

ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

The Joint Painting Procedure: Parents and children creating shared space

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Abstract

The Joint Painting Procedure (JPP) is an art-based assessment and clinical intervention that evaluates and focuses on implicit aspects in parent–child relationships in middle childhood. The JPP has been utilized in parent–child art psychotherapy and various other clinical settings over the past 15 years and involves the parent and child painting together on the same sheet of paper using gouache or tempera paints. The JPP enables multi-dimensional expression and representation of implicit qualities of the relationship that cannot be expressed verbally. Sharing the same space and creating together enables transformational processes such as fostering mutual recognition, encouraging reflective function and creating mutual regulation. The JPP offers the painting dyad a meaningful non-verbal intersubjective experience, as well as ways of looking at various aspects of their relationship. The JPP and its clinical aspects are being examined and validated through rigorous research.

Keywords

Dyadic art psychotherapy, art-based assessment, mutual recognition, mentalization

Introduction

Working as an art therapist for many years with parents and children (dyadic art psychotherapy), I felt the need to create an art-based assessment to help me focus on the unique aspects of dyadic relationships. This assessment evolved from my clinical work and has also been used by students, colleagues and supervisees. In the past five years, I have been trying to research and validate this tool through my PhD work, including an elaboration of its clinical dimensions, in order that every art therapist and parent-child psychotherapist can use it as an evidence-based tool.

The Joint Painting Procedure (JPP) is an art-based assessment and clinical intervention that evaluates and focuses on implicit aspects in parent-child relationships in middle childhood. The JPP offers the painting dyad a meaningful, non-verbal, intersubjective space, which fosters the mentalization process.

The JPP is based on clinical experience in art therapy, which has used painting as a diagnostic tool for decades (Betts 2006; Wadeson 2010). It is also based on the model of dyadic psychotherapy, which is a psychodynamic orientation to treating parent-child relationships (Kaplan, Harel and Avimeir-Pat 2010). This model, which takes a mentalization-based approach, integrates an intra-psychic, object-relational component with an interpersonal perspective, to treat relational disturbances in childhood.

Relationships between parents and children contain implicit aspects, which are non-conscious and nonverbal, in addition to explicit ones. Both are central to understanding the dyadic dynamics and are implicated in psychotherapy processes and outcomes. Hence, a large number of researchers have emphasized the need to assess implicit aspects of the relationship (Fonagy 2001; Granot and Mayseless 2001; Lyons-Ruth 1998). Implicit aspects within relationships can be linked to procedural and unconscious processes (Crittenden 2006; Pally 2005). These aspects are expressed throughout a person's life via behaviour and nonverbal manifestations such as art (Goldner and Scharf 2011; Madigan, Ladd and Goldberg 2003).

Researchers and clinicians note that revealing and analysing implicit aspects in parent-child relationships is possible by observing the parent-child interaction in motion (Fonagy 2001; Lyons-Ruth 1998). Expression via

interaction will be different from an abstract representation of the relations when a single creator imagines the interactions while not actually experiencing them (Gavron 2013).

Hence, in the JPP case, observing the joint artistic expressions during interaction allows a clear picture of the process in motion, and provides a different picture from that of observing the mother's or child's perception of the self with the other (Fonagy 2001 and 2015; Stern 2004). For example, a child who paints her feelings towards the mother separately can draw an ideal representation or a wish for the connection, as opposed to creating a joint painting with the mother that may arouse the child's expressions of anger and aggression.

The Joint Painting Procedure

The procedure (JPP) comprises a structured five-step process in which both partners paint on the same paper, first working separately side by side and then painting together on a shared area of a single piece of paper. In the first step, the mother and child are asked to use a pencil to mark a personal space on a shared sheet of paper. Next, each partner paints inside his or her personal space using gouache paints. This is followed by an instruction to draw a frame around the painted space, and then to paint a path from that frame to the frame painted by the partner. In the fifth and final step, parent and child are asked to paint the rest of the sheet of paper together. After painting, the parent and child look at the painting with the therapist, discuss the shared experience, and give the painting a title. Table 1 describes the JPP process.

Table 1

The Process

1. Each partner marks a personal space on the paper (in pencil)
2. Each partner paints in the personal space
3. Each partner paints a frame around his/her personal space
4. Each partner creates a path from his/her personal frame to the frame of the other's personal space
5. Both partners paint together in the joint area (with gouache paint)
6. The dyad gives a name to the painting, and creates a shared story. Discussion then follows about the experience during the process and about the painting.

The JPP has various clinical goals: (1) to understand the child's internal world and relational representations within the context of the parent, (2) observation of the potential for growth and change in the dyad, as reflected in the continuous process of the joint painting, (3) identification of focused treatment goals relevant to the dyadic relationships.

From a clinical perspective, the JPP promotes change and development in the parent-child relations, in a unique space of enjoyment and creativity. This space contains imaginative playful and creative aspects, as well as realistic parts of the relationship. During the process of painting, each behaviour triggers expression and behaviour in the other. Effectively this involves a mutual nonverbal operation, where each partner reacts to the other. The playful-imaginary space, which is developing throughout the process, allows for a safe experience of transformation in the relationship, which later can be applied in the real world of the dyad (Gavron 2013; Markman 2013).

The uniqueness of this tool lies in it facilitating evaluation and identification of implicit aspects of the relationship, through an examination of what actually happens during a joint interaction. In this way one can explore and identify complex representations of interactions, which can have diagnostic implications (Stern 2004; Tronick 2003). These representations include one's wishes about the relation with the other, the motivation to be together and the opportunity to develop within the relationships. The final product contains a variety of these representations and also fosters mentalization within the dyad and allows researchers and clinicians to observe the processes of expression and change in the relationships.

The JPP is accompanied with a validated manual that includes seven scales: individuation and autonomy, intrusion, mutual recognition, dominance of the child within the relationships, motivation for relationships, emotional expression, and expression of implicit anger and aggression toward the other (Gavron 2013). The manual describes the scales and includes descriptions of phenomena that characterize each level of every scale, and relate to the painting process and the final product, as well as behavioural phenomena observed at each stage of the process (Gavron 2013; Gavron and Mayselless 2015). In order to validate the manual, I took three steps: (1) assessing inter-rater reliability between three judges who rated 20 dyads according to the JPP

manual; (2) computing correlations between explicit aspects of relationships (from validated relationships questionnaires) with implicit aspects (from the JPP); (3) calculating adjustment based on the implicit and explicit aspects of relationships (regression analysis).

This paper focuses and elaborates on the implicit relationship scale of mutual recognition (MR).

Mutual recognition

This scale relates to the degree of recognition of the other as a subject with a unique inner world, which includes thoughts, feelings and intentions. It should be noted that this recognition is complicated because the parent needs to recognise the child's inner world without ignoring their own inner world, and the child needs to recognise the parent as a separated subject (Benjamin 2005). During the process, parents and children with a high ability of MR will authentically create together while being respectful of the other and enjoying the moment of working together. For example, one of the markers of a high level of MR will include artistic expressions of both partners in the shared area, which will be connected to each other through a shared theme and/or formal elements. Another phenomenon which could indicate aspects of a high level of MR involves the parent or the child relating to the other's images, and using similar formal elements from their personal spaces. In the following image, a mother and her 10 year old daughter created a land of candies in the shared space of the painting. They created a shared theme and used similar formal elements from their personal space.



Figure 1- Mother and 10 year old daughter

A low level of MR will also be indicated in various phenomena and formal elements. For example, one marker (out of many) of a low level of MR could be when the shared area is not painted, or when one partner covers the other's images, or when one of the partners is over-dominant. The following image by a father and his 7-year-old boy refers to the son's destruction of the father's images in the shared space of the painting. Another painting of a mother and her 9-year-old daughter is an example of a low level of MR, in which they both refused to paint together in the common space of the painting. It is important to note that these examples illustrate only a limited dimension of the manual, while the JPP manual includes many markers and phenomena pertinent to each relationship scale.



Figure 2- Father and 7-year-old boy



Figure 3- Mother and 9-year-old daughter

The research

The JPP research had several aims. The first two aims were researched using quantitative methods, and the third aim was addressed using a qualitative case-study method. The first aim was validation of the JPP in order to transform a clinical art-based assessment into an evidence-based assessment tool. The second aim was to predict children's adjustment based on the implicit aspects of relationships, beyond the prediction of explicit aspects of relations and beyond measures of temperament. The third aim was to understand the dynamics of the implicit relationships during the JPP.

Participants included 87 mother-child dyads (43 boys and 44 girls) that underwent the joint painting procedure. The quality of the mother-child relationship was assessed using two methods: verbal questionnaires to measure explicit aspects of relations (supervision, autonomy, and close relationships), and the JPP for evaluating implicit aspects of relations. The child's temperament was assessed through the mothers' reports, and children's adjustment (externalization problems, internalization problems, learning problems and social skills) was assessed through both mothers' and teachers' reports. The research was approved by the University of Haifa's Ethics committee, and all participants signed consent forms.

Understanding the clinical process

The qualitative and quantitative aspects of the research indicated that mutual recognition was an important skill to support adjustment and good relationships between parents and children. In the course of observing the clinical interaction of the JPP it appeared that the JPP emerged as a central vehicle that invites mutual recognition and hence instigates change in the relationships. The JPP appeared as an intervention process since most of the participants expressed great enjoyment, and reported a stronger sense of closeness.

It seems that the JPP process invited mutual regulation between both partners, and mentalization processes, which lead to mutual recognition. The joint painting encouraged mutual regulation modes, in which the parent is carefully attuned, recognizing and responding to the child's sensory-emotional expression. Through the artistic action, the parent regulates the

child's feelings and sometimes vice versa (Tronick 2003). While painting together, both parent and child may have experiences of mentalization, facilitating significant understandings of the self and other. This process was made possible through the creative activity, the symbolic product and the act of observation of these two (Taylor Buck and Havsteen-Franklin 2013). While working with parents and observing the process and the product, the therapist may invite the parent to think about this particular child, including her needs, strengths and difficulties in the context of the relationship. These processes lead the partners, parent and child, to experience mutual recognition. In the creative process they can express aspects of their inner world and simultaneously observe the other's inner world in terms of intentions, feelings and thoughts (Fonagy 2015; Taylor Buck and Havsteen-Franklin 2013). The mutual recognition that evolves can lead to a transformative process during the creative encounter. A short example will demonstrate this idea.

Michael and his mother- a transformative process

Michael, a 10 year old boy, came to the JPP meeting excited and immediately wanted to start painting. He marked his personal space (on the left) and began to paint. Soon enough he covered over layers of paint that became mixed and turned brown and grey. Michael happily drew the path. He made a coloured ladder-shape towards the personal space of his mother; however, he was so excited and uncontrolled that he covered both paths (his and his mother's). As they drew together, Michael continued to mix colours on the paper, and covered everything with both brushes and his hands. He almost covered over the mother's space.

At this point his mother said that she could see that he was very excited (mentalization) and asked Michael to not cover everything. She suggested he choose a particular image to remain uncovered at the end of the joint process (regulation). Michael stopped colouring, and asked to paint a house. He was able to paint in a controlled manner with a pencil (top right), and his mother offered to paint the roof. The mother painted a red roof with her fingers in the same style as Michael (mutual regulation).

Michael was impressed that his mother painted with her fingers, and he painted windows, a door and added circles with his fingers, with a relatively

high level of control. Michael added a chimney and smoke and both were excited about the house they created together. Toward the end of the process, Michael looked at the whole picture, took a brush tip and drew a face in his area, which was a clear and distinct representation. The process ended with a conversation about the fun experience they shared.

In terms of temperament, Michael was reported as having a low level of effortful control. In terms of explicit relations, Michael and his mother reported a high level of warmth and close relations. In terms of implicit relationships, they both expressed a high level of motivation for relationships. However, in the beginning of the process, Michael expressed low mutual recognition and a quite high level of implicit anger and aggression towards his mother.

It seemed that the combination of a high level of expression of anger and aggression and weak effortful control did not allow Michael to produce an image at the beginning of the process, and he expressed a very low level of mutual recognition towards his mother. However, later in the process, the mother tried to regulate Michael through her suggestions and later through her colouring the roof with her fingers. The mother had created a regulatory experience, while recognising Michael's needs (selecting the image and drawing in his style). It seems that this process led Michael to transform from a low level of mutual recognition into an ability to express himself while respecting and acknowledging his mother's images.

Parallel to this process, a mentalization process occurred: The mother was able to accept his energy and Michael was able to observe her way of being. Only then could Michael return to his space and paint an image, which represented him as separated and present in the relationship. It seems that Michael felt that his mother was able to appreciate his creative language, which gave room for intensive expression, and at the same time allowed him to experience success and feelings of self-worth (the image of the face).

During the JPP process, implicit representations of the relationship were enacted, met and changed (Stern 1995). From the joint meeting and the interplay of representations, a transformation experience was created when both partners experienced themselves as part of a new relational space. The JPP enabled an artistic co-creation: connection and transformation (Tronick 2003). For example, Michael no longer experienced himself only as

destructive, but as being capable of creative expression. The mother experienced herself as having the ability to communicate with Michael in a receptive manner, while helping him express himself in a regulated way. The experience of the transformation occurred individually, but also enabled the creation of a new relational space, which contained playfulness and creativity through authentic expression between Michael and his mother.



Figure 4 - The painting of Michael and his mother

Conclusion

The JPP seems to represent the essence of parent-child art therapy, as it allows for a creative space to enact nonverbal representations of the relationship, while allowing these representations to change during the process. Furthermore, the JPP emerged also as a central vehicle that invites mutual recognition and meta-cognition and hence instigates change in the relationships. The present research of the JPP utilizes both quantitative and qualitative research, as well as clinical understanding of the joint painting

process. Validating an art-based tool, in the context of rigorous research, is vital for the art therapy field.

Biography

Dr. Tami Gavron is an Art Psychotherapist and Supervisor. She is a lecturer at The Graduate School of Creative Art Therapies at the University of Haifa. She is a coordinator of the Art-Based Supervision Program. She is working at a private practice in the north of Israel; specializing in Parent-Child Art psychotherapy, art-based supervision, and art therapy with trauma survivors.

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