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Research Article

Decoupage as an Art Therapy Technique in Human Functioning in Late Adulthood

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ABSTRACT

The article presents research on the use of decoupage as an art therapy technique among the residents of a social welfare home. The technique used here is described along with its location in the history of art therapy. The author establishes the definition, goals and functions that this field of therapy fulfills in human life, with particular focus on the impact in late adulthood. The research was conducted in the Nursing Home in Gniezno on the basis of an interview questionnaire and a survey conducted among seniors living in the Social Welfare Home. The research was preceded by conducting classes using the decoupage technique.

Keywords: *Art therapy, Precursors, Goals, Functions, Application, Late adulthood in human development, Research at the Social Welfare Home in Gniezno.*

Introduction

Art therapy is considered to be an effective therapeutic method used in working with students, patients and pupils. It includes many, more and more, techniques that support psychophysical functioning. One of the techniques that allow you to bring out expression and activate creativity is decoupage, which is popular in the therapy of the elderly. It shapes accuracy, patience, and focus. It occupies an important place in the history of art therapy presented in a brief history. Getting to know the essence of art therapy must be based on learning the goals and functions that this type of therapy fulfills in every sphere of life of a person who requires support. Decoupage is used as a form of mental,

emotional, and social development of the personality spheres of the elderly. It becomes a source of development of new potentials of the senior, the possibility of working on one's own weaknesses, and prevents the deepening of disease states accompanying old age. The technique is perfect for communication, which greatly enhances its importance in classes for patients of the Nursing Home. The aim of the presented research is to present the decoupage technique as an art therapy technique supporting the functioning of DPS residents and the characteristics of their functioning on the basis of the conducted research. A diagnostic survey was used as a method, and the selected techniques were a survey and an interview. The

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interview questionnaire was used in an interview with the manager of the Social Welfare Home in Gniezno and with an occupational therapist of the SWH. The survey questionnaire was used to study the opinions of SWH residents. The research was preceded by classes conducted with decoupage technique using paper boxes, wooden boards and tree stumps. It enjoys great interest, which means that the vast majority of residents willingly participate in the classes. At the same time, these classes develop creative skills and inventiveness. The residents prefer group classes, but do not shy away from individual classes. They enjoy the napkin technique, painting with acrylic paints, and using wood and glass as a base. It brings them joy and the opportunity to test themselves in artistic and decorative work. It is the most popular art therapy technique.

The article introduces the history of art therapy and decoupage techniques and introduces the characteristics of age and developmental changes in seniors. Then, the presented methodology and analysis will be completed with research conclusions.

Background of the study

Historical outline of art therapy

The expanding interest in and use of art therapy, a therapeutic and educational method, has increased the need to precisely define this emerging field supporting treatment and education. Historical recognition of art therapy's development led to terms associated with therapeutic activities using specific art forms, giving rise to various types such as art therapy, music therapy, drama therapy, film therapy, and bibliotherapy. Art therapy, literally meaning therapy through art, draws from several scientific disciplines, including psychiatry, psychology, medicine, art, special education, and health sciences. Its main focus is on social communication, comprehensive personal development, and health (Loza & Khmelnytska-Plaskota, 2014).

The origins of art therapy can be traced back to ancient Greece, where temples, as places of worship, also incorporated medicine and natural therapies. These temples were surrounded by picturesque landscapes and served

as venues for therapies such as thalassotherapy, hydrotherapy, and silvotherapy. Hippocrates' holistic approach to medicine, which emphasized treating the whole person rather than isolating diseased organs, is considered connected to art therapy, as the Greeks believed in the holistic integration of body and soul (Masgutowa, 1997). In the late 19th century, French psychiatrists recognized the significance of drawings created by mentally ill individuals, which helped reveal their issues through creative expression. This led to the development of the psychology of creativity (Masgutowa, 1997).

German figures also contributed to the evolution of art therapy, with Rudolf Steiner acknowledging the role of art in treating mental disorders. Sigmund Freud, on the other hand, distinguished between secondary and primary processes, describing how rational, verbal, and imaginative thinking, as well as unconscious thought, play a role in therapy (Case & Dally, 2006).

A breakthrough occurred in 1942 when the term "art therapy" was first used. Artist and teacher Adrian Hill popularized the use of art in therapeutic settings such as anti-tuberculosis hospitals, sanatoriums, and psychiatric wards. In Great Britain, the term "consultants" referred to those supporting treatment alongside doctors, which was facilitated by a strong demand for rehabilitation following military operations (Loza & Khmelnytska-Plaskota, 2020).

In education and treatment, John Dewey and Herbert Read advanced art therapy approaches. Their efforts led to the establishment of colleges in England to train art therapists, and numerous workshops were created in schools, especially in urban areas. These workshops, attended by children from underprivileged or neglected families, demonstrated a positive impact on various aspects of the children's development (Gilroy, 2011).

In Poland, the concept of art therapy was introduced in medical literature by Wita Szulc, who explored the potential of visual arts in influencing the mind. Interest in music therapy began earlier, in the 1950s, with Professor Adrian Demianowski's studies on music's effect on neurotic disorders, mood regulation, and relaxation in patients. Additionally, Henryk

Gaertner, a medical doctor and pianist, pioneered music therapy by exploring the relationship between music and physiological responses, particularly in pain therapy (Śliwka, Jarosz, & Nowobilski, 2006).

The essence, goals and functions of art therapy

Art therapy is considered a form of psychotherapeutic influence that can support pharmacotherapy or even replace it. It serves multiple functions within psychiatry, including diagnostic, therapeutic, activating, rehabilitative, relaxing, and preventive roles. Art therapy, using various forms of art, helps patients express themselves and work through their difficulties (Janicki, 2000). According to the American Art Therapy Association (AATA), art therapy is a form of psychotherapy that helps individuals examine their lives and the problems they face. It is closely related to mental health and utilizes the creative process of making art. The target activity group focuses on improving the functioning of clients in physical, emotional, social, and mental areas. The purpose of art therapy is to develop interpersonal skills, address behavioral problems, reduce stress, and increase self-esteem. Art therapy can be viewed from three perspectives: (a) based on cognitive-behavioral therapy (problem-solving and modifying negative thinking patterns); (b) based on analytical therapy (analyzing life experiences); and (c) within the humanities (finding solutions) (Masgutowa, 1997).

In Poland, the development of art therapy is analyzed from two perspectives: the educational path, which includes the humanities within art and pedagogy, and the therapeutic use of art for patients with both somatic and mental illnesses (Skorny, 1990). Individual art therapy is used in the treatment and rehabilitation process in psychiatric wards in compliance with medical regulations (Śliwka, Jarosz, & Nowobilski, 2006). Art therapy in Poland has seen a resurgence since 1989. Konieczna (2003) identified two scopes of art therapy: in a broad sense, as cultural therapy, and in a narrower sense, as visual arts therapy.

Art therapy in Poland is understood as a collection of ideas and activities that allow individuals to perceive and create art, thereby

enhancing or maintaining the quality of human life. It is not only a therapeutic process but also an educational and developmental one, aimed at optimizing life quality and fostering overall human development. Art therapy is used in adult, child, and adolescent psychiatry. The therapeutic process for individuals of different ages involves adapting techniques and methods to suit their developmental needs, especially in verbal, cognitive, emotional, and physical domains (Gładyszewska-Cylulko, 2007). The effectiveness of various types of art therapy is determined by their roles in therapy, education, and life, fulfilling functions such as recreational, educational, corrective, compensatory, regulatory, and psychoprophylactic (Baranowska-Jojko, 2018).

According to Araszkiewicz and Podgórska (1990), art therapy provides many positive therapeutic effects in treating mental and somatic health. These functions include supporting development, improving the functioning of individuals with disabilities, addressing issues like unemployment, poverty, homelessness, chronic diseases, or life difficulties (Konieczna, 2003). Art therapy techniques help patients understand and regulate their emotions, expand awareness, and relieve emotional tensions. It also assists in identifying emotions and suppressing negative feelings (Skorny, 1990). Konieczna (2003) emphasized that art therapy enriches moral development, aesthetic experiences, and interpersonal communication, offering participants opportunities for self-expression and self-fulfillment (Gilroy, 2011). Art therapy has proven effective for individuals with mental disorders, anxiety, depression, autism, ADHD, personality disorders, as well as intellectual or physical disabilities, and is increasingly used to treat disturbed social relationships, such as sexual pathology (Babska, 2006).

Decoupage history

Decoupage, a technique used in art therapy, originates from the French word *couper*, meaning "to cut out." It involves the precise cutting of decorative elements to form a cohesive design, and it has been practiced in Europe since the Middle Ages. The technique gained significant attention in the 16th century, particularly

through the art of lacquering, which was imported from China and became popular in Europe by the 17th century. The lacquering effect, achieved by repeatedly applying layers of lacquer to furniture and objects, was intended to protect them from damage.

In the 18th century, decoupage reached its peak, particularly in France and England, where it was used to decorate homes. English aristocrats often had print rooms where the walls were adorned with paintings of European cities, showcasing the popularity of the technique. Over time, the style of decoupage evolved. During the Victorian era, it was characterized by floral decorations, birds, and other large illustrations. Decoupage also found its way onto a variety of objects, such as furniture and wood, with new techniques further enhancing its visual effects.

The 1970s saw a revival of interest in decoupage, especially among wealthy women who were drawn to handicrafts such as embroidery and painting. One notable figure, Mary Delany, created decorative collage compositions by cutting plant motifs from colored paper. Her work sparked a renewed fascination with decoupage, which was later used to adorn rooms with engravings imported from France and Italy. These prints were arranged in a hierarchical manner, often covering entire walls with common themes.

The early 19th century continued the Victorian tradition of using decoupage to decorate items such as screens, often with cut-out images from children's fairy tales or animals. By the end of the 19th century, the technique had expanded to include a wide range of substrates, allowing for even more creative and varied applications. Decoupage's versatility and artistic value continued to grow, making it a lasting technique not only for decorative art but also for therapeutic purposes.

The period of late adulthood

In the human development cycle, the period of late adulthood spans from the age of 60-65 until death. Developmental challenges during this period include retirement, loss of strength, and general fatigue of the body. These challenges often require individuals to come to terms with the death of a loved one (e.g.,

spouse), changes in their financial situation, and a reduction in physical and mental activity, leading to a decrease in social interactions. The primary task during this stage is to achieve internal balance and a sense of stability. To counteract feelings of loneliness, alienation, and the need to find or cultivate new interests, individuals often engage in therapeutic activities (Loza & Khmelnytska-Plaskota, 2014). Biological and mental aging significantly impact overall well-being and mental functioning. Negative emotions, such as irritation and dissatisfaction, may lead to lower self-esteem, depression, and a general aversion to society (Masgutowa, 1997). As physical health declines, there is a tendency for changes in external appearance, intellectual function, and social behavior (Sikorska et al., 2022). The final stage of life is frequently associated with frailty, requiring constant care from others. This period also involves significant internal development as the elderly person learns to adapt to new and challenging situations, often necessitating the presence and assistance of family members or caregivers. One option for many individuals is to reside in a nursing or retirement home (Gilroy, 2011).

Statement of the problem

Based on the literature, this article established a cognitive and theoretical goal of the research. The aim was to present the decoupage technique as an art therapy technique for the functioning of the residents of the Social Welfare Home in Gniezno and to characterize their functioning. The practical goal was to examine the importance of decoupage as an art therapy technique for the functioning of the residents of the Social Welfare Home. Specific goals included:

- Examining the preferences of residents and occupational therapists at the Nursing Home regarding decoupage techniques;
- Examining the advantages of using decoupage for the functioning of residents of the Social Welfare Home in Gniezno in the cognitive sphere;
- Examining the advantages of using decoupage for the functioning of Social Welfare Home in the emotional sphere;

- Examining the advantages of using decoupage for the functioning of Social Welfare Home in the social sphere;
- Formulating practical recommendations regarding decoupage as an art therapy technique for the functioning of SWH residents.

Methodology

A diagnostic survey was used as a method, and the selected techniques were a survey and an interview. The interview questionnaire was used in an interview with the manager of the Social Welfare Home in Gniezno and with an occupational therapist of the SWH. The survey questionnaire was used to study the opinions of SWH residents. The research was preceded by classes conducted with decoupage technique using paper boxes, wooden boards and tree stumps. The target group of respondents included students of various ages. 20 residents including 5 men and 15 women took part in the classes.

Twenty residents of the Social Welfare Home in Gniezno took part in the survey. It consisted of thirty-eight questions, the first part of which was a summary containing two open questions. The rest of the questions were in the form of multiple choice and one open question. The initial questions in the survey questionnaire were related to gender, age, place of residence, level of education, the region the resident came from, and what profession they had had before moving to the nursing home. The summary of the collected data showed that the respondents were between 60 and 90 years old, 1 person was over 90 years old. The level of education varied: twelve respondents had primary education, five people had secondary education and three respondents had vocational education. They all came from medium-sized cities, 95% from Greater Poland. The examined people were five men and fifteen women aged between sixty and ninety, and one person over ninety. They unanimously chose a medium-sized city with twenty to one hundred thousand inhabitants as their place of residence. In the past, they performed various professions: sawmill worker, parcel shop worker, office clerk, upholsterer, furniture carpenter, monastery worker, gardener, railway plant,

laundress, railway worker, tanner, painter, car mechanic, nurse, catering, post office, shoemaker, chief accountant – economic technician, farmer, shoe factory, plumber. In the past, the respondents indicated that they lived in 5% in tenement houses, 30% in a multi-family block, 50% in a single-family house, and another facility - 5% in a shelter, 5% in barracks or annexes, 5% indicated a house of nuns.

The analysis of the results showed that the family most often visits nursing home residents once a month, accounting for 35%. 10% of respondents indicated that they had no family or were visited by their families occasionally. All residents spend their annual holidays at the nursing home. The next question was aimed at determining the frequency of residents' use of services provided by the National Health Fund (NFZ). The vast majority of respondents (65%) state that they use these benefits once a year. However, the difference between this group of respondents and the rest who go to the doctor once a month is 10%. Another 5% use NFZ services twice and 5% do not use NFZ services. They mainly received support from family (63.2%), friends (21.2%) or from no one (21.1%), with both of the latter factors being at the same level. However, the least help was provided to these people by the nursing home or by neighbours - 5.3%. Among the respondents, support was mainly received from family (63.2%), friends (21.2%) or no one (21.1%). The survey shows that respondents spend their free time mainly watching TV programs and listening to the radio (85%), pursuing and cultivating their passions and interests (85%). Here, too, 30% of respondents indicate that they spend their free time with friends. The lowest level in this range of questions include family gatherings and cooking. When asked what aids the patients use to help them move, the most common answer was a wheelchair (50%) as the main aid used in moving around. To a lesser extent, it was a walker (25%), a gurney (10%) and a cane (10%). At the bottom of the scale were crutches (5%). Among the respondents were the people who did not use any aids - 15%. When asked about the use of cultural goods, the 100% of respondents answered unequivocally that they do not use cultural goods.

100% of respondents agreed that they would recommend the Social Welfare Home in Gniezno to their friends. They rated the occupational therapy classes as very good. The respondents stated that they participated in occupational therapy every day (60%), once a week (40%) and once a month (20%). The largest group are people who participate in classes every day. They said they liked the topic of the classes. During the classes they felt self-realization. Only 1 person, i.e. 5% of the respondents, was reluctant to participate in the classes, the remaining 95% showed great willingness to participate in them. 55% found these activities relaxing, 50% motivating, and 35% found them to be a good form of leisure.

The research shows that the activities constituting the stages of creating a work in decoupage technique, which are difficult for nursing home residents, are mainly preparing the substrate (55%), gluing the motif (50%), splitting napkins and cutting out the motif (30%), varnishing (25%). However, the smallest percentage of difficulties in this area is applying the crackle preparation (10%) and applying paint with a foam brush - 5%.

The respondents showed that the art therapy methods they seem to like the most are mainly bibliotherapy (80%), film therapy (70%), music therapy (55%), chromotherapy (45%), drawing (30%), and to a lesser extent choreotherapy (20%), painting (15%) and sculpture (5%). 90% of the study participants did not get tired from the classes, and only 10% of them felt slightly tired. The respondents gave various answers regarding difficulties they came across, preferred style and method of decoration, and the use of utensils and materials. It is believed that they result from personality preferences and motor competences, which have not been the subject of research.

The question regarding the independent use of art therapy techniques showed that watching films (55%) and reading books (45%) were the most popular. To a lesser and equal extent, namely only 25%, they indicate working with ikebana, listening to music/radio news, reading newspapers or improvising movements to music, and only 10% drawing with charcoal.

The decoupage technique helps the respondents to externalize their own feelings and show their experiences and sensations (40%). It also indirectly increases the sense of aesthetics, sensitivity to the environment and the ability to express themselves.

For respondents, decoupage is a source of relief from everyday difficulties (55%) and it stimulates creativity and ingenuity (45%). Only 25% of them feel better understood by society or relaxed - 15%.

In their answers, 80% of the respondents agreed that decoupage activities influence interactions with others, while 25% of the answers were inclined towards greater openness to new acquaintances. 100% of respondents expressed joy as an accompanying emotion during the classes. An interview with the manager of the nursing home in Gniezno revealed that willing and mobilized people take part in occupational therapy classes. The form of classes is always adapted to the needs of the clients and their calendar of intended rehabilitation and therapeutic activities. The work performed by the students often depends on their physical fitness - fine motor skills. The health condition has a major impact on the speed of work. Everyone enjoyed attention. Decoupage serves the following functions for the students:

- team work;
- it develops emotions, which is visible in the creation output;
- it allows to deepen and develop knowledge of art techniques.

During classes, interest, concentration, development of new skills in overcoming difficulties, and interest in new techniques and materials used in work are clearly visible. The students willingly take part in activities such as: drawing, painting, sketching, colouring, modelling in plastic materials, cut-outs, and weaving. Techniques and types of art therapy are taken into account, and they include: music therapy, story therapy and film therapy. When using decoupage, tearing, cutting and gluing larger surfaces is not a major problem for the participants using the technique. Small elements and precision of workmanship were difficult for the participants. The collage technique, origami, reading aloud and listening to texts are also

popular. The patients are open to the therapist's ideas and willingly work with various materials used for decorations.

The interview with the therapist allowed to show the advantages and disadvantages of the decoupage technique. After observations of students participating in classes, it should be concluded that this is a universal technique. Among the disadvantages, the therapist noted that precision when working on small elements can be a demotivating aspect. However, he believes that the classes enrich the personality of the participants, interpersonal contacts develop between them, long conversations take place, a hint of humour and interpersonal bonds appear. Working in a group becomes an opportunity for the residents to open up to the nursing home community. New experiences activate seniors to take up new activities, they boldly take up and suggest other activities that are interesting to them.

The therapist adapts the topic of the classes to the group of participants, so that they take into account their physical and motor capabilities and encourage them to act. Each class involves financial expenses, some techniques are low-budget, others require large financial investments. Sometimes people donate resources and supplies for classes. The person conducting the therapy noted in the interview that sometimes he does not participate in the classes, but just watches from the side. Active and passive activity has a specific impact on participants. To sum up, the therapist believes that decoupage classes activate participants and give them many positive experiences.

Conclusion

To sum up, the research shows that the residents of the Social Welfare Home in Gniezno support each other and integrate. They spend their free time together, watching TV, pursuing their passions, and listening to radio programs. Most of them move using wheelchairs, walkers and need the assistance of other people. Everyone is satisfied with their stay at the facility and would gladly recommend it to other people.

Decoupage is one of the art therapy techniques often used during occupational therapy classes at the Nursing Home. It enjoys great interest, which means that the vast majority of

residents willingly participate in the classes. At the same time, these classes develop creative skills and inventiveness. The residents prefer group classes, but do not shy away from individual classes. They enjoy the napkin technique, painting with acrylic paints, and using wood and glass as a base. In the case when the classes cannot be held, the students engage in ikebana decorations, reading newspapers, books, and listening to radio news.

Interviews conducted with the therapist and the manager of the nursing home showed many positive aspects of art therapy classes conducted at the facility. They certainly influence the people under their care. They have a relaxing and rehabilitative function. Residents of the Social Welfare Home who are examined prefer drawing, ornamentation and decorating, bibliotherapy, music therapy, creating greeting cards, reading aloud fragments or the entire book/text, decorating various objects. The advantages of using decoupage in the cognitive sphere among the residents of the Social Welfare Home include the ability to select a motif for the decorated object, better memory and thinking, and shaping the sense of aesthetics. The advantages of using decoupage in the emotional sphere include the ability to cope with stress, it is a way to release excessive aggression and let off negative thinking about various problems and difficult situations.

The decoupage technique is probably very popular among people of late adulthood. It brings them joy and the opportunity to test themselves in artistic and decorative work. It is the most popular art therapy technique. The classes could be more interesting and inspiring, so that the financial aspect of functioning of a social welfare facility would not be a major obstacle.

Research has confirmed that the students feel an increased sense of self-fulfillment, have the ability to express themselves and their current feelings, sensations, impressions, and enjoy small successes and achievements. Despite health restrictions, the vast majority of seniors are willing to actively participate in classes. This translates into a daily improvement in the quality of life, the ability to enter into social interactions, and establish and maintain longer

relationships between the participants. Providing decent conditions at the end of life, a sense of security, self-agency, privacy, self-worth, and the discovery of new experiences by seniors are tasks imposed by the legislator of each European country. Therefore, the law should provide funds for the appropriate management of time and potential competences of people in late adulthood.

Discussion

It is difficult to find critical voices in the literature denying the need to use the decoupage technique in therapy. There are also no studies that compare the techniques used to achieve therapeutic goals. The selection of techniques depends on various conditions, including financial resources and the expertise of staff working with seniors. One can only attempt to search for manifestations of satisfaction with classes, the level of group communication during sessions, and the emotional, social, and cognitive involvement of participants as indicators of therapeutic effectiveness.

The literature addresses errors in using the decoupage technique, but typically excludes aspects of therapy. It focuses mainly on mistakes related to the use of paints, varnishes, brushes, adhesives, and surface preparation to achieve the desired effect of the work (Lupato, 2011). Several articles discuss decoupage as one of the art therapy methods used in special schools and nursing homes, both stationary and day-care settings. The use of such techniques often depends on the financial constraints of the facility and the training of the staff, factors that usually determine the necessity of the technique. However, this topic has not been widely researched in the context of decoupage in the therapy of seniors, making the described research a pioneering step in exploring its use in nursing homes for adults (Miszczak, 2015).

Literature on seniors highlights various health problems that can be addressed through art therapy, including manual disorders, hand tremors, and depressive states linked to deteriorating health (Lewandowska-Prot, 2021). Creative, manual, artistic, and technical activities can help maintain hand dexterity and improve the overall well-being of seniors, enabling them to feel dignified within society. Engaging in

such activities is essential for their mental and emotional well-being, as it counters isolation, loneliness, and exclusion from society. Participation in art workshops fosters skill development and helps seniors maintain their social connections and cognitive functions (Głowacka et al., 2016). Moreover, every active engagement in tasks allows seniors to expand their mental horizons, boost their self-confidence, and strengthen self-esteem (Józefowski, 2014). Eugeniusz Józefowski also emphasizes the importance of conversation in the therapeutic process, which enables seniors to remain active during the workshops and alleviates feelings of loneliness. In addition to artistic creation, seniors benefit from social interaction, which contributes to an improved quality of life (Józefowski, 2014).

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