

# ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

## Small Experiential Group

### Julia Meyerowitz-Katz

In the context of the large, busy conference, the small group seemed to provide an intimate and safe space in which participants were able to catch their breath, process their myriad conference experiences and make links to their professional practice. In the beginning, save for two members, we were all strangers to each other. Six nationalities and five native languages were represented in the group; there were occasions when language had to be translated and explained.

The start on the first day was a bit ragged; this seemed to be partially the consequence of people having to navigate their way around the building and find the right room, but also perhaps reflected the journey involved in the coming together of people from different countries. People started from different places, used different routes, some found their way easily, others got lost and had to be guided to the room but everyone got there in the end.

There was a lot of enthusiasm for making art and during the first session the group got going on making art quite quickly. There was soon an industrious, creative atmosphere. However, I found it difficult to find a place of reverie and found my mind wandering; a parallel process, perhaps, of embodying the sense of the group members as individuals, the group having not yet formed. During the discussion time we noticed that several art works contained themes and images of containment. From the discussion themes it seemed as if the art works reflected a transference towards both the small experiential group and the conference as a whole as a kind of container. Projections were

ambivalent; the container represented something safe and bountiful, and also flawed and lacking. This was represented in the form of complaints about the materials on offer but there were also complaints about there not being enough time for art making.

There were other ways in which the structure and content of the conference was reflected in the group dynamics of this small group. For instance, on the second day when the early morning panel discussion had been on refugees and migrants, a new person knocked at the door and asked to join the group. This brought the issues relating to the social and political context of art therapy with refugees and migrants, and themes of belonging and 'welcoming the stranger', right into the group in a live way. Art works made during that group contained images of vulnerability and reaching out and they reflected complex and strong embodied emotional experience. Transferences to the larger conference experience came up with strong feelings expressed about the previous day's Art Therapy Large Group experience. I found a place of reverie and found myself reflecting and making links on a myriad of themes. It seemed as if the participants had formed themselves into a group.

The group used the session on the third day in a complex way. They used the session to verbally express and process a tremendous anger to do with the Art Therapy Large Group experience from the previous afternoon: the lack of a microphone, people not turning up to it, a lack of messy materials. What kind of art therapy conference is this that you can't make a mess? In addition, art works made had to do with containment, attachment and separation as well as with renewal. The sense that the conference/small group had provided participants with an experience of regeneration, renewal and containment was represented by the tearing up of an art work that had been made during the first session. The torn up fragments were then used as part of the elements in a new art work that encircled the room, representing the containment that the small group had offered.

The use of the room and art materials changed over the three days. During the first session the group was careful about space and mess; at the end of the group the room looked tidy. Then over the next two days, art work became messier and took up more space in the room; the room had a sense of a creative disorder.

We were all struck by how quickly the small experiential group became a cohesive working group and how quickly it became an intimate and safe space. Voicing a group sentiment during the third and final session, one participant said: 'This has become like a family.' During the discussion time, ordinary experiences to do with endings – loss, separation and valuing the experience of having been together were expressed. Ending the final group session felt like a wrench and participants found it hard to leave.

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