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Capstone Research

Growing up with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) has dramatically influenced the way I think, act, and feel. My lifelong obsession with detail in its most intricate form is undoubtedly linked to my perfectionism and deep interest in realism artwork to begin with. Yet, I have always been told that perfectionism and creativity are incompatible. Growing up, the culture I experienced every day attempted to pull me away from art and force me into a career path that was more “suitable” for OCD-diagnosed individuals. However, more and more studies are being conducted that evaluate the potential connection between art, creativity, and mental health. A growing number of experiments find that mental health and art influence one another more than previously expected. The use of art therapy as a treatment modality is becoming a very popular topic among clinicians (Hu 1). Thus, not only can art act as an alternative to typical antipsychotic medication, but it can also bring out creativity in individuals who are or might be typically viewed as the opposite.

The overarching consensus right now is that art therapy can be a valid alternative method to the traditional medication used to relieve symptoms relating to disorders such as anxiety, depression, Alzheimer’s, and more. Defined as “a form of psychotherapy that uses art media as its primary mode of expression and communication” (Hu 1), art therapy has been known to improve cognitive and sensorimotor functions. Other functions that can be improved include fostering emotional resilience, increasing social skills, resolving conflicts, and promoting societal changes. Clinicians have stated that typical antipsychotics have an immense amount of side effects, causing a turn towards alternatives (Hu 1).

To properly analyze art therapy and mental disorders, 479 records that relate to art therapy from 2006 to 2020 were pinpointed by Jingxuan Hu, Jinhuan Zhang, Liyu Hu, Haibo Yu,

and Jinping Xu, researchers responsible for “Art Therapy: A Complementary Treatment for Mental Disorders”. These records were then broken down by specific mental disorder. This includes categories such as Alzheimer's, dementia, and more. Looking at mental disorders such as anxiety and depression, medication has always been the most common form of treatment (Hu 1). However, documented studies have shown that art therapy can actually help alleviate these symptoms just as well if not better than the typical medication. These studies include an observational survey by “Gussak”, a randomized and controlled study with the elderly, and multiple studies done on students. Specifically, painting has been shown to improve the mood and reduce these symptoms of anxiety among cancer patients (Hu 1).

These studies demonstrate that art therapy is a useful tool for both helping patients decompress and even diagnosing specific diseases. This indicates that clinicians might be able to examine individuals without having to perform the kind of conventional psychological testing that is typically or often done. While painting was specifically discussed in this article, there are hundreds of other variations of art therapy that are available. These mediums of self-expression are able to artistically connect with individuals that have mental illnesses or cognitive differences. Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) is an appropriate example that is supported through additional studies.

A thesis study performed by Samuel Meyer at the University of New Mexico aimed to prove a connection between individuals with moderate-to-severe OCD symptoms and high levels of creativity. The cognitive and clinical characteristics that were recorded included OC symptoms, depressive moods, levels of creativity and flexibility, verbal and visual-spatial reasoning proficiency, and psychometric IQ. In total, fifty-seven individuals that met all requirements participated in the studies (Meyer 12). Divided into groups, these individuals were given assessments, such as The Beck Depression Inventory II, The Creativity Achievement

Questionnaire (CAQ), the Wisconsin Card Sorting Test (WCST), and others. After two sessions of experimenting and data-analyzing, the results were concluded (Meyer 15).

Using the clinical cut-off scores for Y-BOCS, Samuel discovered two groups that shared high scores in both OC Symptoms and High-Achievers (Meyer 20). A large group of individuals that tested high for these clinically significant OC symptoms demonstrated very high scores on the creativity scale. In addition, it appeared that individuals with the highest OC symptoms, scores that are clinically relevant and severe, had incredibly high creativity. However, these results also point towards the theory that individuals with HFOCD (high-functioning OCD) have entirely different brain mechanisms than individuals with only OC symptoms (Meyer 28). Samuel was able to conclude that there is a direct link between creativity and OC symptoms among the appropriate individuals. Even though neatness and perfectionism are not typically associated with creativity in the traditional sense, creative behaviors have shown to be linked with a majority of these OCD-diagnosed individuals.

To conclude, studies have shown that there are more positive connections between art and mental health than previously understood. A number of studies analyzed show that art therapy can be an appropriate substitution for traditional medication used for individuals with certain mental illnesses. Significant evidence points toward the idea of art therapy being an important clinical application for mental disorders. This type of self-expression relates directly to individuals with obsessive-compulsive symptoms. While behaviors such as orderliness and perfectionism are typically associated with OCD and not creativity, a study performed by student Samuel Meyer found otherwise. In fact, individuals who tested high for OC symptoms had incredibly high levels of creativity. Thus, my lifelong obsession with art as one of these OCD individuals only builds onto these statistics. Studies analyzing art and mental health continue to grow, and the results are compelling. In this paper, I briefly covered a few examples of these

studies, but it is important to note that I only scratched the surface. It's time to finally shine a light on the possibilities that art has for those with mental illnesses and/or cognitive differences.

Works Cited

Hu, Jingxuan, et al. "Art Therapy: A Complementary Treatment for Mental Disorders." *Frontiers in Psychology*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, 12 Aug. 2021,

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