

ART IN WAR VETERANS

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ABSTRACT

The paper analyzes from a psychological point of view the psychic and emotional changes inside Veteran-Artist who has gone through traumatic war experience, illustrating the path of psychological healing undertaken by Veterans through Art Therapy. The aim of this brief study is to understand how war experience is reflected and has an impact on Veteran's visual expression, but also how much Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) can change the creative processes of those Veterans who were already artists before going to war by generating a different artistic style as an evident manifestation of a psychological distress, as detected in relation to Veterans engaged in psychic and emotional rehabilitation programs, that make use of visual arts as a unique and alternative psychotherapy tool for the PTSD treatment, in integration with other accredited therapeutic methods, for reducing psychical distress induced by traumatic war experiences: as war has had a negative impact on the Veteran's psychic sphere, so Art Therapy may produce mental and emotional changes finalized to the social reintegration of former fighters.

Keywords: Art and War, War Veterans, Art Therapy, PTSD

INTRODUCTION

Art, as well as War, is an immersive and all-absorbing experience for the individual. Many War Veterans were artists before going to War, and it is interesting to note how their artistic style and creative processes have changed the way back from the front. In fact, traumas experienced in war scenarios have left an indelible mark into highly sensitive individuals, especially in people who were injured in battle and then survived, or have seen die tragically their fellow soldiers, so that, when a fighter-artist come back from the War, it is possible to detect a significant change of his/her artistic style, which reflects the experienced traumas. But for War Veterans who were not artists before leaving for the front, Art has become a basic resource to draw from in order to activate a process of psychic healing: in fact, many Art Therapy programs were activated to bringing out the soldier's traumatic experience and try to treat him/her. It was estimated that about 10-15% of veterans deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq in the last ten years reported, or show, a PTSD symptomatology and currently suffering from severe psychosocial dysfunctions, characterized by a "persistent increased arousal" that affects the autonomic nervous system with evident effects on body and mind, as well as on affect regulation (somatic memory), according to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th ed. (DSM-IV, 2000). Major PTSD symptoms can be reduced to four basic types (dysphoria, re-experiencing, hyperarousal symptoms and social

avoidance) and may include: negative alterations in cognitions and mood, social phobia, anxiety, nightmares, major depression, various psychosomatic disorders, alcoholism, drug addiction, guilt, agoraphobia, estrangement, alterations in arousal and reactivity (such as an increased level of hyper-vigilance), and other psychotic, mental, neurological or stress related disorders, among which also dissociative episodes and suicidal ideation, that require specific and urgent PTSD treatments: these may include many kinds of cognitive-behavioral therapies, but also the art group therapy, which is obtaining good results in clinical practices [1]. At the current state, Art Therapy is proving to be an effective long-term treatment in order to release from war traumas, as coadjuvant of traditional psychotherapy and other standard or accredited clinical treatments [2]. In fact this unique contribution in PTSD treatment allows, through visual arts support, to make war trauma uncovered and visible for a better rehabilitation of War Veterans and their re-integration into civil life, providing a particular insight into traumatic war experiences and memories experienced by soldiers, correcting any memory dysfunctions, and enhancing therapeutic knowledge and clinicians abilities in PTSD symptoms treatment.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

The research method is based on gathering and analysis of the psychological evidences of War Veterans who practise Visual Arts (both as artists and patients), and on the clinical descriptive study and qualitative-observational analysis of the artworks produced before and after the War experience (in the case of former artists-veterans), or during the rehabilitation programs that use Art Therapy as a method of psychic healing. The art-based treatments are usually carried out in group sessions, where patients are asked to draw by free associations, making use of free colour choices; then they exhibit and discuss their drawings or painting each others, and also with therapists in the setting of group analysis, where self-reported feelings and behaviours related to the depicted scenes, expressed by veterans during the sessions, are detected and investigated by a clinical point of view. Normally, patients are asked to give a drawing/painting title, and encouraged to express and discuss feelings and emotions aroused by each produced artwork. The most recent scientific literature has also been considered.

RESULTS

Art Therapy and the therapeutic practice of visual arts are increasingly used in clinical context by civil and military institutions as alternative treatment method for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in many rehabilitation programs for traumatized War Veterans. Some of the retrospective clinical studies of drawings and paintings made by Veterans (either artists and non-artists before war experience), based on quantitative and qualitative analysis, have shown a marked preference for the depiction of battle scenes, with killed and wounded combatants, and the frequent use of red and black colours, with symbolic-evocative meaning, in evident association with their war traumas, based on death, fear, blood, wounds, and destruction ideas, such as destroyed buildings, demolished houses, desecrated churches and villages in ruins [3]: these all are emerging PTSD symptoms that surfacing to the consciousness thanks to the art practice during an Art Therapy path in clinical context, due to the effective support provided by the group through disclosing traumatic experiences and sad memories in a safe setting, which is a

protect and controlled environment where those negative experiences may be corrected and resolved in a positive and collaborative communication atmosphere, characterized by hope and self-confidence sensations, stimulating a greater trust in the others and hope for the future [4]. As detected, war-related themes are more recurring in graphic and pictorial representations by war-traumatized patients (on average, over 82% of cases, whether non-artists or former artists veterans), with a prevalence of horrifying war events that show or witness wounded and killed soldiers scenes. Moreover, also nightmares (as lifelike traumatic experiences) and graves themes are usually represented, as well as destroyed, burned or abandoned cities and dreary landscapes, with deserted fields, desolate battlefields, broken and bare trees (without branches and leaves). However, a simple and obvious visual symbolization must not mislead therapists, directing them incorrectly to improper treatment types and false conclusions on the basis of a negative countertransference, that often influences in a wrong way their interpretation of drawings and paintings. War Veterans treated through Art Therapy, when discuss or comment about their own artworks, usually report feelings of fear, horror, sadness, disperation, hopelssness, devastation, pain, and life-threatening dangers personally experienced during the battle. Another meaningful aspect that powerfully emerges from drawing and paintings is the guilty feeling for having survived their companions, the pain of being-cause of their death, and the suffering of their loss, but also a hatred and revenge feeling, with a sense of rebellion against the enemy (only in rare cases these feelings include forgiveness, social support and other protective factors). Furthermore some artworks depict scenes of deadly ambushes, siege, deadlock or being surrounded by the enemy, with reference to a feelings of terror, full helplessness, complete loneliness and isolation, emptiness, great sorrow and devastation. It was noted that graphic lines and contours are markedly sharp and usually drawn nervously and quickly, demonstrating anxiety, considerable emotional charge, and extreme tension. Broken, dense and intersecting graphical lines were reported in War Veterans who were already artists before leaving for the front, although their artistic style denotes a higher order than the drawings or paintings produced by non-artists veterans, surely due to their previous art practice or expertise in visual arts. In this particular case, colours (generally faded, dull or dark) overflows from the drawn shapes, blending with the painting background, and generating a particular (and recognizable in some ways) artistic style, different from the previous: this style changing reflects a psychical modification in the inner veteran's world, characterized by a memo-cognitive disgregation, and denotes a different state of mind and mood in patients. If at first War Veterans undergoing Art Therapy sessions show a behaviour largely similar to their psychosocial functioning (e.g. silence, or doubting about the possibility to be cured or healed through art practice), however most of patients changes their attitude and shows more interest to discuss traumatic and dramatic scenes from their artworks with other participants and therapists. In fact, the confrontation among the therapeutic group members about their drawing and paintings helps each veteran to observe traumatic war experiences by another point of view in a protected environment, by rationalizing and giving new meaning to those same experiences. Furthermore, therapist's role in group discussion contribute to highlight the differences between war memories and peace time reality, correcting any misinterpretations caused by a psycho-cognitive disruption due to traumatic war experiences.

DISCUSSION

The visual support provided by fine arts to War Veterans helps them to bring out and sublimate their traumatic on combat experiences and post-traumatic stress symptoms following the re-inclusion into civilian life from the battlefield, which often becomes problematic because of the tendency to social isolation by veterans, based on perceived or supposed social disapproval and negative esteem by civilians towards combatants: this mental attitude, which causes many difficulties in social interactions, is based on a negative self-representation inside War Veterans, determined by feeling of being judged by the fact of having handed a weapon to kill other men. In fact, it was detected in some individuals a certain reticence or reluctance to express their feelings and emotions related to the themes illustrated in the artworks (denial of reality, and, in more severe cases, disruption of memory or amnesia), and to reply to interviewers during the session group after the drawing session, clearly due to the pains experienced in war. For this reason, visual representations of war memories drives therapists and clinicians to treat symptoms of the social phobia and other psychosocial pathologies related to PTSD, by means of psychological work done to uncovering traumas during art-based therapy. In fact, patient's involvement and engagement into creative (and non-verbal) procedure, that implies an "harmless" decision making process (e.g. the colours choice), as well as mind and body activation. Indeed, the most important Art Therapy's goal is to bring out latent unresolved conflicts and repressed traumas, since patients undergoing an art-based psychological treatment report verbally, and in varying degrees: distress, discomfort, horror, anger, grief, loneliness, helplessness, guilt, until to need of forgetting everything related to scenes depicted in the artworks, because those evoke painful experiences and sad memories that veterans are trying to remove and forget in every way [5]. Thanks to group support during Art Therapy sessions, War Veterans feel themselves accepted again by society and this therapeutic experience through artistic practice provides moral gratification and strengthen them emotionally, by correcting their self-perception (so-called *proprioception*), providing emotional regulation, and confirming that Art Therapy treatment, by means of group interaction, may uncover latent content removed from consciousness, removing the perceived barriers to social interaction, enhancing veterans' feeling to be accepted by civil community and improving their ability to express emotions again, without feeling themselves socially judged or considered only like rejections by the society, taking back control of their emotions and feelings, just like ordinary men/women [6]. But in some cases, due to the visual-centered psychological treatment, Art Therapy could make reliving and re-experiencing traumatic war events to veterans, who may react in an unpredictable or not programmed way (depending on the severity of the reported PTSD diagnosis), experiencing intense negative emotions or physical sensations during treatment sessions, because of an excessive exploitation of the brain areas involved in the processes of creative expression, already overloaded and destabilized by the tragic misadventures of war experienced traumatically by veterans [7]. Therefore Art Therapy treatments for veterans traumatized in war actions are more effective when combined (as integrative treatment) with endorsed and accredited first-line therapeutic programs, that provide for the implementation of different intervention methods and psychological support, such as cognitive-behavioral and psychodynamic therapy, with the aim of decreasing social avoidance, passivity and anxiety, increasing on the other side veteran's self-confidence, relaxation and verbal expression. Through reminiscing war and massacre scenes, and the visual description of their nightmares, War Veterans

should gradually pull out negative feelings, leaving out their traumas and inner wounds: this specific psychotherapeutic practice, that makes use of visual arts as a means of expression, makes possible to veterans switching from war themes to current social reality (by an integration work on fragmented sensory and emotional elements of traumatic experiences), focusing more on “here and now” problems, overcoming the social interaction difficulties, and beginning to glimpse hope feelings by removing the perceived barriers to care [3], [5].

CONCLUSION

Findings confirm that War Veterans really gain benefit and positive effects from Art Therapy paths following a PTSD diagnosis, reducing major symptoms and supporting social integration of veterans through inner working on traumatic memories; but in some cases, that path, instead of sublimating and healing the psychic trauma, causes the emergence of painful and not removed contents, that come out from the artworks, unleashing other latent clinical symptoms, before repressed [8]. In fact, Art Therapy, by involving a complex combination of cognitive, sensory and motor activities through the support of visual expression, allow a better introspection and insight in patients that can not verbally express their trauma, such as War Veterans, providing a unique contribution to PTSD treatment, thanks to the greater effectiveness of a trauma-focused and evidence-based psychotherapy, such as Art Therapy, that make visible the psychodynamic processes inside the individual [9], [10]: because veterans avoid talking about their traumatic experiences with people without war experience, this form of psychological integrative treatment on a non-verbal level is a “storytelling with no words”, whose goal accessing traumatic (and preverbal) memory through image making process in narrative function, to penetrate content not verbally accessible or explainable in words due to cognitive and emotional breakdown. In fact, PTSD treatment by means of Art Therapy must go beyond words by transferring Veteran’s communication skills, psychically compromised, to visual representation in order to integrate effectively cognitive, emotional and affective memory of traumatic experiences, by processing emotions and stimulating the coming out process of psychic traumas by veterans’ inner world: this complex psychological work through art making and non-verbal expressive therapies allows to release painful and traumatic memories away from troubled consciousness, aiming to the effective reduction of social distress symptoms, the restoration of degraded abilities, and finally the social re-integration of War Veterans into civil society.

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