Clay in Therapy
Juan Granados, MFA and Kathleen Phelan, CRC, LPC-Intern
Texas Counselor Association 57th Annual Growth Conference
November 21, 2013

Clay is a tool used therapeutically to facilitate emotional expression, catharsis, and communication, as well as to reveal unconscious material through concrete and symbolic representations. The process of handling, manipulating, and sculpting clay emphasizes the importance of both product and process; clay work is not merely the final product, but it is also the process by which the product has been developed that nurtures holistic integration and healing (Sholt & Gavron, 2006). The process of absorption into touching the weight, depth, and texture of clay evokes a powerful and intense primal sensory experience, with the potential to transform one’s existence or presence in the here-and-now. The product becomes an imprint for interpretation that allows counselor’s to enlarge our understanding of our client’s inner world and needs. Process and product interpretation are briefly summarized below.

Process

Clay work engages both tactile and visual functions, thus providing a safe space in while to explore self-expression (i.e. self-awareness, self-image, and self-concept) through unconscious creations that may emerge.

Clay sculpting is an experiential technique that encourages creativity, however, it is important to remind clients that artistic abilities are less important than the ability to explain and interpret their clay sculpture (Banker, 2008). Allow client curiosity to replace inhibitions or tactile defensiveness by beginning with simple demonstrations of clay’s plastic qualities; i.e. coiling, pounding, squeezing, pulling, and pinching.

During process, encourage clients to focus by not talking while they are sculpting and by focusing more on emotions or affective channeling than on cognitions.

Product Interpretation

Encourage client to discuss the sculpting process individually, prior to group interpretations. If the client’s sculpture does not look as they had hoped, the client should be encouraged to explain how they wanted their sculpture to look. Counselors may ask the following (Elkin-Abuhoff, Goldblatt, Gaydos, & Corrato, 2008):

- How would you describe the clay experience?
- Can you tell me about what you have made?
Observe the parallel relationship between the healing process and aesthetic development. Counselors may consider the following:

- Did client reintegrate the whole clump of clay or only a partial amount?
- Did client construct a recognizable shape?
- Did the clay experience trigger an emotional response?
- Did the client state a future interest in working with clay?

Product may symbolize a paradoxical mixture of concreteness and abstraction (Henley, 1991).

Product may symbolize “stuck” emotions, long-forgotten memories, or unacknowledged imprints of experience.

Because clay work in therapy provides a powerful medium to work through many core issues, such as pain, anger, frustration, grief, and fear, interpretation of both process and product can move a client towards inner growth and healing (Sherwood, 2004).

Product symbolizes feelings in a unique and tangible way by allowing for more concrete interpretations. In a group setting, product conveys messages that make feedback easier to assess, while promoting communication among group members in a creatively mutual environment.

Rhyne (1973) explains that by returning to the cognitive components during interpretive processes, the healing function of symbolic representation involves:

- Focusing on topic and relations among component parts of the whole
- Thinking through a present course of action by relating past and future behaviors
- Ordering and containing affect through a structure associated with previous emotional content

Gestalt theory emphasizes the creativity, spontaneity, immediacy, and awareness evoked through clay work. Here-and-now awareness lends itself to an innate drive to create and express (France & Edward, 1997). Emphasis is on expression through sensitivity in the here-and-now, with the goal of congruency of growth between “intra-personal” and “inter-personal” experiences.

Adler (1997) wrote that the co-processing experience can never be fully translated into words, and that the naturally occurring healing that emerges through [clay work] provides a symbolic mode of communication to fill this vacancy; the individual is both the product and the sculpture. During process, clients are able to create, without sacrificing their individual uniqueness, a tangibly accessible work through which to explore. During product interpretation, clients are encouraged to embrace holistic dimensions of self (spiritual, physical, emotional, and cognitive) by revealing and interpreting their clay sculptures. Through the process of group interpretation, members are able to co-process their individual experiences with the clay, as well as the product, thereby facilitating both “intra-personal” and “inter-personal” growth and healing.

Please feel free to contact presenters with further questions or information on the use of clay in therapy.

Juan.granados@ttu.edu
Kathleen.phelan-glasscock@ttu.edu
Reference List


