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Interactive Seminar Summary

Robert Irwin Wolf

The College of New Rochelle, rwolf@cnr.edu

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Dr. Robert Irwin Wolf, LP. LCAT, ATR-BC, NCPsyA

The following is a summary of the material presented at an Interactive Seminar, co-sponsored by The Institute for Expressive Analysis and The New York Art Therapy Association, March 2018

Neuroscience Background

- Certain types of mental illness are viewed by neuroscientists as created by a design flaw in the evolution of the human brain
- Humans have a prolonged period of brain development and are dependent upon the outside world to complete their development
- During this period, external interaction creates a template within the primitive brain

Neuroscience Meets Freud

Research in early brain development has shown that sensory motor experience is perceived and recorded in “*implicit memory*”, or as Freud would describe it, the *unconscious*. The most primitive part of our brain collects and stores highly ‘affective/emotional’ experience and creates an internal template that can be later triggered and projected out into the world, as a prototype of what is to be expected. Freud would call this ‘projection or transference’. Early attachment paradigms as well as later stressful or traumatic experiences are stored within this part of the brain *which is preverbal*. These can be triggered in later life.

Freudian Perspective: Our Ego converts Primary Process images into words; i.e., Secondary Process Revision.

Neuroscience: The amygdala first responds to any situation to assess danger, (real or anticipated) and the hippocampus, responds ½ a second later, providing cognitive processing. If danger is signaled, the brain shuts down all functioning that is not directly related to survival, including cognition, reflection and speech which would delay the ‘fight or flight’ reflex. In healthy mental processing, there needs to be an interaction between these two parts of the brain.

Photographs speak directly from the unconscious:

Expressive, sensory motor, non-verbal forms of communication are therefore important vehicles to uncover, express and explore unconscious/implicit memory/experiences. Once externalized in a creative form they may then be processed by higher levels of brain functioning. In effect, through this process we turn on higher levels of brain functioning and enable the ‘digesting’ of unprocessed material.

Visual Images are one of our earliest sensory motor mechanisms through which we perceived and organized our world. Photographs, speak to us visually through this primal, unconscious language of ‘implicit’ or primary process communication.

By starting with a photographic image we can often access more unconscious/implicit content by allowing ourselves to ‘play’ with (free associate to) the image, fostering greater understanding and the ability to let go and move on. In other words, we aim to externalize implicit memory/experience so that it may be transferred into an explicit form of conscious understanding, moving it from one part of our brain to another and fostering communication between these parts.

Our Perceptions are Subjective

As clinicians, if we interact with clients on this preverbal level, we must remember that our own associations are always, to some degree, subjective. What we see most easily in any image is what speaks to us most directly from the vantage point of our own personal history of experience.

The Importance of Self-Understanding

As expressive analysts and therapists, if we learn about our own inner world through personal analysis or therapy, we are less likely to unconsciously project our own material into our clients work and be more able to reach a place where we can communicate authentically with clients on this preverbal level.

Here we can help externalize, explore, process and ultimately transform *implicit* memory to *explicit* memory, where it is understood and therefore less likely to be acted out.

Exercises to Offer Patients

- **Ask a Patient to take a photo of you** and have them playfully add to it with art materials. (exploring transference)
- **Wall/Obstacle:** Create an image of yourself facing or climbing over a wall or obstacle of some kind and place something you want on the other side (exploring resistance)
- **Childhood Snapshot Reconstructions:** Using a reproduction of childhood snapshot(s) reconstruct the photo(s) in a new way. Use a combination of other photographs and/or visual art materials. Add words to each person’s image.
- **Creative Story:** Tell something which you have never been able to tell anyone about yourself by using a combination of photographs and art materials.
- **First Memory Photo:** Create a photographic image of your first memory.
- **Dream Photo:** Think about a dream and re-create an image of it by using photograph(s) and art materials.

- **Photographic Time Line:** Place several photos of yourself at various stages in your life on one background paper. Then use art materials to draw in significant events that occurred between the images during this time frame.
- **Non-Verbal Memory Transformation:** Create a photo that represents an experience when you were ‘at a loss for words’ and couldn’t speak, then add words.

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