Models of Art in Mental Health in the Asia Pacific

Session 1: India

Chair: Dr Takeshima, Director, National Centre for Neuroscience and Psychiatry, Japan

Art and Mental Health: The Different Interfaces

Dr Debasis Bhattacharya MBBS DPM MD (PSYCH.)
Dr Rahul Bhattacharya MBBS DPM MRCpsych
Where it leads to?

- The maps differ over time and reflects different socio-political alliances!
- These differences are essentially verbal
- Language limits intuitive creativity and comprehension whereas perceptual analysis through visual art can go further (Rudolf Arnheim)
- One can therefore hypothesize that visual medium has the potential to transcend some of these barriers
- This can be an asset in trans-cultural work in the field of mental health
Use of Art in Trans-cultural Setting:

An Example

• Women of Indian origin living in the US
• Suffering from marital/relationship difficulty
• Background: This is a population known to poorly access services (cultural barrier?)
• Small study in the US presented in 2006 (Keeling M - Ahimsa Project)
• Narrative-based therapy involving writing and creative visual art
• Conclusion: Creative art work (and being interviewed) was an effective and culturally appropriate intervention for these participants
**A case report:** GG- a male patient and artist was admitted with severe depression and suicidal ideation. After a course of treatment he improved and one day he expressed his wish to paint. Art materials was given and he hastily painted five small pieces of water color paintings – almost simultaneously.

“.....in our modern civilization we are accustomed to distinguishing between animate and inanimate things, human and non-human creatures, the mental and physical. But in terms of expressive qualities, the character of a given person may resemble that of a particular tree more closely then that of another person.”

RUDOLF ARNHEIM
**A case report:** PX graduated in Fine Arts and was employed in public sector as an artist at a Medical school. He got married, worked in profusion but had marital mal-adjustment & was ultimately separated. He became seclusive with some delusional ideas & dysphoria.

---

**Is there an ‘Indian-ness’ in the vision?**

- In Indian tradition, beginning with Bharata's Natyasastra, lively debates have taken place on moods (*rasas*) and emotions (*bhavas*) leading to treatise on aesthetic art (Journal of Indian Psychology, 1999, J K Singh)
- It also attempts to address the different levels of selfhood
- Are the visual ‘archetypes’ cross-cultural?
- If not are they affected by globalization?
**Challenges to interpreting artistic content**

- Being a pre-verbal medium, **rational analysis** of content of the painting/drawing poses challenges
- Qualitative analysis of the visual **art-form** or its **content** has not been established, e.g. through factor analysis
- Analysis of content is difficult to verbalize and is largely **intuitive**
- There is risk of **cultural bias** in interpreting content in cross-cultural setting

**Visual Art**: being used therapeutically in **India**

- Little published research
- Research looking into art therapy for young male offenders with substance misuse (Art Therapy - Use of Creative Therapy in Chemical Dependence - P Senroy 2008 and 2009)
- Use of Art therapy among the 2004 Tsunami survivors suffering from a wide range of psychiatric diagnosis (Math et al, 2008)
- But lack of publications may not necessarily mean lack of activity in the field
Research in Art and Mental Health in India

• Example a Google search on “mental health” + art + India reveals 76,400,000 results (in 0.21 seconds on the 22nd October 2011)
• Though this is not a true reflection of the amount of activity in the field.
• A search on “mental health” AND “art” AND “India” on EMBASE + MedLine + PsychInfo revealed 15 unique publication 2 of them were about American Indians and 2 were picked up because the had the term “state-of-the-art”!

An Interesting Finding

• Study looking into ‘creativity’ and ‘mental health’ comparing 50 professional and 50 non-professional artists randomly selected from a group of 400 artists was carried out in India
• There was a higher prevalence of substance use and affective disorders seen in professional artists which make a professional artist more vulnerable to these (A study of Yakshagana artists in south India - Indian Journal of Psychiatry, 2009 by P Kalmane Sridhara & S Kalmane Ramabhatta)
The relationship is complex

- Art can be a therapeutic medium for people who are suffering from mental health problem
- Art can be considered as a relatively acceptable cross-cultural medium of engagement and therapeutics in trans-cultural settings
- Art by artists / patients with mental health problems can potentially be a window into their psyche

A Personal Note

- As a Psychiatrist I find my painting as a self-therapy for relaxation
- I feel my art has been a source of emotional strength and resilience that has helped me to cope with the emotional stresses I have faced over my career as a mental health professional.

"It seeks to regale, shock or purge him, drive into paroxysm of pleasure and pain, make him more of what he is, wake him out of stupor that gathers on him in the normal routine life and bring alertness into actions." – K.G. SUBRAMANYAN
PERCEPT IS NOT DIVORCED OF CONCEPT

“All perceiving is also thinking,
All reasoning is also intuition,
All observation is also invention.”
- RUDOLF ARNHEIM

Perspective is important—even visually

I had no idea that up side down maps were so popular in Australia!!!
Conclusion: Art as a therapeutic tool

- Art can therefore be used to tap on:
  a) as a pre-verbal therapy for individuals suffering mental illness.
  b) sense of self: e.g. human personality (like Rorschach test) and therefore be a tool to explore issues around identity (a core component of the cultural construct of a person) and relevant in exploring mental health issues in the Indian Diaspora abroad or mental health problems related to immigration (within the country and abroad) which is closely related to mental health
- Tap into individuals with their emotional distress and provide an avenue to release their feeling and a tool for communication
- Provide an opportunity for group activity / therapy

THANK YOU!