

Men and Art Therapy: A Connection Through Strengths

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Abstract

This inquiry examines the strengths of male art therapists and art therapy students using the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS) survey that measures character strengths. Among this sample of 21 men, two signature strengths emerged most often and had the highest total scores: "curiosity and interest in the world" and "appreciation of beauty and excellence." Connections are made between these signature strengths and assumptions in the literature regarding qualities art therapists possess. Thoughts and questions are posed highlighting possible implications of this data for the men who participated in the study, men in the field, and the larger art therapy community.

Jeremy: Background

I (Jeremy) grew up working class. My family lived in a small town of about a thousand people located on the border of Oklahoma and Texas. My father, a 6' 5", over three hundred pound man, worked alternating shifts at a glass plant forty miles away. My mother worked different part-time jobs. We lived in a small house on the edge of town.

When I was younger my father enrolled my brother and me in martial arts lessons. Three times a week my mother would drive the thirty miles to the nearest town so that we could spend an hour and a half punching and kicking mostly air, and sometimes each other.

One day, after arriving home, I noticed a large bag hanging by a coarse rope from a rafter of our house's carport. As I got closer I realized that in our absence, my father had hand-sewn remnants of some of his old blue jeans into a large sack. He then proceeded to stuff the sack with cloth scraps. What resulted was a homemade punching bag for us to use to practice against.

Looking back, I don't exactly know what happened to that hand-sewn punching bag. Like many children who have been given new toys, I wasn't very concerned with what went into making that bag, but instead only thought of it for what it was at the time, something to kick. After a while, it probably got thrown into a corner and forgotten

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about. Maybe it was thrown away. To be honest, it wasn't until I became an art therapist that I began to think about that bag again.

I never really questioned the act of my father sewing that bag together. Now, however, I wonder what lessons there are to be learned from that memory and from the gift my father gave me that day. This one homemade object embodied a larger, seemingly self-contradictory metaphor for how men are "supposed to" behave (aggressive and direct) yet also for how certain men choose to express themselves through non-traditional roles (like sewing fabrics together for children).

I find that these same metaphors are still with me as I ponder my career choice as an art therapist. Certainly for men, art therapy can be seen as a non-traditional occupational choice, much like my blue-collar father's choice to sew. What other group of men gets to use crayons and children's watercolor paints? What other group of men (other than those in similarly role-transgressing careers) get to nurture and support others in times of crisis?

But while I enjoy these privileges of my professional work, at the same time I still must deal with the dissonance of being a man in an occupation where the women outnumber the men. I must deal with the idea of not being able to earn the income to provide financially for my family like so many friends who have entered higher paying, historically male professions. I often think of the lower status I hold as an expressive therapist in the overall hierarchical structure of the hospital where I work. I think about being asked to lift and carry supplies at work more often than my female counterparts yet feeling all right with that because I'm the man in the department. I think about activities that I can do to make me feel "more manly," like boxing, a hobby I recently began. I wonder if it is the act of hitting that is appealing to me as a man, or the camaraderie of being with men in some kind of archaic fraternity of masculine ceremony—a dimension that is missing from my work life.

I begin to ask questions about myself and the field of art therapy. What brings men like me into our profession? I wonder if there are commonalities among us that allow for such opposition to a commonly accepted mainstream masculine culture. I wonder what that could mean for the broader culture of art therapists. What is special about the men practicing art therapy today that allows them to hand-sew their punching bags and hit them too?

Introduction

One does not need to spend much time at an American Art Therapy Association (AATA) conference, or with an

incoming group of art therapy students, to realize that our field is composed primarily of White women. Over the past 15 years, the percentage of men in the field has stagnated at approximately 6%. It is noteworthy that this figure, as with even lower percentages of people of color, has remained relatively constant over time (Elkins, Stovall, & Malchiodi, 2003; Gordon & Manning, 1991; Knapp, Knapp, & Phillips, 1994; Rauch & Elkins, 1998).

Some authors (e.g. Malchiodi, 1996; McNiff, 1986; B. Moon, 1992; C. Moon, 2000; Potash, 2005; Wadson, 1989) have called attention to these demographic proportions. Recent issues of this journal and presentations at the national conference have begun to explore the issues of race and now this special journal issue offers an opportunity to look at another dimension of art therapy. Being a man in the field of art therapy is presumably a unique experience impacting both the personal journey of men in the field as well as the profession as a whole. In addition, the small amount of research about the men in disproportionately female fields, and the potential isolation felt by these men, motivates the authors to discover common threads that may connect the men in the art therapy profession. Their very presence in these professions makes these men, by definition, extra-ordinary individuals.

The intent of this study is to examine possible trends in the strengths of a small and very specific subculture of men within the field of art therapy and how these men and the strengths they possess relate to the broader art therapy community. By doing so we hope to increase the knowledge regarding men in the profession and begin developing a better understanding of their particular contributions to art therapy. It is our contention that the practice of art therapy, our professional identity, and art therapy's future will benefit if we can identify, support, and nurture the strengths of men (and women) within our field.

We begin by reviewing some of the literature that identifies beliefs and characteristics of art therapists, searching for ideas that are consistent across the field, thereby attempting to find common qualities that connect all art therapists. We will then focus our efforts and describe in detail the method of inquiry we used to take a closer look at the characteristics, specifically the strengths, possessed by men in the field of art therapy, introducing the Positive Psychology's Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS) survey (Values in Action Institute, 2003). We will report on the results obtained from the VIA-IS survey and expand on emerging trends in the data. Finally, comparing these initial findings with those described in the literature, we will pose thoughts and questions about the broader connectedness of art therapists in the field. We hope that by opening this dialogue, the art therapy community will be better able to address the challenges that impact our profession, including increasing professional diversity and cultural competency, raising the recruitment and retention rates of men in the field, and finding new ways to support the individual strengths of members.

Literature Review

We found that little has been written about the specific traits and strengths of art therapists beyond general assumptions made about those in the profession. Even so, there are some common ideas and definitions that permeate the literature regarding who art therapists are, why they enter the field, and what kinds of qualities they possess. By including this section we did not intend to classify or deny the uniqueness and diversity of the individuals in the art therapy field, but rather to highlight some of the shared traits that characterize our profession.

From a historical perspective, McNiff (1986) stated that "the pioneers in the creative arts therapies may have had differing professional and educational backgrounds, but they were all characterized by a total commitment to the healing power of the creative process as a primary mode of therapeutic transformation" (p. 46). Similarly, Waller and Dalley (1992) suggested that although the term "art therapy" can encompass a wide array of practices, at the core is the practitioner's belief that image-making is healing. Makin (1994) also identified a belief in the healing power of art making as the fundamental thread connecting all art therapists. What is notable among these authors is that they share an assumption about many art therapists. Their statements suggest a unified belief about the art therapy community relating to a connectedness between art making and a healing or therapeutic process. The interest in this relationship (art making and helping others) is seen as one of the reasons why people enter the field of art therapy (Oppegard, Elkins, Abbenante, & Bangle, 2005).

As individuals, many art therapists come from either an art or helping profession background (Liebmann, 1990). Although these at first may seem to be divergent educational disciplines, Rubin (2001) observed that "most people are attracted to art therapy because they like both art and human beings, and they tend to be curious, as well as compassionate and creative" (p. 343). Moon (1992) highlighted a blending of characteristics such as "charisma, warmth, artistic perspective and skill, love for humanity and intellect with a willingness to work" culminating in a "passionate discipline" necessary for individuals preparing to become art therapists (p. 70).

In a survey of the American Art Therapy Association membership conducted by Oppegard et al. (2005), members were asked to rank order a list of characteristics they felt they possessed as an art therapist. Positive interpersonal skills and a desire to help others were the two most frequently identified first-ranked characteristics among the art therapists in that study.

In these authors' writings, we see a progression from interests that bring people to our profession to traits that are needed to complete the transformation into practicing art therapists. According to these authors, many of those entering the field of art therapy share backgrounds and characteristics that allow them to view the world through both artistic and humanistic lenses.

From our professional organization's standpoint, the American Art Therapy Association identifies on its website the following personal characteristics of an art therapist:

An art therapist must have sensitivity, empathy, emotional stability, patience, interpersonal skills, insight into human behavior, and an understanding of art media. An art therapist must also be an attentive listener and a keen observer. Flexibility and a sense of humor are important in adapting to client needs and work setting (Retrieved January 14, 2007).

Although this is a longer list of characteristics, there are some commonalities between those identified by AATA and those identified in the literature discussed above. For example, AATA identifies some characteristics from both the helping professions (e.g., empathy and listening skills) and art (e.g., the ability to understand art media). AATA's emphasis on these two categories seems congruent with the writings of Liebmann (1990), Rubin (2001), and Moon (1992) discussed above and the research by Oppedgaard et al. (2005).

Although we have discussed in general terms some of the assumptions about career choice and characteristics, in this study we are interested in understanding more deeply the particular strengths of male art therapists and male art therapy students. Within the literature review, we found no research specifically related to the traits of male art therapists but rather to a broader art therapy community (Wadson, 1989). Is the field of art therapy taking for granted that all art therapists, including the small percentage of male art therapists, possess these same traits? Is it safe to assume that all art therapists are alike given differences as profound as gender, race, and culture? Do men in the field possess particular strengths that make them unique in their own way or link them to each other and the larger art therapy community? To increase knowledge about the strengths that connect art therapists, and to specifically learn more about men in the field, we turn to our method of inquiry.

Method of Inquiry

While thinking about the goals of our inquiry, to learn more about men in the field and their connection to the larger art therapy community, we decided that focusing on the characteristics, particularly strengths, of men in the field would be an important and interesting place to begin.

After reviewing several trait surveys, we identified the Values in Action Institute's Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS) survey (2003), developed by Martin E. P. Seligman and Christopher Peterson, as the tool we would use to identify the key strengths of male art therapists and male art therapy students.

The character strengths and virtues in the VIA-IS survey were identified by Seligman and a team of researchers after reviewing the written texts of ancient cultures, religions, philosophy, politics, and education. Each of the texts were collected and analyzed, focusing on emerging trends in core virtues. These researchers limited their data collection to literate, large, and long-lived societies and therefore it is unclear whether these virtues would also characterize smaller societies or ones with verbal or pictorial histories. Even so, the researchers found a "strong convergence across time, place and intellectual tradition about certain core virtues" (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 50). Six virtues

consistently emerged throughout their research. These are identified by Peterson and Seligman (2004) as Wisdom, Courage, Humanity, Justice, Temperance, and Transcendence. Each of these six virtues is broken down into three to five strengths, 24 in total, that are called character strengths. These 24 character strengths are defined as being psychological pathways for displaying each of the virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

The VIA-IS is a self-report survey that uses a five point Likert scale and measures participants' endorsement of the 24 character strengths grouped under the six core virtues identified as follows: Wisdom (creativity, curiosity and interest in the world, open-mindedness, love of learning, perspective), Courage (bravery, persistence, integrity, vitality), Humanity (love, kindness, social intelligence), Justice (citizenship, fairness, leadership), Temperance (forgiveness and mercy, humility and modesty, prudence, self-regulation), and Transcendence (appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humor, spirituality) (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

There are obvious pitfalls to self-reporting, including participants' potential to respond with answers that they feel are socially desirable or that provide skewed responses to meet researcher expectations. Even so, we trust and hope that most participants were honest about themselves when completing the survey.

The VIA-IS survey has been revised five times and completed by more than 150,000 adults across mostly the United States and some other English speaking nations. Since the VIA-IS survey is the most culturally inclusive survey we found, given that there have been few ethnic and gender differences discovered to date, we believed that this catalogue of strengths and virtues would be a good starting point for our inquiry (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Procedure

After setting up a research code on the VIA-IS survey website (www.viastrengths.org) that would organize data collected, we created flyers to request participation from male art therapists and male art therapy students only. These flyers were distributed at the American Art Therapy Association's 36th Annual Conference in Atlanta, Georgia, as well as emailed to a database of male art therapists compiled from past conferences' men's focus groups. Colleagues were encouraged to relay this information to male art therapists/male art therapy students beyond our reach. Our intent was to capture as many responses as possible.

Participants were instructed to visit the VIA-IS survey website and enter the research code provided on the flyer and listserv email. This would then allow them to create a user name and personal password. After logging in with their newly assigned identifying information, participants completed the survey. Upon completion, they were provided with a list of their five top character strengths (called "signature strengths"), a description of each strength, and normative percentile scores. All of the scores from participants' 24 character strengths were collected and organized into a database and provided to us for our research

Table 1
VIA-IS Survey top range frequency and cumulative totals for character strengths.

Virtues (bold type) & corresponding Strengths	Frequency in Top Five Scores	Cumulative Scores for Sample
Wisdom & Knowledge		
Creativity	13	78.3
Curiosity	18	99.9
Love of learning	7	84.3
Open-mindedness	8	85.1
Perspective (wisdom)	1	79.1
Courage		
Bravery	6	79
Persistence	4	77.7
Integrity	9	84.7
Vitality	3	78.2
Humanity		
Love	7	83
Kindness	8	82.7
Social intelligence	2	80.3
Justice		
Citizenship	2	78.3
Fairness	7	83.3
Leadership	3	82.1
Temperance		
Forgiveness & mercy	4	76
Humility & modesty	2	71.9
Prudence	3	72.9
Self-regulation	1	70.5
Transcendence		
Appreciation of beauty	14	91.3
Gratitude	6	82.6
Hope	3	77.7
Humor	6	81.1
Spirituality	4	77.5

purposes. No demographic information was provided with this database.

In order to participate in the study, participants needed access to a computer with Internet capabilities and approximately 30 minutes to complete the survey. Although this research was limited by the fact that not everyone has access to computers and the Internet, these tools are still a useful and convenient way to conduct surveys. Participants were asked to complete the survey by January 31, 2006.

Results

Twenty-one male art therapists and male art therapy students participated in the study. Depending on their

responses to survey questions, each participant was given an average score between one and five for each strength (five being the highest endorsement for any particular character strength). By taking the top five scores of each participant, the authors sought to identify participants' top five strengths. However, in certain cases, more than five strengths received the same numerical score, in which case the participant may have had more than five signature strengths. As a result, the authors included more than five top scores for some participants.

After examining the data, some trends emerged among the responses. First, when looking at participants' top five signature strengths, three strengths occurred most often. These were "curiosity and interest in the world" (appearing 18 times), "appreciation of beauty and excellence" (14), and "creativity, ingenuity, and originality" (13) (see Table 1). In addition, 14 of the 21 participants had one of these strengths identified as their top signature strength.

All participants' scores were then added together to obtain a cumulative total for each character strength. If a character strength received its highest possible score (5) from each of the 21 participants, the highest possible cumulative total for that character strength would be 105. "Curiosity and interest in the world" and "appreciation of beauty and excellence" also had the highest cumulative totals of all of the character strengths, scoring 99.9 and 91.3 respectively (see Table 1).

In order to understand the application of these strengths we have included explanations of the top two signature strengths identified above and their respective virtues. We chose to focus on "curiosity and interest in the world" and "appreciation of beauty and excellence" as they occurred most often in the participants' top range of scores and received overwhelmingly higher scores for the cumulative totals than that of the other signature strengths.

Curiosity and Interest in the World

As defined by Peterson and Seligman (2004), "curiosity and interest in the world...involves the active recognition, pursuit, and regulation of one's experience in response to challenging opportunities" (p. 125). Curious people enjoy ambiguity and are open to matters that do not meet initial expectations or presumptions (Seligman, 2002). This signature strength can be broken down into subcategories, including curiosity, interest, novelty-seeking, and openness to experience. Curiosity and interest can be used interchangeably, and "they initiate and sustain goal-directed behaviors in response to incentive cues" (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 126). Novelty-seeking involves experiencing new, exciting, and potentially high-risk experiences in order to achieve a high level of stimulation. Openness to experience is a predisposition to new ideas, imaginative thinking, and unconventional values (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Curiosity can fuel one's potential for personal growth. This strength is often highly valued, but can cause difficulties on an interpersonal level when it is viewed by others as intrusiveness.

The strength of curiosity falls under the larger virtue of “Wisdom.” The virtue of “Wisdom” is said to be “knowledge that is hard fought for, and then used for good. Wisdom is a form of noble intelligence—in which no one is resentful and everyone is appreciative” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 39).

Appreciation of Beauty

The second top signature strength, “appreciation of beauty and excellence,” is distinguished from other strengths by a feeling of awe that enters one’s awareness when confronted with something deemed aesthetically exquisite or superior in nature. As defined by Peterson and Seligman (2004), “appreciation of beauty and excellence refers to the ability to find, recognize, and take pleasure in the existence of goodness in the physical and social worlds” (p. 537). Beauty and excellence, in whatever shape or form, are appreciated deeply by the person with this strength. Peterson and Seligman (2004) proposed that a person can benefit by responding to three different types of positive encounters associated with “appreciation of beauty and excellence.” These are as follows: (1) a display of physical or auditory beauty, (2) a display of skill or talent, and (3) a display of virtue or moral goodness.

The virtue of Transcendence, under which the “appreciation of beauty and excellence” strength falls, enables individuals to form a connection with the larger universe. Commonly this virtue is exemplified by spiritual models of existence—models that refer to the nonmaterial aspects of life (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Transcendence encompasses strengths that connect individuals to something larger than themselves, including, but not limited to, other people, the divine, or the universe (Seligman, 2002).

Discussion

As we return to the original purpose of our inquiry, to increase knowledge about men in the field of art therapy and how they relate to the larger art therapy community, we find that there are implications and questions raised from what our study revealed. These findings may be pertinent to the men who participated in the study, a wider group of male art therapists and art therapy students, and our larger professional community. There seems to be a connection among the majority of the participants linking them together by shared strengths. Perhaps the realization of connectedness among the men who participated in the study and the professionals in the field itself will foster a greater sense of connectedness among male art therapists. It may be that a greater recognition of these very qualities will contribute to a deeper understanding, not only of what has drawn men to this field but what sustains them as well, as these strengths are expressed through art therapy practice. In nurturing and appreciating these strengths, the profession as a whole might benefit from the recruitment and retention of male practitioners. Conversely, a particular configuration of strengths might, to some extent, be shaped by the culture of the profession itself. Perhaps men possessing these signature

strengths are encouraged to enter the field while others are subtly discouraged. Men who may exhibit other arrays of strengths may, once in the field, respond to influences of what an art therapist should be by conforming or feeling alienated. While studying male flight attendants, Young and James (2001) concluded that the numerical majority frequently creates an exaggeration of differences between themselves and the numerical minority, while individuals in the numerical minority attempt to conform to the existing characteristics and beliefs about the group they represent. Are male art therapists identifying with or conforming to the expectations of the larger group of art therapists comprised primarily of women?

We wonder to what extent “appreciation of beauty and excellence” and “curiosity and interest in the world” align with the feminist perspectives woven into the field of art therapy. The values and traits of the men in the field appear to be more aligned with the feminist perspectives and ideas of flexibility, empathy, relationships, creativity, and artistic sensibilities (Moon, 2000). Is that what makes them a good fit for this profession, that these men are able to adopt caring and connected ways of working (Wadson, 1989)?

How does this research relate to our larger society’s view of career expectations of men? Being that U.S. society generally continues to support traditional notions of masculinity, this socialization may affect men’s willingness to nurture such strengths as “appreciation of beauty and excellence” and enter a field that promotes these strengths. This may explain in part why there are so few men in our field, as compared to the number of women. What does this say about the unique group of men who choose this career path?

Generally, there seems to be a connection between the strengths identified by the men who participated in this study and the traits outlined in the literature. Both Rubin (2001) and Opegard et al. (2005) identified curiosity and interest as common characteristics of art therapists. This is consistent with the finding of men in this study who scored high on the character strength of “curiosity and interest in the world.” In addition, the authors discussed in the literature review have identified an artistic sensibility as an important quality found in art therapists. One might suggest that “appreciation of beauty and excellence” is closely connected with this way of relating to the world. Here we find a relationship between the qualities possessed by the male art therapists and art therapy students who participated in this study and what are believed to be essential characteristics for art therapists to embody. Given these findings, there may exist a current “art therapist profile.” If so, it becomes the responsibility of the field to honor these traits while still fostering the uniqueness and diversity of its constituent members. The field as a whole must make an effort to examine the way we represent ourselves and recruit new members, in order to not limit our full potential to become an inclusive and dynamic profession.

Conclusion

In this study we measured the strengths of 21 male art therapists and art therapy students using the VIA-IS survey.

Two strengths emerged as being the highest scoring and most commonly occurring among these men: "curiosity and interest in the world" and "appreciation of beauty and excellence." Connections were drawn between the identified strengths of these individuals and literature pertaining to qualities assumed to be possessed by art therapists. A number of questions arose while making these connections and we were reminded that with research one is often left with more questions than answers. It was our hope to increase the knowledge and understanding of a small subgroup of male art therapists/art therapy students while strengthening the thread that stitches our field together through the identification of commonality.

As we continue developing and expanding upon this inquiry we hope to address some of the limitations we encountered. For example, our small sample size and inability to reach male art therapists who may not be active in the art therapy professional association made it difficult to draw conclusions and to generalize findings. Something as simple as access to a membership database that could be sorted by gender would be a tremendous advantage to future researchers. We hope to continue gathering VIA-IS data on men in the field and couple that with additional questionnaires to gain more insight about these individuals. Another way we are interested in continuing this inquiry is to look at the entire field, with the hope of identifying some trends in strengths that may be inherent in most art therapists. As research grows regarding the use of the VIA-IS, it will be interesting to compare the strengths of male art therapists to the top strengths of other men who have made more traditional or non-traditional career choices.

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