

## Female Teenage Delinquent's Experiences of Expressive Arts Therapy

<sup>1</sup>A.S.M. Sh. Marzety Adibah, <sup>2</sup>K. Jusoff and <sup>3</sup>M.S. Nor Shakirah

<sup>1</sup>Centre for Socioeconomic Development, Kenyir Research Institute,  
Universiti Malaysia Terengganu, 21030 Kuala, Terengganu, Malaysia

<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Resource Science and Technology, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak,  
94300 Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia

<sup>3</sup>School of Social and Economic Development, Universiti Malaysia Terengganu,  
21030 Kuala, Terengganu, Malaysia

---

**Abstract:** The objective of this study is to evaluate the female teenage delinquent's experiences of expressive arts therapy group counselling. This research uses a qualitative phenomenology method. Ten female teenagers involved in delinquent behaviour are purposely chosen as the participants. The participant's ages were between 16 and 18. Each of the participants went through eight sessions of group expressive art therapy, deep interview, observation and diary writing. The analysis produced six themes: Incentive for creativity, emotional release, opportunity, awareness, art and healing and self-discovery. The findings indicated that the expressive arts therapy has given meanings to the participant's lives. This study implies that the usage of therapy in the process to understand the life experiences of the participants comprehensively and holistically.

**Key words:** Expressive art therapy, delinquent teenagers, phenomenology, group counselling, multimodal art

---

### INTRODUCTION

Expressive art therapy is an approach that utilizes various multimodal art to explore the life experience of a client in which art is the catalyst for the changes. These changes include the rise of internal, personal development, self-healing, self-expression, therapeutic process, cultural awareness and community building (Miller, 2013). Expressive art therapy, also referred to as intermodal expressive therapy, creative arts therapy or interdisciplinary art therapy is a practice that integrates stories, songs, music, movement, dance, drama and visual arts which foster human emotional development, healing and growth (Akins *et al.*, 2003; Bella and Serlin, 2013). Rogers (2011) explains that expressive art therapy helps individuals and groups to undergo a transformation that will help them cope with internal and personal challenges, community and global unwaveringly. Expressive art therapy is utilized not only in individual and group counselling but also in family counselling. It is a combination approach that can be implemented in numerous distinct places.

Group art therapy has been implemented with adolescent in various places to cover diverse issues. Previous research has includes studies to improve

academic performance and participation (Wadson and Wirtz, 2005), identification and emotional expression in appropriate manner such as anger and aggressiveness (Hanes, 2000; Hartz and Thick, 2005; Wadson and Wirtz, 2005), reduce symptoms of anxiety (Tibbetts and Stone, 1990), reduce symptoms of depression and sadness (Hanes, 2000; Testa and McCarthy, 2004; Tibbetts and Stone, 1990), issues of losses and grief (Testa and McCarthy, 2004), increase self-confident and self-concept (Epping and Willmuth, 1994; Graham, 1994), decrease Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and trauma (Hartz and Thick, 2005; Rosal *et al.*, 1997).

Previous studies indicate that arts-based intervention is very effective in stress and traumatic treatment on both children and adolescent. Painful and traumatic images and memories are accessed through intervention based on arts and creativity which helps in reducing symptoms of stress (Appleton, 2001). A study conducted by Sh Marzety Adibah, Baharuddin, Raba'Aton Adawiah and Zakaria proved the effectiveness of using expressive art therapy in reducing anger, anxiety, depression and stress among drug addicts where the findings showed a significant decrease in the mean scores of anger, anxiety, depression and stress for the treatment group compared to controlled group.

Table 1: Expressive arts therapy session

Sessions	Technique	Explanations
1	“Collage of name”	A collage was designed to represent themselves
2 and 3	“Life map sketch”	Create a guided imagery to imagine a map and a journey that they are and had walk through
4	“Expressive creation on extreme Positive and negative feelings	Identifying the feelings and the positive and negative thinking and transfer them into a creative result according to the comfort of each person
5 and 6	“Butterfly stories”	Choose the image of a butterfly that were prepared and decorate it with individual creativity by imagining and relating the butterfly story to their own story
7	“Wave movement and drawings”	Do the wave movements while closing the eyes and imagining yourself to be on the waves. After 10 min, draw the waves
8	“Diary writing”	Appreciate and see the art results that were created and share experiences, exhibit and present all the arts including the diary writings that were created outside of the sessions

Delinquent behaviour among adolescents is a social issue faced by our society today. Past researches have also found that adolescents with emotional health problems have a high tendency to engage in delinquent behavior such as drug addiction in the future (McCord *et al.*, 2003). These emotional health problems consist of behavior/conduct disorders, attention and hyperactivity disorder, acute depression disorder, rejection and resistance. Prior to detecting their inner emotions it is important to understand their perceptions, conducts and feelings. In this context, the researcher tries to explore the female teenage delinquents’ experiences of expressive arts therapy group counselling.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

**Research design:** A qualitative research method using phenomenology approach is used in this research. Phenomenology focuses on the process of defining the meaning of a phenomena interaction (Merriam, 2001). When the researcher wants to understand the underlying meaning as well as the essence of a experience together with how the study participant understand it, the appropriate method to use it is phenomenology (Grbich, 2007). Ten adolescents from a rehabilitation centre in Malaysia were involved in this study. The participant’s aged were between 16 and 18 year. The participants were selected using purposive sampling. In this sampling, the researchers chose teenagers involved in delinquent behavior to understand the phenomenon of juvenile delinquent behavior and their life experience. All the name of participants in this study has been change.

**Procedure:** Notes were taken during the observation on each subject that was examined in each of the eight group’s sessions carried out in the duration of six months. All the sessions that were conducted have been simplified in Table 1.

**Data collection:** Data collection for this study are from in depth interview, observation, diary writing and participant’s works of art. This is a triangulation technique of various sources and data reinforcement (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The interview processed in this study based on the interview model developed by Seidman (1998). Researchers also used open ended questions in interviews conducted to encourage participants to share openly. Researchers will also explore the participant’s answers. In addition, data were also obtained from verbal and nonverbal observation of each participant in the group counseling. According to Creswell (2003), observation is a technique to get a true picture of the phenomenon under study. Observation is a method to obtain information directly from the original source. Researchers in this study observe the movement, facial expression and speech of participants in each counseling session. Besides that, the data also obtained through artwork participants during counseling sessions as well as diaries of participants.

**Validity and reliability:** Reliability and validity are achieved in the study throughout the duration of 6 months in the fieldwork audit tracks and peer reviews. Patton (2002) and Merriam (2002) have identified four types of applicable triangulation in a qualitative study. In this context, the triangulation of data is done through 3 series of in depth interviews, observations and document analysis of journal writing, paintings, participant’s artwork and also the researcher’s notes

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A number of themes and subthemes emerged from this study and the themes are presented in Table 2.

**Theme 1 (incentive for creativity):** Most of the participants admitted that expressive art therapy sessions conducted were different and has its own uniqueness. Lily (not real name) agreed to this: The counsellor’s approach has never been done by other counsellors, it is indeed very different.



Fig. 1: Salina’s life map skeeth

Table 2: Theme and subtheme

Theme	Subtheme
Incentive for creativity	Uniqueness and differences, meaningfulness, reflective and relating experiences
Emotional release	Expressive and spontaneous sharing
Opportunity	Building new life, instilling hopes and enthusiasm
Awareness	Reality, divergence and self change
Art and healing	Reduce stress, emotional stability
Self-discovery	Understand other’s experiences

Creative relationships generated by the participants has motivated them to relate and reflect on their own experiences. Salina (not real name) relates that life mapping session has made her reflect on her life and realize her history (Fig. 1). According to Salina:

“The second and third session are suitable to investigate and identify the root of one’s damage. I used this technique to look back and reflect on my journey in life that led me into this social problem and how I ended up here”

The artistic activity also has its own meaning to the participants. Khaty (not real name) stated that various artistic activities done were meaningful in regards to a creative relationship which have given them an awareness in their lives. Khaty said:

“This therapy is very meaningful to me as I gain an awareness about my life and how I came to be social what I should do to change my life”

**Theme 2 (emotional release):** Six out of ten participants stated that the use of expressive art therapy has enabled them to be expressive and share spontaneously to gain emotional tranquility. For Zaza (not real name), artistic activity and creativity helped her to reflect on her past experiences and share spontaneously the pent up emotions because she felt that her burdens were reduced with the artistic activities created.



Fig. 2: Khaty’s expressive creation on extreme positive and negative feelings

“The pent up emotions are finally released and with that release, gone are all burdens that I have been carrying all this while”

Khaty (Fig. 2) shared her sadness that has been haunting her whenever she thinks of her life. When she was suddenly engulfed by extreme sadness, all she could do was cry to overcome it. When asked to explain in detail about the artistic creativity that represents her positive and negative feelings, Khaty shared her life experiences with tears as she remembered what her father did to her.

**Theme 3 (opportunity):** Participants mostly shared that the therapy has given them a new opportunity. This is relevant to the participants in this study as they are given a chance to build a new life after undergoing the expressive art therapy session. Kamelia (not real name) said that she is going to start a new life and her experience in using the therapy has open a new chance and opportunity for her to understand her past which gives her hopes to rebuild her life. Kamelia expresses that:

“This session has taught me a lesson and I really regretted the mistakes I did in the past...I feel that I have gained a new hope in life”

Similar to Kamelia, Rina (not real name) too feels the same. The pressure she experienced in life led her astray and chose her friends to rely on. However, rina has built up a new hope in her life (Fig. 3) that one of these days she would become someone like a rose which is wanted by people for the pleasant smell. Each individual has an inner doubt but the therapy provides them an opportunity to have faith to believe in themselves. Creative arts that were produced by the participants have given them faith and inspiration to believe in themselves. For Salina (not a real name), the creativity of a butterfly story (Fig. 4 and 5) has given her full confidence on herself. She noted that:

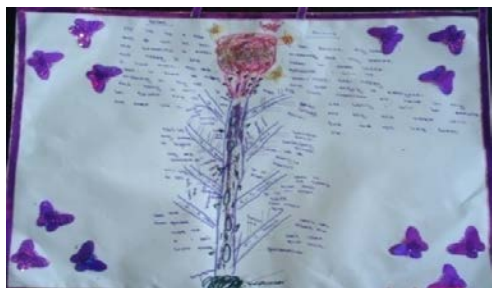


Fig. 3: Rina's life map sketch



Fig. 6: Lily's wave movement and drawings



Fig. 4: Salina's butterfly story



Fig. 7: Rina's expressive creation on extreme positive and negative feelings

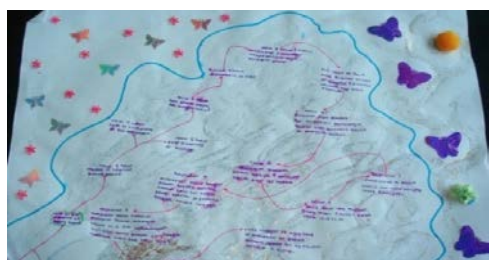


Fig. 5: Fifi's life map sketch

"Using a butterfly as a symbol to represent myself, I now have faith that my life is very much like a butterfly, an inspiration that elevates my soul

**Theme 4 awareness:** The study participants also shared their experiences that using the expressive arts therapy has instilled a deep sense of awareness in them. Most of them have seen the differences and changes that took place before and after the therapy sessions. Fifi (not real name) shared her experience in which both techniques, creativity and art have fostered a deep sense of awareness in her. She recited that from the sessions:

"From the sessions (life map sketch) I have identified the problems/issues that I have been through since I was a child until i

Reached the age of 16. Looking back made me realized that all those problems have led me to negative directions in life. I hope to be more on the positive sides after this"

For Lily (not real name), she started to be aware of the negative feelings that she experienced had its ups and downs and that every challenge faced by each individual is just a part of life (Fig. 6) Lily claimed:

My life is like a wave, there is an ups and downs and so is my life, realized that now

All the participants in the study have shared their experiences on their awareness of the changes and differences transpired in their lives after using the expressive art therapy. Rina (Fig. 7) revealed her awareness of the changes and differences in her after using the therapy. She began to be able to control her feelings of anger, resentment, hate, sadness and disappointment that existed within her. She wrote:

"I can also control my negative feelings such as stress, emotional, depression, rage and hitting people. I can keep all my negative feelings in check and learn positively"

**Theme 5 (arts and healing):** Another important result expressed by participants is through arts and healing. Most of the participants in this study deal with the



Fig. 8: Khaty's wave movement and drawings



Fig. 9: Kamelia's butterfly story

psychological issues like trauma and emotional disorders. It can be seen that, participants finally managed to express some change in themselves after undergoing an expressive art therapy session. A large number of the participants disclosed that the experience in artistic therapy in group counselling is a technique that enables them to stabilize their emotion. Khaty (Fig. 8) explained that she has shed all the negative feelings and resentment that exist within her. Her emotional ups and downs are also stabilized. According to Khaty:

“Honestly, I feel so grateful for being able to attend this session because from here, I learned how to manage the emotions that have been haunting my life before. Once I was depressed, very emotional but now that I can control the emotions. I feel revived”

All participants expressed a sense of relief after participating in expressive art therapy counseling sessions. Expressing and sharing their feelings through drawings, writings, used objects and certain symbols produced have finally given them relief. Kamelia (Fig. 9) recounted her experience of relief resulted from full participation in the therapy. Kamelia stated:

“After joining this counselling session, I feel relieved and my problems lessen. My burden is lifted like a cocoon free from its confinement”

**Theme 6 (self-discovery):** The use of artistic creativity in group sessions is a method that has given high self-discovery among the participants which has ultimately increased their self-esteem. Increased self-esteem strengthens their ability to clearly articulate their intimate world, feelings, hopes and aspirations. They generate creativity that forms a strong relationship which binds the similarity and understanding among them. Experiences recounted by each participant through creativity and artistic handiwork is a mode in providing important information for them to understand each other's experience. All of the study participants said that they could understand the experiences of others. Storytelling and sharing through creativity they have produced is very effective for them to fully understand their own experience as well as other's in the group.

Through the techniques of collage and life map sketch, 10 participants informed that they can place their life experiences from childhood until they were admitted into a rehabilitation center. They were also able to fully understand and appreciate one's life experience of those who share the same fate and were involved in delinquent behaviours. This has created a strong bond among themselves.

The findings of the study gave a complete overview of the teen's experiences through the expressive art therapy conducted. In addition, the findings also provided an explanation to the life experiences that the female teenage delinquents went through. Several themes emerged from this study; creative incentive being one of them. Most of the study participants have felt the difference and uniqueness of expressive art therapy, how it gives them meaning, helps them to reflect as well as relate their life experiences creatively. Apart from that, nearly everyone of the study participants have experienced emotional release through this therapy. They are able to share their life experiences spontaneously and also express everything that has been buried for a long time. The expressive art therapy has presented the youths with opportunities to instil hope and passion to building a new life. Following that, they managed to breathe life into a new beginning through this expressive art therapy. Most of the participants felt like they have just awoken from a dream leading them to an awareness on the self-changes occurred. Results from the observation, interviews and diary writings that were carried out, indicated that a high sense of awareness have led to a significant change and difference in the participants.



The results are similar to the findings described by Romanoff and Thompson (2006) where they stated that the expressive arts is one way for individuals to explore their feelings and experience to create. Furthermore, art also helps them to form a view on the world around them or an awareness of their own world (Romanoff and Thompson, 2006). Other than that, the therapy also presented with arts and healing experiences to the participants in this study. Most of the participants admitted that their emotions have become more stable and they felt relief. Finally, with the expressive art therapy, the study participants also experienced self-discovery whereby it helped them to increase their self-esteem. This experience also acted as a support in articulating their inner world, hopes and aspirations. In conjunction to that, they felt accepted, appreciated and loved as they felt the sufferings of others.

Based on the discussion of the findings, it is obvious that expressive art therapy has offered an opportunity to individuals to express their feelings both verbally and non-verbally apart from allowing them to face their issues consciously and unconsciously. These findings are consistent with Wilson and Daigle (2013) who stated that the use of expressive art therapy has enabled individuals to express in a creative way what has been repressed for a long time and something that they have no awareness of.

The study participants also get to share their life experiences more comfortably through their creative productions in this expressive art therapy. Overall, expressive art therapy group counselling illustrates the positive experiences of the participants. The themes exposed and discussed have given us a clear picture of what these female teenage delinquents experienced in their lives through the expressive art therapy.

### **CONCLUSION**

The interactions with those experiences have provided insights on the issues of youth's involvement in delinquent behaviours to the researcher. The research findings also concluded that using the expressive art therapy has been an intervention that can be explored further by the counsellors in delving in and understanding the life experiences of participants as with the 10 female teenage delinquents in this study. The usage of this therapy also demonstrated a way of interaction with the phenomenological method carried out for the purpose of this study in the process to understand the life experiences of the participants comprehensively and holistically. The expressive art therapy is still a new innovation in the field of counseling.

### **IMPLICATIONS**

Various implications of the study can be discussed as a result of this qualitative study. First, the findings in this study can be used as a guide for counselors and counseling discipline to understand the use of expressive arts therapy in this study. The utilization of this expressive art therapy can be practiced by counselors since this therapy is a continuation of art and creativity that may be combined with any conventional theory according to the counselor's convenience and comfort. Second, the findings of this study can be used as an injection and guidance to researchers in Malaysia especially in carrying out similar research studies in the future. It can also be used by adolescent to reflect on and better understand their own behaviour and so help them make more positive choices.

### **REFERENCES**

- Akins, S., M. Adams, C. McKinney, H. McKinney and L. Rose *et al.*, 2003. *Expressive Arts Therapy: Creative Process in Art and Life*. Parlow Publishers, Boone, North Carolina.
- Appleton, V., 2001. Avenues of hope: Art therapy and the resolution of Trauma. *Art Ther.*, 18: 6-13.
- Bella, K.A. and I.A. Serlin, 2013. Expressive and creative arts therapies. *Wiley Blackwell Handb. Transpersonal Psychol.*, 1: 529-543.
- Creswell, J.W., 2003. *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Method Approaches*. 2nd Edn., SAGE Publications Ltd., London, ISBN: 9780761924418, Pages: 246.
- Epping, J.E. and M.E. Willmuth, 1994. Art-therapy in the rehabilitation of adolescents with spinal-cord injuries-a case-study. *Am. J. Art Ther.*, 32: 79-82.
- Graham, J., 1994. The art of emotionally disturbed adolescents: Designing a drawing program to address violent imagery. *Am. J. Art Ther.*, 32: 115-121.
- Grbich, C., 2007. *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Introduction*. Sage Publication, London.
- Hanes, M.J., 2000. Catharsis in art therapy: A case study of a sexually abused adolescent. *Am. J. Art Ther.*, 38: 70-74.
- Hartz, L. and L. Thick, 2005. Art therapy strategies to raise self-esteem in female juvenile offenders: A comparison of art psychotherapy and art as therapy approaches. *Art Ther.*, 22: 70-80.
- McCord, J., C.S. Widom and N.A. Crowell, 2003. *Juvenile Crime, Juvenile Justice*. National Academy Press, Washington, USA.

- Merriam, S.B., 2001. *Qualitative Research and Case Study Application in Education*. Jossey-Bass Publisher, San Francisco, California.
- Merriam, S.B., 2002. *Qualitative Research in Practice*. Jossey-Bass Publisher, San Francisco, California.
- Miles, M.B. and A. Huberman, 1994. *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook*. 2nd Edn., Sage, Thousand Oaks, California.
- Miller, L., 2013. *SpiritArts: Transformation through Creating Art, Music and Dance*. Expressive Therapy Press, Phoenixville, Pennsylvania.
- Patton, M.Q., 2002. *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*. 3rd Edn., Sage Publication, California, ISBN: 0-7619-1971-6, Pages: 598.
- Rogers, N., 2011. *The Creative Connection for Groups: Person-Centered Expressive Arts for Healing and Social Change*. Science and Behavior Books, California.
- Romanoff, B.D. and B.E. Thompson, 2006. Meaning construction in palliative care: The use of narrative, ritual and the expressive arts. *Am. J. Hospice Palliative Med.*, 23: 309-316.
- Rosal, M.L., S.M. Vislisel and S. Neece, 1997. Keeping students in school: An art therapy program to benefit ninth-grade students. *Art Ther.*, 14: 30-36.
- Seidman, I., 1998. *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Research in Education and the Social Science*. 2nd Edn., Teachers College Press, London.
- Testa, N. And J.B. McCarthy, 2004. The use of murals in preadolescent inpatient groups: An art therapy approach to cumulative Trauma. *Art Ther.*, 21: 38-41.
- Tibbetts, T.J. and B. Stone, 1990. Short-term art therapy with seriously emotionally disturbed adolescents. *Arts Psychother.*, 17: 139-146.
- Wadson, H. and G. Wirtz, 2005. The hockey/art alliance. *Art Ther.*, 22: 155-160.
- Wilson, B. and J.Z. Daigle, 2013. The use of expressive arts as experienced by high school counselor trainees. *J. Creativity Mental Health*, 8: 2-20.