

Discovering authentic voice: An expressive arts therapy exploration of therapeutic voice work

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Abstract

This research study was designed to evaluate the use of expressive arts therapy as a medium for exploring identity and authentic self-expression, through a focus on voice. This was a single-case study in which the participant experienced four sessions of multi-modal arts therapy as she explored her perception and use of voice through movement, visual imagery, poetic metaphor and dialogue. The data analysis used a structured approach to thematic content analysis. The study indicated that using expressive arts therapy to explore images of voice enabled the participant to achieve an enhanced perception of the quality of her voice.

Keywords

Expressive arts therapy, authentic, voice, poetry

Introduction

Voice, whether in the form of primordial sounds or fully articulated words, comes from the inner recesses of the human body. Individuals have a “deep yearning to articulate experience into the spoken word” (Koltai, 2007, p.378). According to Shewell (2009), voice is shaped by the speaker’s psyche and soma and can be a “bridge between our inner and outer worlds” (p.4). However, for most adults many aspects of voice remain largely unexplored during their lifetime.

In the early development of psychoanalysis – Freud’s talking cure – the spoken voice was the dominant medium of expression. The predominance of the spoken voice has been challenged since then, and experimentation with non-verbal aspects of voice has resulted in theatre and body work techniques that release the voice in one way or another, sometimes with emotional catharsis (Newham, 1994).

The individual arts therapies were originally utilised primarily within populations where verbal expression was limited, or when verbal therapies were thought not to provide adequate therapeutic benefits (Karkou & Sanderson,

2006). In the subsequent development of expressive arts therapies, and despite the use of voice, language and sounds in many modalities, there is a lack of evidence of the specific use of therapeutic voice work. This lack of evidence indicates a level of ambivalence towards both verbalisation and voice in these therapeutic approaches.

Voice is the domain of a wide variety of specialists including: speech and language therapists; voice teachers and coaches; singing teachers; and exploratory voice guides. Shewell (2009) outlines a continuum of voice work “from so-called normal to abnormal voice, and from aesthetic to therapeutic voice work” (p.13). Psychologists and psychotherapists are trained to listen to the quality of and changes in the voices of their clients (Martin, 1996). Voice coaches and dialogue teachers are trained to create changes in the voices of their trainees. Despite this, we can live our whole life without knowing much about our own voice (Barton & Dal Vera, 2011). There are few studies which record a subjective, personalised experience of therapeutic voice work.