

Layers of Space in a Therapeutic Journey

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The subjective experience of a person’s place within the world and within relationships is shaped and crafted at the confluence between the internal milieu or space and the external world. This article tracks the dynamics that occurred between four youths who participated in the process of a therapeutic journey during group art therapy. It traces the connections and dialogues that were formed between the internal arenas of the minds and the external space of the boys who were all diagnosed either on the autistic spectrum or as suffering from developmental delays. It is argued that these diagnoses reflect inherent alterations of their existential experience in space. The experience of existence in the “intermediate area” of art is described in the paper in terms of the “skin boundary” metaphor between the boys and the external world. The metaphorical skin is the boundary between the internal milieu and the world, but is also the area of contact and connection between them. The skin constructs the experience of self as a coherent spatial entity that is constant and continuous across space and time. The article describes how developmental impairments may lead to a lack of dynamic and flexible skin function. Under normal circumstances such a skin functions enables containment and binding together of the internal space and at the same time provides a medium for an exchange relationship with the external world. The boys’ emotional experience ranged between a skin boundary that is porous, open and limitless, and a skin boundary that is shell-like: hard, scaly and coarse. The artistic creative process enabled the existence of a fragile bridge of expression between the spaces: the concrete creative space, the verbal space, the sensory space and the metaphorical spaces the boys voyaged through in their journey. The collaborative artwork generated for the participants an experiential “intermediate area” that is safe and embracing; a space that supports the regulation of movement and contact with the external world.

Keywords: Group art therapy, autism, space, journey, skin ego function.

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