



Heraldic Art As A Supplement To Individual Psychotherapy

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This paper describes the use of a technique termed ♦heraldic art therapy.♦ The approach to treatment was utilized in conjunction with individual psychotherapy in the treatment of mild to moderately disturbed patients having difficulty establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships and group affiliations. Seventeen patients in an outpatient mental health clinic were selected for participation in the weekly heraldic art therapy group. Fourteen members remained in the group for 15 months and three members withdrew from the group rather early. The paper highlights the major group emphasis and assignments, as well as the direction and course of one patient♦s response to treatment. It was concluded that the dual treatment design appeared to be remarkably helpful to the patients in addressing and reducing problems in individual and group functioning.

The purpose of this paper is to report a technique of art therapy which was interfaced with and was intended as a supplement to and enhancement of the traditional psychotherapy in an outpatient mental health clinic. The method was designed to aid in the development of patient awareness of self and others, to promote self-esteem and self-confidence, to enhance interpersonal relationships and to effect group involvement.

Seventeen patients were selected to engage in a heraldic art therapy group project in addition to their regular individual therapy sessions. The patients selected for inclusion in the group were those with mild to moderate emotional disturbances.

They characteristically had reduced levels of self-esteem and confidence, tended to feel isolated, lonely, uninteresting and held minimal interpersonal relationships or group identifications. Interpersonal skills had either been only partially mastered or had fallen into relative disuse. Many had entered an isolated period due to transitional stresses such as loss of a spouse, work related relocation of domicile, retirement and similar events. It was anticipated, and in retrospect wisely so, that patients with limited intellectual ability, obsessive traits, active psychosis or other severe symptoms would be inappropriate for the project.

As a matter of clarification for readers abroad, it should be noted that in the United States there is rather intense public interest in heraldic coats of arms. Numerous commercial Arms have realized success in the millions of dollars from the sale of bogus ♦family coats of arms.♦ There is also great demand for heraldic like designs on all manner of merchandise, from drinking glasses to coat buttons. Yet, despite this infatuation with armory, the general public knows little or nothing regarding legitimate heraldic regulations or practice.

A basic understanding of the fundamentals of armory is rather easily acquired, though mastery is a quite arduous undertaking. Familiarity with the visual beauty and charm of heraldic arms has the capacity to promote appreciation for a great storehouse of broad socio-cultural interests. Heraldry, for example, is inseparably connected with genealogy, history, the origin and meaning of names, calligraphy, flags, coins and many other areas. The therapeutic use of heraldic art and science was, therefore, envisioned as a vehicle to intrigue the clients into a venture which could eventually expand their sensitivity, develop their focus of interest and lead eventually toward personal and group encounters outside the clinical setting.

As the project began, patients were introduced to heraldry through an informal discussion of armorial related history and basic armorial concepts based primarily on the English model. Colorful pictures and armorial renderings were shared. Following meetings introduced the patients to the rich symbolism found in heraldic arms, Heraldic symbols, allusions, puns and the like were investigated. In the absence of obvious and clear symbolism such as the tilting lance in the arms of William Shakespeare, the group enjoyed speculating regarding the possible meanings associated with the arms of famous persons. The journal of The Heraldry Society entitled *The Coat of Arms* was an excellent resource, displaying several recent British heraldic grants to individuals and corporations. It gave the blazon, or written description,

of the arms and an account of the meaning of the various heraldic symbols employed. The atmosphere of the group remained at an informal and social level during this period.

When the patients developed a very elementary grasp of the use of symbolism in heraldry, they were asked to visit a local library to review the pictures in heraldic texts. Their assignment was to trace or draw, even if crudely, a few coats of arms which in some way especially caught their attention and to explain or speculate to the group regarding the meanings of the symbols. After a few sessions, they were again asked to review the library texts and, from the symbols found, to personally compose a design which could reasonably represent their own surname and occupation. Later, they were asked to design coats of arms which expressed their various emotions and personal characteristics. During this period color was added to the drawings with crayons, colored pencils or paint. These designs were still often crude, violated most heraldic rules and were on occasion quite hideous. Nevertheless, progress was noted in both insight and technical skill.

The patients were encouraged to begin studying the more basic heraldic books in order to expand their understanding of heraldic history, laws and principles which in turn improved the quality of their designs and renderings. Based on this technical knowledge, they were individually assigned to develop an armorial design which would be appropriate for local schools, colleges, corporate bodies, government agencies and prominent persons. The arms were to be used only in the group. Each design was to include such factors as history, function, product and the like.

By the end of the third month, patients began to broaden their interests into areas directly and indirectly associated with heraldic art as have been previously mentioned. Occasionally, two or more areas of interest developed simultaneously. Most patients began to trace their lineage, some began studying calligraphy, others became absorbed in ethnic history and still others in the preservation of local and regional historical sites. By the ninth month affiliations had been established by the patients with clubs and societies in these areas and their specialized knowledge made them resources of relative expertise. The group was helpful in enabling members to locate and make themselves useful within the organization with little difficulty. When the organizations learned of their familiarity with heraldry, the patients were also used occasionally as speakers on the topic and were invited on numerous occasions to share their heraldic knowledge with garden clubs and sundry ladies meetings. From these experiences, self-esteem and self-confidence were enhanced and interpersonal skills were further developed. Their organizational involvement also expanded their social contacts, and new friendships developed.

Rather than experiencing endless lonely hours with little meaningful direction or purpose as had formerly been the case, the patients grew from the group's interaction and also became increasingly involved in the ongoing life of the community. Toward the end of the first year, several of the patients formed an informal weekly group of persons from their genealogy, art, history and heraldry organization contacts. They acted as informal consultants to the librarian in wisely selecting additional heraldic and associated texts for a balanced collection. They also developed heraldic and historical artwork for use in schools and local organizations for teaching and as decorative appointments. Those patients who had studied calligraphy and had become moderately proficient in beautiful writing, were seized upon by friends, employers and local societies to handletter invitations, programs, posters and the like.

The experimental program has been described thus far in terms of general group movement. In order to lend greater texture and clarity to its effects on individuals, the experience of one patient will be described in some detail. The patient to be discussed was selected because she was a rather average patient in the group in terms of basic ability and in therapeutic involvement and progress. In portraying this patient, the author seeks to avoid either overstatement or understatement of the process.

The patient was a fifty-six year old Caucasian widow, formerly the wife of a non-commissioned military officer. Her two single sons worked abroad and a married daughter lived in a distant city. The family maintained few face to face contacts, but maintained considerable regard for one another. Both she and her husband were primarily of German extraction. There was a history of moderate marital conflict, partially due to the husband's remarkable rigidity and occasional alcohol abuse. Through the years, the client had exhibited mild to moderate passivity, dependency and depression with a sense of depreciation and diminished self-worth. The patient applied for treatment five months following the death of her widowed mother and two months following the death of her husband. The presenting complaints included intense depression, loneliness, feelings of guilt related to her relationship with her husband prior to his death and a fear of coping independently with her environment. Initially, she was treated with drug therapy and individual psychotherapy. After two weeks, she was invited to join the beginning heraldic art therapy group.

The patient's general focus in concurrent individual psychotherapy moved from a crisis orientation to an emphasis on identity, interpersonal relations, worth and competence and finally to a search for meaning with regard to contributions related to family, friends and the community. It is believed that individual psychotherapy and heraldic art group therapy mutually aided patient movement, yet with the absence of formal research design it is not possible to distinguish the contributions of either.

The patient entered the group somewhat reluctantly and for the first two weekly sessions remained silent. With nominal interest, she listened to the group discuss basic heraldic concepts and reviewed with

them the drawings and paintings of coats of arms, knights in heraldic attire and other medieval themes. In following sessions, her interest increased as the group began to explore similarities and differences in medieval and modern dress, homes, employment, customs, household and work implements and how changes in each area were reflected in the style of heraldic charges since the 13th century. During the third session she joined the other group members in questions and comments, cautiously at first, then more freely in subsequent sessions. The increasing comfort level was likely enhanced by the coffee, doughnuts and discussion period following each session in which patients came to know one another on a more personal level. Initially the period was partially structured to encourage personal interaction; however, the structure was no longer needed after the third session.

Beginning in the second month, upon direction, the client searched a large military library for heraldic designs site considered especially appealing. Having been reared in a fishing community, she became interested in fish and sundry sea creatures, real and imaginary, common to heraldic art. She researched well the circumstances under which they are employed in heraldic design. Her extra effort brought applause when she presented her findings to the group accompanied by rough drawings of the fish and sea creatures on poster paper.

Somewhat later, she developed a heraldic drawing utilizing symbols which adequately referred to a composite of her maiden and married name. In completing this assignment it was necessary for her to consult several books in the library which explore the development and meanings of surnames. During this period, she was resistant to utilizing color in her work, feeling it was beyond her ability, but under some pressure and encouragement from the group, she began to employ colored pencils to complete her drawings and was soon delighted with the effect achieved.

In completing her first assignment to compose heraldic designs to represent her emotions, she sought the consultation of an art teacher in order to cope with the problems of perspective and shading. Her designs included a very interesting one - an oyster shown washed ashore and stranded on a beach. She explained the oyster represented the way she felt - desperately alone, out of place and frightened at being so vulnerable. The group gave understanding to these emotions, but then someone noted that the shell of the oyster was partially open and a pearl could be faintly seen inside. They suggested that perhaps the design reflected her situation even more accurately than she had intended. They indicated that her own protective shell was beginning to open to new ideas and experiences and that she did indeed contain a pearl of valuable potential talents which could be shared with others. For the first time she was able to share with the group some of her private grief and some of her faint hopes for the future. Three group members were scheduled to **show and tell** that day, but the group never got past the oyster. It was at this point the patient began to experience the unity and acceptance of the group. Later, heraldic renderings designed to represent emotions, problems, successes and the like were also submitted by the patient and discussed with meaningful results. It is noteworthy that during this period the patient became more free and imaginative in her drawings and her work began to show humor when appropriate. Her skill in rendering and in the use of art materials began to display considerable improvement.

The studies of the group had focused primarily on the English mode of heraldry during the initial period. By the fourth month, the patient realized the German form of heraldry was quite different in many ways, including its history, appearance and regulations. Being of German extraction, she developed an intense interest in German heraldry since it was more applicable to her heritage. She read all available books written in English on the subject and located several written in German. Her curiosity led her to enroll in an introductory German course in a local college. Unfortunately, she seemed to have limited talent in that area and withdrew from class after about a month. In conference with the group, the patient decided to begin a German oriented heraldry project. She made a list of local industries and large businesses having Germanic names. Based on the meaning of the names and the histories and products of the companies, she began to design a coat of arms for each which fit the German style. One of the designs somehow caught the fancy of the group and encouraged by group members, the patient had a local draftsman professionally render and color the arms. She framed it and presented it to the president of the company with an explanation of the intended meanings of the armorial charges used in the design. He graciously received the rendering and promised to hang it proudly in his office, though he may well have acted from a motive of kindness rather than of genuine interest.

About the same time she established affiliation with a local genealogical society and began to trace her lineage. She joined two heraldic associations as a general member. Eventually, she joined a national society and registered her American lineage.

Due to her contact with the local genealogical society, she became recognized by the end of the year as one with considerable heraldic knowledge, was appointed to a committee and was warmly welcomed into the ranks. Personal contacts there led to friendships and occasional trips with three other widows to surrounding cities. In previous relationships outside the family, she had often felt uncomfortable being **only a housewife** who was **dull** and had nothing interesting to contribute. Now she felt like a peer, one with knowledge and ability, and one to whom people came with problems and questions. Her appearance and bearing began to reflect this improved self-concept. One of the widows invited her to begin a weekly heraldry workshop for their **golden age** club which met in a local church. The workshop was successful and led to invitations to address local garden clubs on the subject. An elderly gentleman, and group member, became her associate in the garden club presentations and

demonstrated the art of calligraphy.

The patient was dismissed from individual psychotherapy after one year, but elected to remain in group therapy until its termination. Her parting goal was to continue the lineage research in her husband's paternal line and attempt to connect it with an ancient German family bearing arms since the 16th century. If connection was found, she hoped to apply in Germany to have the arms legitimately registered to and borne by her children.

Despite occasional disappointments, failures, environmental problems and limited income, the patient was considered to have made considerable progress. She left therapy feeling, looking and coping well. She had become rather optimistic, goal oriented, more poised and dealing adequately with emotional and environmental needs. She better understood her intrinsic worth and optimized her extrinsic worth in interpersonal relations and in service to others.

It should be noted that a potential heraldic art therapist need not be a master of the topic. It would, however, be most helpful for the person to have closely read two or three basic heraldic texts in order to lead the initial teaching portion of the group. Group members may well become more knowledgeable of the area than the therapist; yet, this need not damage the group. Following the initial sessions the therapist may function as group coordinator, allowing the emerging knowledge and skills of group members and the group process in progress to contribute to assignments and evaluation.

Of the 17 patients initially involved in the heraldic art therapy project which continued over a period of 15 months, one discontinued therapy against recommendations, while two failed to develop a particular interest and dropped out of the group but maintained their individual therapy sessions. The 14 remaining patients undergoing both individual psychotherapy and heraldic art therapy all terminated by mutual agreement. This group of 14 all evaluated the heraldic art therapy experience as a particularly helpful adjunct to individual therapy. They felt it was especially useful in paying the way toward their transition into greater personal involvement and group participation. They indicated that the experience also brought them to a more complete appreciation of their cultural heritage and of the environment in which they lived. Of particular interest were their comments on their increasing sense of discipline, mastery and commitment experienced during the undertaking. However, they felt that familiarity with parliamentary procedure would have been helpful in their involvement with some of the more formal groups with which they affiliated. While this was likely quite accurate, the addition of such a study may well have decreased the spontaneity and exuberant task performance of the group.

The combining of psychotherapy and heraldic art therapy was based on theoretical predictions, but also to some degree on speculation. The apparent results were far more remarkable than anticipated. However, the success of the project may be partially due to its novelty, to the group process occurring, to unique traits within its members, or to other factors. Additional experience and a more formal experimental design would be helpful in clarifying these issues. Nevertheless, both the therapist and the group strongly sensed that this therapeutic design offered greater emotional strengthening and practical interpersonal gains than would have been possible in either traditional individual or group psychotherapy or a combination of the two. It also seems that a heraldic art group may well be of value in quite similar ways to populations who have not been identified as having emotional problems, particularly in terms of personal, group and community involvement.

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