanus states:

A metaphor makes different matters face each other, transfers meanings and opens new thoughts and feeling connections. In creative situations, where nothing is forced to arise, but everything is given space to be born, metaphor extends perspectives; it assembles and breaks obsolete frames of reference. Metaphors transport and transform meaning mentally, somatically, and neurally (Ihanus, 2019, p. 218).

Shafi points out that the process of poetry therapy is meaningful and clinically relevant only when both the patient and the therapist understand the metaphors that are used in therapy (Shafi, 2010, pp. 96–97). In psychotherapy, finding a common language between the client and the therapist is very important. Everyone has their own personal language and unique metaphors. A new metaphor, that is, born in a shared dialogue, offers a continuum between the past and the present and the conscious and the unconscious (Mertanen, 2009, p. 233). Through the poetry therapy process,

it is important that the therapist resonates with all kinds of metaphors, not overlooking any as too conventional, banal or blatant. [...] Everybody has the right to express their own mind’s voice and to share it in dialogic-interactive poetry therapy. (Ihanus, 2019, p. 220)

To embrace the uniqueness of self-expression calls for explorative and exciting perspective-shifting journeys. Metaphor encapsulates the most significant aspects and makes it possible to tackle difficult issues in a safe atmosphere.

This poem written in the poetry therapy group is a good example of how a therapeutic metaphor works in practice:

Donald Duck and me

I’m like a question mark
Sometimes tired of the whole life
Too suffering, perhaps for no reason
Anyhow, eager to live

Not always equally a loser, in this
 Life totally alone
 Useless thoughts that cause
 Suffering I have a little heart
 That has been hurt, wounded
 And a secret life, I try to forget
 All the bad things in my life
 And try to live
 As if there were somebody
 who would understand me.
 (Kähmi, 2015, p. 137)

Poems are written in the poetry therapy group

Even if the writing tasks were always structured, people had the freedom to choose the themes that they wanted to address in the poems. The examples here are written in the poetry therapy group, and the punctuation is left original. Names of the group members are not mentioned. The themes are classified into three main categories:

- (1) Suffering and pain, illustrating one's own life affected by illness.
- (2) Positive things in life, humor, hope, moments of joy.
- (3) Desire for a normal life, building a new identity by structuring chaotic thoughts.

Suffering and pain, illustrating one's own life affected by illness. Schizophrenia often involves suffering, and people need to talk about their hard experiences. There are manifestations of schizophrenia in the poems: difficulties of understanding others, fragments of poetic expressions, implications of fears, hallucinations, and delusions.

[...] always feeling so cold and / chilly How could I be warm? / Sane and warm / – Woman, 2011

Come wind / and take the bad / mood away / take the sorrows behind / the rock / wash away the sorrows / to the sea. – Woman, 2011

[...] I don't want to be a target for any public attack – Woman, 2011

When I think about my life in this moment it's like a snowstorm; chaos; I'm afraid of the public places and vehicles and strange people [...] – Woman, 2011

I listen to the voices / I hear voices / I listen to silence / I hear a voice. – Woman, 2011

I hear psychedelic sounds, / I think my thoughts are read. / I don't want to get mad [the line crossed out] / medicines, music and other hobbies remedy [the line crossed out]. – Man, 2011

A 22-year-old man, who had social fears and memories of being bullied at school, always wore black sunglasses and used to hide from others. When asked to choose some animal and write about it, the man chose his metaphorical animal and identified with it: "I am like a walking stick [insect], because I want to camouflage." Another member, a 55-year-old woman, who used a walker and had severe substance addiction and acute cancer, chose an animal contrary to her physical state: "Am I a gazelle, / running proudly / toward a new / morning."

Positive things in life humor, hope, and moments of joy. On the contrary, there is also much hope in the poems. One of the aims of poetry therapy is to raise hope, and these texts show that this aim is fulfilled:

I'm passionately waiting / I'm still waiting for something / from my life that I haven't left / my life without living. / Live more, is quite well said. / whatever you dream and had / dreams. Often bemused, as if someone / were helpful. – Woman, 2011

Members of the group often wanted to write about their own strengths and moments of joy. Nature was a good source to inspire positive feelings. The above mentioned young man, who tried to hide, found relief in the woods:

I walk far into the woods, / feeling good becomes by itself. / Mocking people are far away, / and I can disguise myself like a walking stick.

The gazelle woman wrote a poem addressing her power animal in the middle of her mourning process:

My gazelle, you take me / into this gloomy forest / let me be / here until / I am allowed to mourn. / you would already want to / get out of here / I still have / to be, to mourn / here. / Wait let's continue / the trip together.

Poems show that positive moments of closeness are an important means of survival, providing the reappraisal of autobiographical memories:

Closer to you / I sail / with my experiences. / Memories about the past / are not always / beautiful. / We make the memories / beautiful. / We, too, shall survive / throughout life / this night / I cling to you / I stay beside you – Woman, 2011

Humor is shown in texts. Often it seems that a writer had a conscious aim to raise a laugh. Through humor, it is possible to overcome fears and to consider delicate themes:

I'm not afraid anymore / not for a moment / Uuno Turhapuro [a character from a Finnish comedy film] / had me in fits of laughter / a ragged shirt / Teeth like nailed / Humor / came to life / like a film / to this world / Fear disappeared – Man, 2011

Fethry Duck walked back and forth and wondered: / What is that weird noise / Fethry doubted if his medication was ok / should he go to a hospital / but the new medication / helped him / and a new record / was worth buying / Fethry worked hard on snow removal / didn't stay awake all night / Medication was ok / and Fethry too / was a new man / – in a way. – Man, 2011

The Desire for a normal life, building a new identity by structuring chaotic thoughts. There is a strong desire for a normal life shown in the texts. Poems contain dreaming about big and little things. Writing is a way to outline and reconcile contradictory thoughts and to build a new identity. The interconnectedness of the participants in a poetry therapy group becomes evident when sharing images, dreams, fantasies, and memories. Poetry gives a new angle to look at things. Through writing, it is possible to ask: Who am I? What do I dream about? What should I do to get that thing I dream about?

giving away all that. / learning new things, listening to classics / making food, soup in nature for example / silent evenings enjoying, / listening to nature's voices, calming down / in twilight, waiting for darkness / waking up to a new morning, birds / moving on a shingle roof / admiring the beautiful nature, / with trips to spring. – Woman, 2011

I'm me. I'm sometimes happy and again unhappy when everything feels so useless. The whole life. Feelings about all humankind. Why do we exist, for each other, or? Who would be able to help me? – Woman, 2011

Significant elements

At the end of every session, the participants had the chance to tell the most significant things of the session. Most common answers were writing together with the safe group, interaction with others and the chance to convey how one feels through poetry.

The answers to the question “what was the most significant thing in this session?” were classified into eleven categories. The list below shows the name of the category and how many answers belonged to that category.

The group, seeing the others regularly, the atmosphere and communication (54)

Writing and self-expression (48)

The read poems / The picture cards (19)

Safety (14)

Therapy, to get a better feeling, to release one's feelings (10)

The recreational activity, to spend time (9)

Coffee (8)

I do not want / cannot say / nothing was important (8)

Others (8)

Participating (for example, despite feeling bad before coming) (6)

Variable program / the poetry therapy material (6)

Some answers fit in many categories. There were 162 answers, but in many cases, there was more than one significant thing. There were 206 significant things altogether. The largest category is “The group, seeing the others regularly, the atmosphere and communication” (54). For example, the answer: “The most significant thing is to know that here are the people who have encouraged me to write and they carry on spurring me” belongs to this category. The group was a very important social support to its members. One participant told in the interview that the other members had become the most important people in the rehabilitation center. There were also many answers that fit in the category “Writing and self-expression” (48). These two categories form the main part of the answers.

In addition, the category “safety” can be combined with the good group, and in the same way, “to release one's feelings” may have some links to writing. Likewise, “to get a better feeling” and “therapy” are in many cases connected with writing. Some answers show that the participant has found the whole session very enjoyable and useful, and they feel it hard to point out one thing that is more important than the other things. In many answers, there are several significant things listed, for example, “The most important thing was therapy, you can come here, you don't have to be alone, variety, regular meeting” or “Meeting once a week, regular writing, a good group” or “Therapy, meeting regularly, you can write, and therapy at the same time.”

The safe group, social interaction, and writing were the most significant things. Thus, it is not surprising that the group leader and the members both felt that interactive writing tasks were more therapeutic than those where the group members wrote separately, without communicating with others. In interactive and collaborative writing, social communication is combined with writing.

More interactive and collaborative tasks were developed and applied in the middle of the group process. One of the reasons was that it seemed to be hard for the participants to concentrate on listening to others' texts when they read them aloud. However, when writing as a group, every member of the group participated passionately, even those who found it hard to write alone. When the text is not solely one's own product, it does not press one to perfection.

Before the first interactive and collaborative task began, one member of the group asked: "So it doesn't matter if I don't write reasonable things? No matter at all? He was told that is the case, and he started writing, seemingly relaxed. When writing together, the members of the group laughed and smiled more than usual. Another task, which reduced the pressure to write "well," was a task where the point was to give positive feedback to other participants. At the end of the session, one member told that the most significant thing "was to tell about the other people."

For example, the man who identified himself with a walking stick insect had very ambitious aims and high standards when writing by himself. He never wrote long texts and was often reluctant to read his texts aloud to others, because he regarded his texts as "bad." He could let loose of his strict stance only through collaborative writing exercises. In the interview after the group, he said that he had especially enjoyed these exercises. A couple of other group members mentioned in their interviews how good they had felt when the man had participated with others in collaborative writing without his too high self-imposed standards.

Results

The members of the poetry therapy group were committed to the therapy process. They were in attendance and almost always on time. They reported it was nice to come to the group. In the interview at the end of the year, the participants were asked what it meant to be part of the poetry therapy group for a year. All participants mentioned that it was meaningful to participate in the group. The active self-reflective process and the ability to express emotions affected the participants positively. For example, the sense of humor improved.

Writing in a group is therapeutic and gives self-esteem. The poetry therapy group was an important part of their social network; the members of the group reported that it was a pleasure to see the other members regularly. They said it was always easy to come to that group, and they enjoyed writing and seeing the others. Every member of the group hoped that there would be another chance to participate in a poetry therapy group.

The nurses that work with these people told later that the group had been affected positively; the members of the group laughed more and were more open and more talkative than before. The young participants had great plans. One and a half years after the group ended, two of them even moved away from the rehabilitation center to live on their own, and one of them found a regular job.

Conclusion

For us, one of the most important aspects of poetry therapy is that it gives hope both to the clients and to the therapists. This poem written in the poetry therapy group tells

about hope from the point of view of the client. The task set in the poetry therapy session was to write a poem containing the words “ainutlaatuinen” (unique) and “keltainen” (yellow).

Color yellow

Unique
Can't be replaced
One of a kind
Can't be fixed
It's beautiful
To be matchless
The sun shines
There is still time
The magic of therapy

This poem shows how meaningful the poetry therapy process may be to the client. Poetry therapy has raised hope that there is something to look forward to in the future. Even if the mental disorder cannot be totally “fixed,” the client trusts that she is a valuable person and has the right to enjoy her life and tell about her feelings and thoughts to others. Poetry therapy can produce strong experiences and joy that mental health patients may often lack in their life. This is an important aspect of well-being. It embraces a vital and satisfying life. A poetry therapy group can be a safe harbor where the threatening orders and the blaming voices can be appeased with help from others, accompanied by therapeutic words and metaphors.

Poetry therapy can be put into practice as part of a rehabilitation program, or it can be combined, for example, with cognitive psychotherapies, expressive arts therapies, or integrative therapies. Photographs and other pictures have always been a meaningful part of poetry therapy sessions and they can be used even more in the future. At the University of Jyväskylä, poetry therapy has also been combined with music therapy. The pilot group was arranged for the drug addicts' parents. The participants gave positive feedback, and it seems that together poetry therapy and music therapy deepen their positive effects. Another group combined poetry therapy and psychodrama, and the facilitators and participants found that also these two methods fit together very well.

We need both quantitative and qualitative research about poetry therapy as a tool for the rehabilitation of people with schizophrenia to make it more reliable. However, we also need practice-based insights and participants' experience-near feedback to gather empirical data and develop further research and well-grounded theory. It could be that poetry therapy as a part of cognitive psychotherapy or combined with other expressive arts or integrative therapies could substitute medication in some cases. For some people, writing is a better form to express themselves than talking. It should be a possible form of communication, enhancing enjoyable and shared meaning-making in therapies with various groups.

Disclosure statement

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