Helping adolescents develop self-realization using art therapy

Xiaoyang Fang¹*

¹Department of Art & Art Professions, New York University.

*Correspondence: Xiaoyang Fang, New York University, 34 Stuyvesant Street, New York, USA. Email: xyf200@nyu.edu

Keywords: art therapy; adolescence; psychodynamic theory

This report explored psychodynamic developments that adolescents undergo in their process of self-realization and self-identification, including separation-individuation and ego development. The paper made a case for art therapy as a resource and non-confrontational outlet to guide adolescents through their development and search for their self-identity. The role of the art therapist is presented as an alternative source of support and containment which may be lacking through the adolescents’ peers and parents. The paper ultimately argued that art therapy had many therapeutic qualities that could help the adolescent in their search and consolidation of the self.

It is widely agreed upon that adolescence is a highly volatile period in life [1]. The adolescent not only undergoes dramatic physical and biological changes but also faces an inescapable psychological conundrum. Within the transitional phase from childhood to adulthood the adolescent has to individuate from their parents and construct an idiosyncratic self-identity based on the projections of their family, peers, and society at large, all the while replacing their comfortable dependency with a load of mature responsibility. Risk taking behavior, insecurities, and hyper vigilance toward both external and internal stimuli are only logical consequences.

Adolescents are often seen as rebellious, troublesome, and defiant towards authority [2]. These qualities can sometimes make them seem like an intimidating population to work with in therapy. The paper will start with the theoretical substantiation of why the turbulent self-realization process is part of the adolescent's essential needs, and will then move on to explore the unique role that art therapy as well as the art therapist can play in positively affecting the adolescent in his or her journey of finding and establishing the self.

Establishing the self

There are two times in life when people's ego development goes through a significant phase that is sometimes referred to as an "inner break with the past" [3] and other times as the process of separation-individuation [4]. The first time is around the first year of life when the child ends a previously symbiotic phase with their mother and starts to develop limits as they differentiate themselves as separate individuals. Prior to this time, an infant is suggested to feel one with the mother, who serves as the only barrier between them and the rest of the world.

The separation part of this process is necessary for the subsequent individuation, which refers to the development of the infant's ego, their sense of identity, and their cognitive abilities [4]. The second cycle of separation-individuation, which is a more intense version of the first, happens in adolescence where the child moves toward financial independency and is to further solidify, if not finalize, their individual identity. The successful completion of this process is of utmost importance should the adolescent wish to move into adulthood with a stable sense of self. As keenly observed by Blos, common struggles during this phase are "occasioned by the inability to give up the gratifying parent on whose omnipotence the child came to depend rather than developing his own faculties" [3].

The disillusionment about the self and the limited attainment in reality are but typical sensations during the normative crisis we call adolescence. As the adolescent undergoes the period of mourning where their ego starts to be liberated from
the early lost objects, they are simultaneously searching for new love-objects. And although this process is an exciting and necessary one, it also opens up unknown horizons to the adolescent, which comes paired with a mix of hope and fear, as well as the threat of a sense of new dependency [3]. In time of such perceived uncertainty, the adolescent often erects a number of defenses, including uniformism, denial, intellectualization, repression and isolation. Though healthy and often necessary, some adolescents run the risk of taking their defenses too far, to the extent that their behaviors become borderline pathological. It will later be discussed how in therapy these defense maneuvers can be made conscious and be turned into healthy modes of behavior that service the developing ego.

The role of parents, peers and society

The adolescent's social context including their family, peers and the society they live in plays a large role in the progression and the end product of their self-realization. As earlier indicated, the crucial establishment of a self-identity is much related to the adolescent's separation from the parent. A plethora of literature, however, supports the idea that the parents do not always make this progress very easy. Families with a child or children undergoing adolescence often experience a period of chaos, which results partially from the parents' fear of losing the love of the child and their authority over them [5], partially from their envy towards them [2], and partially from the inability to establish firm enough boundaries for the adolescents to bounce their rebelliousness off of [6]. Furthermore, parents are said to be narcissistically vulnerable as they are dethroned by their adolescent children and bombarded by their unpredictable and fluctuating moods and ego states [5]. They feel out of control, which is a feeling that is in turn projected onto the already fickle adolescent. To stop the perpetuation of the vicious circle, parents need to separate their anxieties and the unresolved issues from their own adolescence with that of their teens. They need to form strong coalitions and embody empathy and firmness so that the adolescent can feel supported and understood in a world where few other things make sense. Unfortunately, parents often either surrender or distance themselves from the adolescent's problem or overindulge in commanding their children to "be happy", thereby denying their pain and adding to the teen's feeling of not being understood.

Riley posits that adolescents rely on peers in their process to individuate and separate from parents [6]. At times, however, "the lack of parenting and limit setting leads to uncritical acceptance and attachment to peer groups" [5], which in some cases leads to delinquent and/or gang-related activities. This tendency of the adolescent to resort to peer-licensed behavior is coined by Blos as uniformism, which "permits him (the adolescent) to divorce feeling from action in the ego's struggle against the drives and against infantile object ties (the parents)" [3]. There is little controversy about the fact that peers are, and should be, a fundamental source of the adolescent's development. Yet it must be acknowledged that there are times where the acceptable code of peer behavior is malicious and potentially dangerous to both the self and society.

Contemporary media and societal values also cannot be overlooked in their influence on this subject matter. Voelker and colleagues, for instance, found that mass media has a salient influence on adolescents' beliefs about perceived body ideals, often leading to weight-related bullying, overemphasis on body weight and appearance, and eating disorders stemming from pressures to conform [7]. In many cases, the confusion of today's youths stems from the discrepancies between the adolescents' expectations, the expectations of society, and the commercial images projected by the media.

Another study, which explored perceptions of adolescents among teachers and social workers found that these professionals often regarded adolescents as having problematic self-conceptions, being irresponsible, being materialistic, being calculative, and not having long-term life goals [8]. Anthony skillfully addresses the self-fulfilling prophecy where adolescents act negatively because they are believed to be troublesome and difficult; and the more they act out on the pessimistic societal expectations of them, the stronger the stereotypes become [2]. Extreme manifestations of adolescent behavior furthermore gain great publicity and as such may generate the impression that they are the statistically expectable modes of teenage behavior when in reality they are rare. The power of mass
media is so vast that sometimes it manipulates "parents (to) respond to their adolescent children as if they were embodiments of negative ideas rather than real people" [2]. The lyrics "I'm not anti-social, society is anti-me" from the song Two-sided politics by the band Suicidal Tendencies neatly exemplifies the dichotomy of rebelliousness and helplessness that is often felt by the adolescent. Evidently this is not a healthy cycle of thought and, if not addressed, it will almost certainly impact the adolescent negatively in their separation-individuation process. Many a time, children go through the period of adolescence burdened with the idea that they are bad, if not doomed in the face of making daunting life choices.

Art therapy with adolescents
In dealing with an overwhelmingly charged psychological reality, the adolescent is bound to feel insecurities, doubt, and guilt towards anger both repressed or manifested. Teenagers are also sensitive about their image, particularly with their peers, and will often put themselves at emotional risk rather than confess that they need help from a "shrink" [9]. Furthermore, their view of traditional or "talking" psychotherapies has been shaped by the movies, and they often think that these therapies are only for serious mental cases. Compared to traditional therapies, art therapy is less confrontational, less familiar, and less judgmental [6]. The adolescent has fewer preconceived ideas of therapy and will be more easily able to explore and express their feelings. Additionally, self-exploration is a process that becomes more tangible when it is documented in artworks. Seeing the progression of their journey and having their every step validated through imagery will help the adolescent achieve a greater sense of autonomy and self-control [5]. This paves the way for the beginning of an integrated identity, which then naturally reduces the antisocial symptoms that adolescents are mostly primarily referred to therapy for.

As a form of psychotherapy, art therapy often involves both the creation of art and the discovery of its meaning. Individuals are encouraged to visualize, and then create, the thoughts and emotions that they cannot talk about [10]. Rather than using words, they are asked to illustrate the difficulties that have brought them to therapy using techniques such as drawing, painting, shaping clay, and collaging. The art therapist does not interpret or judge the art piece, and the adolescent is free to share as much of the meaning of their art as they choose. Art therapy thus not only provides a structure and boundaries within which adolescents can vent their anger and frustrations, but also offers a venue through which teens can safely express emotions that are too powerful or incomprehensible for words.

Adolescents are also particularly attuned to symbols and graphic depictions, which can be reasoned about on two levels. First of all, they are suspicious of the adult world around them, and sometimes justifiably so. Making art allows adolescents to keep a degree of secrecy and to stay within the safe realm of the metaphor. It also allows for them to express some of the contents of their active fantasy life, which studies have shown is at its peak during adolescence [3, 11, 12]. Many of the decisions made during adolescence are furthermore based on spontaneous emotion rather than rationalized reasoning [3], and as such may be better expressed using art as language rather than via verbal communication.

Secondly, the act of illustrating makes external the internal turmoil. In other words, the depicted behavior becomes the problem rather than the individual themselves, which permits the teen to take some distance from the charged material [9]. Separating the individual from the act helps the adolescent realize that it may not be them that is inherently bad, but the circumstance they are in, or the decisions that they have made. The art, in this case, will serve as a mirror for self-reflection. Once the adolescent accepts themselves as an agent with the locus of control within themselves, they can then go on to make positive and self-enforcing changes in their thought and behavioral patterns.

In many art therapy cases, an image will come first and the understanding of the visualization will come later. As opposed to traditional verbal therapy where question and response happen in direct fashion, the delayed interpretation of the presented contents gives the adolescent the freedom and the control to determine themselves when the time is right to tackle the issue on a deeper level. This act not only enhances the individual's sense of agency but also stands allegorically for the reflection time that the adolescent should be encouraged to take before
engaging in impulsive acts. The artwork in this case may not only serve as a buffer time-wise, but also in terms of emotional catharsis. By expressing one's urges in visual imagery, the adolescent is circumventing the ego-restrictive defense mechanism of asceticism and using the healthier alternative of intellectualization, thereby displacing potentially negative affect into a more socially accepting medium. Seeing the artwork can also have a containing effect on the adolescent. The paper or clay or any other medium that the artwork is made on/with can metaphorically hold the charged material for the adolescent.

**Role of the art therapist**

Any therapist working with an adolescent population must first and foremost recognize that adolescence is the age at which resistance towards therapy is the greatest. More often than not the adolescent will associate seeing a therapist with having a mental problem, which is especially counterintuitive and frightening taken into account their dire search for the recognition of being normal. The art therapist needs to acknowledge that although there may be common themes that adolescents struggle with, such as bodily changes and confusion in the psychic structure, no two youths develop at the same rate physically, emotionally, or intellectually [6]. Blos talks about a heightened keenness of sense organs as adolescents made a cathetic shift away from their parents en route to their development of self [3]. He states that during adolescence, "internal events are experienced as outer perceptions, and their quality often approximates hallucinations". This not only occasionally presents the adolescent as having pseudo-psychotic functioning, but also contributes to their idea of being the only one in the world who feels the way they do. The art therapist needs to validate the adolescent's vulnerable state even when - perhaps especially if - it is disguised in a repressed state (denial), actively avoided (isolation), or glorified (intellectualization).

Defenses as such are neatly expressed the song Break Down the Walls by Youth of Today, the first few lines of which read, "I used to think that labels were just symbols of pride, but over time I've seen they only serve to divide; it's so easy to judge people by the way they seem to be". What the song exemplifies next to the aspect of social judgment and the walls that adolescents have erected to separate themselves, is their acute attunement towards symbols. This prevailing adolescent trait of creativity, however, is often neglected and thus it is the art therapist's job to try and engage and channel this talent and utilize it as a creative outlet for conflictual material [13].

Before this can happen, the therapist needs to be able to establish a relationship with the adolescent, which is difficult since most adolescents are not just distrustful of adults but also resistant to authority. It is therefore important for the therapist to take a natural and minimally-threatening approach where the form and shape of art therapy must conform to the adolescent's world view [6]. Sometimes this means that the art therapist must be prepared to offer therapy using non-conventional art materials or more modern art forms such as digital art [14]. By conforming to methods that the adolescent is more in tune with, the therapist is not just fostering the therapeutic relationship but is also indirectly enforcing an interest in the adolescent's formation of an artist identity. This can be a very grounding and fulfilling experience for the adolescent who is at the early stages of separation-individuation and tremendously confused in their search for a self-identity.

In the beginning phases of identity establishment, the adolescent is in a constant search for reassurance and perceives rejection as one of the biggest threats. The precarious and fragile quality of the early therapeutic alliance is often caused by the adolescent's alienation, which is a pathology of the self that leads to loneliness and estrangement or in more extreme cases despair and helplessness [6]. It is vital then that the therapist accommodates this by accepting and validating whatever material the adolescent brings out in their artwork, even if the content is violent in nature [15], as this could be related to the reality that is experienced by the adolescent.

Some authors argue the therapist's stance of neutrality is the quickest way to form trust with the adolescent [9], while others recommend a personal note when appropriate [5]. Regardless of the level of self-disclosure on the therapist's behalf, the most important factor determining the efficacy of the therapeutic alliance is rooted in the adolescent's
positive feelings towards the therapist as based upon the therapist's ability to accurately appraise the adolescent's ego for its need for understanding and the subsequent gratification for being understood [5]. The support and validation from the art therapist is essential as the adolescent often experiences the world with a unique sensory quality rendering the belief that "Nobody ever felt the way I do" [3]. With the therapist being a sympathetic and perceptive party, the adolescent will not only be able to integrate their experiences and shed their identity as an isolated entity, but also start the journey of establishing the self as an individual whose feelings and fears are not only shared by others, but that most importantly: those feelings are OK.

Conclusions
Separation-individuation has been addressed as being one of the monumental yet necessary progresses during the period of adolescence. The self-realization and identity establishment process is in and of itself tumultuous. Yet the extensive role of parents, peers, and society, throughout this development must be taken with considerable regard. Should this maturation process be disturbed then the adolescent is not only in danger of engaging in delinquent and perilous behavior but also runs the risk of entering adulthood with an unstable and fragmented identity. The desire to find the individual self is processed through stages and through its progression it is important for the adolescent to feel supported and contained.

Art therapy is an ideal resource because it is an expressive and non-confrontational outlet where the adolescent, who is amidst their creative peak, can explore their inner world by externalizing it. The artwork is not just useful for emotional catharsis but can simultaneously serve as metaphorical mirrors and containers, which help the adolescent reflect and control their feelings and perceptions. The art therapist embodies the role of a non-discriminatory, understanding, and supportive adult whose insatiable interest and empathy for the adolescent will aid them indefinitely in their search and consolidation of the self.

References
15. Haeseler MP. Censorship or intervention: But you said we could draw whatever we wanted! Am J Art Ther. 1987; 26:11-20.

Supplementary Information (Discography)

Competing interests: The author declares no competing financial interests.

Received: 16 February 2019; Accepted: 9 April 2019; Published online: 25 April 2019