The Impact of Arts on Emotional Empathy Among Adolescents From Intercultural Families

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In this study, the effects of a group art intervention on emotional empathy levels among adolescents from intercultural families were evaluated by means of the Questionnaire Measure of Emotional Empathy (QMEE) that was used as a pre-/post- test measure with a control group. The art therapy intervention consisted of eight two-hour weekly meetings. Results of the repeated analyses of variance (ANOVA) revealed a significant improvement in empathy among the youth participating in the therapy, when compared with the control group. Irrespective of gender, the experimental group scored statistically higher in the post-test ($p = 0.000032$), especially among girls ($p = 0.0001$). The findings suggest that the group art therapy was effective in improving emotional empathy levels among adolescents from intercultural families.

Keywords: art intervention, emotional empathy, adolescents, intercultural family

Introduction

Empathy has been the focus of countless studies making the research on this topic plentiful (Davis, 1996; King, 2011; Gerdes & Segal, 2009). Yet, there are still significant aspects of empathy that remain unexplored. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate that art therapy helps to increase emotional empathy levels among children from intercultural families, specifically from Ukrainian-Turkish parents. It is assumed that such children experience specific confusions about their identity because of the different demands of each parent's culture. Children in these families build resiliency and agility, while undergoing an adaptation process that makes it difficult for them to pursue the concept of self and clearly define relations to other people, often due to intergenerational differences that normally become more pronounced during adolescence. An exchange of empathy between parent and adolescent also becomes more complicated than when they were parent and child. In childhood, the age where attachment and imitation create mutual closeness, parent and child are highly emotionally attuned to the other as they build a strong bond of dependence and trust. However, this type of intimacy slowly breaks down when children enter their middle school years, and the age of detachment begins for more independence and differentiation for more individuality. As young adults grow older, they may feel confused about their identity and unsure how to present themselves to others or how people perceive them. Therefore, it might be particularly important to engage children in conversations about their feelings and experiences as well as allow them to express themselves through creative outlets like writing, dance, theater, art, or poetry. Research has shown that after art therapy, children are able to express their opinions and feelings more openly and directly (Bilgin, 2011).

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Adolescence is critical in the development of personality traits, as well as empathy; having reached a clearly expressed level in adolescence, it stimulates social behavior in the rest of life. The development of empathy is especially important in the period of adolescence, when moral values, life perspectives, new outlook on life and on relationships among people are being developed intensively. The paradox is that adolescence is sensitive for the formation of empathy, however, emotional instability, another key characteristic of adolescents, complicates the effectiveness of socialization process. Children's empathic skills are important in terms of their healthy social development. Moreover, empathy is one of the most important premises of moral development in children. Children and adults with low empathy may also have antisocial features. They can act according to their own needs and harm others. It seems to be proved by studies of psychopaths, who demonstrate deficit both in empathy and morality (Blair, Mitchell & Blair, 2005). It is essential to enhance empathy skills in order to protect children with inadequate empathy from risk situations, such as social isolation, grievance, and alienation.

A long history in psychological research characterizes empathy as a fundamental underpinning of pro-social behavior (Roberts & Strayer, 1996; McMahon, Wernsman, & Parnes, 2006). Merabian et al. (1988) noted that individuals who possess high emotional empathy are more likely to be emotional and altruistic in relations to others, volunteer to help others, and score higher on measures of moral judgment. Studies have shown that children with empathic skills exhibit less bullying behavior and that their emotional intelligence is higher. In addition, empathy is effective for children to exhibit positive social behaviors, to reduce aggression levels and to develop healthy friendship relationships. Children with low empathy skills may also have trouble understanding their families, teachers, and friends, and therefore, may feel excluded by their environment (Bingöl & Uysal, 2015). The complexity of the issue is highlighted in different theories related to the development of empathy in children. According to psychoanalysis, it is suggested that empathy starts from the childhood's relationship with the parent, while the social learning theory states that empathy will be gained if one's behaviour is modelled on observations of others and learned within a social context (Bingöl & Uysal, 2015). According to social cognitive theory, in the development of empathy in children, observation, modeling, and imitation play the most important role. Bandura (1968) stated that empathy emerges within the principles of social learning, while Rushton (1982, as cited in Bingöl & Uysal, 2015) argued that is reinforced by prompts, modeling, practice, or didactic instructions.

Defining Empathy

A significant challenge in the study of empathy is defining the concept consistently. It is crucial that a widely accepted definition of this term be established, since empathy is described as being "one of the most fundamental skills in the repertoire of human social behavior" (Rameson, Morelli, & Lieberman, 2011). The most relevant definition to the present study is the one found in *The Social Work Dictionary*, which defines empathy as "the act of perceiving, understanding, experiencing, and responding to the emotional state and ideas of another person" (Barker, 1999). Nearly all researchers address the "responding" aspect of Barker's definition by emphasizing the importance of not just the feeling itself of empathy, but also what is done in reaction to this feeling (Gerdes, Lietz, & Segal, 2011; Gerdes & Segal, 2009; King, 2011). According to the Turkish Language Society (TDK), empathy is defined as "the ability of the person to perceive the feelings, wishes, and thoughts of the consciousness in question without putting them on the spot" (Turkish Language Society, n.d.). Due to its multifaceted nature, empathy has also been divided into three different forms: cognitive, emotional,

and compassionate. The definition of emotional empathy as being “a vicarious emotional response to the perceived emotional experiences of others” that also includes empathic concern, emotional contagion, and sharing or mirroring the feelings of another person (Preston & de Waal, 2002) will be used moving forward with this study.

Art and Empathy

Research on the interconnection of art and empathy suggests that “the arts are capable of ‘promoting’ prosocial behaviors because of their intertwinement with empathy-laden relations and opportunities” (Caterall, 2011). It is a two-way process: Our empathetic reactions are expressed by and central to music, acting, dance, and painting, and while we do arts, it stimulates the empathy. This is the reason why art therapy interventions have proven to be effective with people who have anger control issues, anxiety, eating disorder, and hopelessness (Akhan, Kurtuncu, & Celik, 2017; Abbing et al., 2018). They are particularly effective with children who find it difficult to express themselves through verbal communication (Demir & Yıldırım, 2017). They also contribute positively to individuals with a rehabilitating aspect; have the potential to heal brain damage, developmental disability, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder and a lot of other mental disorders. In this context, art therapy emerges as a tool which helps people to recognize and express their feelings and thoughts by using their creativity (Bilge & Ögce, 2008). Application of art therapy is based on psychosocial theories about therapeutic tools (awareness raising, social skills development, behavior management, problem solving, anxiety reduction, assistance for reality orientation, and self-esteem), that help solving human development, education, psychodynamic, cognitive, interpersonal, and other emotional conflicts (Sayar, 2006). The engagement that occurs in art therapy reduces the possibility of stigmatization and enhances the development of empathy. Moreover, art therapy allows a person to become more aware of individual strengths, provides with the opportunity to identify weaknesses, and acquire coping strategies by using their individual strengths (Bilgin, 2011).

Methodology

A measure of emotional empathy developed by Albert Mehrabian and Norman Epstein (1972) was used in this study. The 33-item scale consists of inter-correlated subscales which measured related aspects of emotional empathy. The measure proved to be very reliable and showed discriminate validity. The subscale inter-correlations are all significant at the 0.01 level and exceed 0.30 in all instances. The split-half reliability for the entire measure is 0.84. The total empathy scale has a correlation of 0.06 with the Crowne and Marlowe’s (1960) social desirability scale (Questionnaire Measure of Emotional Empathy [QMEE]) (Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972). Russian translation of the measure of emotional empathy by Fetiskin (2002) was administered in this study.

Sub-scales of QMEE include: susceptibility to emotional contagion, appreciation of the feelings of unfamiliar and distant others, extreme emotional responsiveness, tendency to be moved by others’ positive emotional experiences, tendency to be moved by others’ negative emotional experiences, sympathetic tendency, and willingness to be in contact with others who have problems.

QMEE’s sample items:

1. The people around me have a great influence on my moods (Susceptibility to emotional contagion);
2. Lonely people are probably unfriendly (Appreciation of the feelings of unfamiliar and distant others) (reverse scored);

3. Sometimes, the words of a love song can move me deeply (Extreme emotional responsiveness);
4. I like to watch people open presents (Tendency to be moved by others' positive emotional experiences);
5. Seeing people cry upsets me (Tendency to be moved by others' negative emotional experiences);
6. It is hard for me to see how some things upset people so much (Sympathetic tendency);
7. I would rather be a social worker than work in a job training center (Willingness to be in contact with others who have problems) (QMEE; Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972).

Participants

A total of 37 children volunteered to take part in this study. They were divided into the experimental and control groups with 20 in the experimental group and 17 in the control group. The mean age in the experimental group of 10 boys and 10 girls was 12.65 ($SD = 1.01$). There were 17 adolescents (eight boys and nine girls) in the control group. The mean age of the complete participants was 16.41 ($SD = 2.08$) for the control group. The gender distribution for the complete participants was 52.9% female and 47.1% male in the control group. The measure of empathic tendency was administered at the beginning of the study and after eight sessions of art therapy with a four-week interval in-between. The control group had not had any previous art therapy, nor did they participate in the art therapy during the period of the study. Each child had a parent from two different cultures and in addition was between 12 to 19 years of old, a student who lived and studied in Turkey, and had one Turkish parent and foreign parent.

The QMEE was used as a pre- and post- test measure. The questionnaire was designed to assess emotional empathy, which was defined as "a vicarious emotional response to the perceived emotional experiences of others". The questionnaire includes 33 items using nine-point ratings from ("−4 = Very strong disagreement" to "+4 = Very strong agreement").

Procedure

In this study, the experimental group was found through a non-profit organization "Ukrayna Ailesi" and consisted of 20 adolescent participants (10 boys and 10 girls) who live in intercultural Ukrainian-Turkish families. Over the course of two weeks, children participated in eight art therapy sessions that were divided into two main groups.

The first group of methods included art activities, such as creating collage, drawing the path to a goal, painting self and family portraits, and these art activities were used to observe the participants' style of relations with others and their own self, impressions of the individual on others, personal boundaries, being understood, understanding, and expressing oneself.

The second group of expressive methods was based on action, like storytelling, role-play, and dances. These activities were used to influence role elasticity and role diversity of the participants, being creative in spontaneous situations, feeling the character enacted, and establishing empathy, using and recognizing body language, etc.

The formation of the group depended on the responsible involvement of each participant. Gradually, group intimacy increased, self-disclosures occurred, constructive confrontation of different points of view and the first initiatives of emotional support emerged. There were also present various positive emotions and the sense of unity with others, which increased the group members' willingness to engage in new experiences. In this way, they have adopted and experienced new attitudes and behaviors without any fear of risk. As a result, each group member became his/her own creator in his/her own pace, discovering that in order to grow as a person, it is

important to receive, but also to provide support, which favored self-acceptance, self-esteem, self-confidence, and trust in others. Each participant became for the others “a window that offers a different perspective on reality, a privileged space in which any member of the group can meet himself in another position” (Badea, 1999).

In the beginning of each therapy session, the main themes were emphasized. As it was expected, similar themes were experienced differently by the participants of experimental group. Each method was used in accordance with the reactions of children to different kinds of art. While some children progressed easier in sessions when painting was used, others had better progress with the methods based on action, such as a role play. In each session, expressiveness and creativity acted like a bridge in gaining positive dynamics in the relationships with the peers.

Figure 1. The experimental and control groups' empathy level.

Results

A one-way within-subjects (or repeated measures) ANOVA was conducted to compare the effect of structured artwork on participants' empathy levels. As shown in Figure 1, the total mean pre-test QMEE score of experimental groups was 20.6, whereas the total mean post-test score of experimental group was 25.2. For the control group, the total mean pre-test QMEE score was 23.3 and the total mean post-test score was 22.6. Therefore, irrespective of gender, the experimental group scores statistically higher in the post-test with p -value 0.000032 (0.0032%) compared to significance level of 5%. This result proves that arts work may effectively increase empathy level of adolescents from intercultural families.

According to the results of the study, the male experimental group scored statistically higher compared to the control group in the post-test with p -value 0.038 (3.8%) with significance level of 5%. The female

experimental group scored statistically even higher than the male group in the post-test compared to the control group. *P*-value is 0.0001 (0.1%) compared with significance level of 5%. Therefore, the intervention was efficient both for girls and boys from displayed higher emotional empathy score in post-test procedure.

Discussion

The results of this study are both female and male experimental groups scored higher in the post-test than the control groups. Thus, the results of the study support the hypothesis that art therapy improves empathy levels in adolescents living in intercultural marriages, and it is coherent with behavioral evidence from a 12-year longitudinal study in which ties between participation or engagement in the visual and performing arts during adolescence improved the cultivation of human empathy by early adulthood (Catterall, 2009), which is also in line with Carl Jung statement: “In contrast to abstraction, associated with introversion, empathy corresponds to the attitude of extraversion”.

While the female experimental group scored higher than the male experimental group that correlates with the findings of multiple studies including neurological studies, in which it was found that both the right and left frontal lobes of women are sensitive to emotions, where as in men, this was only true of the right frontal lobe (Schore, 1997; Osman, 2011; Gerdes, Lietz, & Segal, 2011). This provides preliminary data to support the use of art therapy methods especially for female adolescents with low empathy or difficulty in adapting to the environment. The artistic products made in the art therapy exercise facilitated the expression of emotions and experiences that young people communicated and then gave them sense within a secure relationship. Several studies evaluated the contribution of art therapy to the development of the empathic skills of adolescents and adults. Freilich and Shechtman (2010) indicated that one weekly session of art therapy, in addition to academic assistance, was effective in improving the children’s adjustment, and gains were sustained over the following several months. Oz (2001) determined that the empathic skills of nurses working in internal diseases and surgical services increased following a 10-week empathic skill development education based on theoretical knowledge transfer, role-playing, and experience sharing. Kalkan and Ozdel (2005) found that empathic skills were developed among elders in a nursing home following a group study using psychodrama techniques. Kaner (1993), on the other hand, found no difference in terms of the sentimental aspect of empathy after a group study using psychodrama techniques, but did find a significant difference in the cognitive dimension. Dereboy, Harlak, Gurel, Gemalmaz, and Eskin, (2005) noticed that communication skill education provided to the students of the faculty of medicine was effective in the development of empathic skill.

The personal effects arising from the experiential group members in our study also emphasized Mitrofan’s (2004) view, who believes that the therapeutic process based on the dramatic improvisation focuses on restructuring of personality in a creative manner at the emotional, motivational, volitional, and cognitive level as well as behavioral by unlocking repetitive patterns and creating alternative adaptive behaviors.

Therefore, this study also supports earlier findings that proved focusing on an exploration of emotions and reflecting on them provide a key to personal change (Greenberg, 2001; Hill, 2005; Prochaska, 1999). Art therapy is proved to be a very useful supportive method for people, who not only lose their health and or struggling to cope with their substance dependence, but also for adolescents who undergo a rapid social and physical growth. It allows people who have difficulty in verbalizing themselves to connect and express their feelings and thoughts in a nonverbal way (Kar & Toros, 2015).

In the light of the lack of studies on the influence of art therapy on adolescents' empathy further research is needed to determine the effect of various expressive techniques on individuals' empathy skills. Besides empathy, other interpersonal skills should be assessed at the end of each group. The control group consisting of children unfamiliar with the group, art therapy will enhance the power of results.

Conclusion

A number of studies from within the behavioral and neuro-sciences have suggested that experiencing art helps to develop empathy, especially in children and young adults. This assumption was confirmed by this study as both female and male in the experimental groups scored higher after making art than the control groups with the female experimental group scoring slightly higher than the male group. It provided preliminary data to support the use of art interventions for low empathy or difficulty in adapting to the environment among female adolescents. Further studies apart from empathy can include assessment of different interpersonal skills to provide additional evidence on the influence of art on emotional empathy in children.

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