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## Schooling Cognitive-Behavioural Clinical Psychologists: Expressive Arts Activities as Potentially Favourable Conditions Which Facilitate One's Observing of One's Own Streaming of Automatic Thoughts

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this article was to focus on how to design education which would potentially provide favourable conditions in the process of cultivating postgraduate students enrolled in a cognitive-behavioural psychotherapy course. Such training intends to benefit the students in terms of developing their alertness and awareness of their subjective mental internal experiences, allowing for the identification of flowing or running automatic thoughts and thus bringing those thoughts to a conscious layer of cognitions. Previous research revealed that the use of expressive art forms produces circumstances which expose an inner silent space which allows for the observation of one's flows of automatic thoughts. Thirteen postgraduate students enrolled in a cognitive-behavioural psychotherapy course participated in a session of an expressive art form aiming at creating a context in which automatic thoughts would move simultaneously at differing layers of cognition potentially allowing one to come upon the contents of one's own streaming of automatic thoughts. Results revealed that participants noticed both their streaming of automatic thoughts passing by and their ability to just watch the profusely pouring flows of automatic cognitions during the session. Results also revealed the potential for this expressive art form to provide pleasing conditions of training to learn and to acknowledge the present, the now existing instant. In the process of preparing cognitive-behavioural therapists who deal with mental and emotional disorders, the practical application of a simple expressive art form allowed students to perceive mentally in themselves what conditioning does to one's cognitions, emotions, and behaviours.

**Keywords:** Cognitive-behavioural clinical psychologists in training; Cognitive-behavioural conditioning processes; Expressive arts activities; Streaming of automatic thoughts.

**JEL classification:** I Health, Education, Welfare; Io General.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Assemblage of factual information

Humankind's direct participation in events or activities leads to the accumulation of knowledge, accretion of memories. Such assemblage of factual information that one knows builds one's cognitions and, of particular importance, it builds up the so called mental schemas, beliefs, notions, opinions, impressions, or bundles of memories. These are internal representations of the world, of one's self and of others that influence one's interpretations of every event or activity in which one participates directly or indirectly. Such renditions (thoughts) of one's life circumstances generate certain emotions that end up controlling one's behaviours. Then again, behaviours that are emitted in such settings strengthen, as with new evidence, those very emotions and associated versions, that is, those mental representations of the meaning or significance of something, thus toughening those already rooted cognitions, one's core beliefs, notions, opinions, or impressions or, in other words, one's internal representations of the world, of one's self and of others. On top of all that, thoughts (cognitions) create more thoughts (Beck & Dozois, 2011).

### 1.2 Assemblage of ancient information

Undoubtedly humankind shares several circumstances, conditions, contexts, settings, or scenes in life which shape one's mental schemas, beliefs, notions, opinions, impressions, that is, humankind's ancient and modern memories, deep cognitions or thoughts. Some of these shared memories symbolise timeless human issues such as the planet's reactions to the movement of the atmosphere (for instance, floods), overpopulation, and death, which build up roots of knowledge (inherited or acquired), not necessarily immediately accessible but nevertheless controlling one's flows of thoughts. An example of such shared memories would be a traditional narrative ("Noah and the Flood"), a story accepted as history which is deeply embedded, implanted, and profoundly rooted in humankind's mind as cognitive schemas or beliefs, notions, opinions, or impressions which activate streaming of thoughts, emotions and behaviours.

### 1.3 Assemblage of shared memories

The tale of "Noah and the Flood" succeeded in expressing something intangible that has been thought about by humankind for thousands of years. This iconic record of past events originated in the landscape of Ancient Mesopotamia (part of what is now known as Iraq), belonged to the Ancient Mesopotamia's oral tradition, and later on it was printed in Ancient Babylonian Cuneiform script on clay tablets, in a literary style, using Semitic Babylonian, that is, Akkadian (closely related to Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic). Therefore, it passed on from Akkadian Atra-hasis Epic to the Hebrew Old Testament then to the Greek New Testament and then to the Arabic Koran. In the Book of Genesis, Atra-hasis Epic is told as the great inundation which is said to have occurred in the time of Noah (Finkel, 2014).

Both the building of this particular boat and the memory of this particular hero (and his kin, by blood or marriage) that saved all species endured, continued to live, persisted. From the Ancient Mesopotamia's literature to these times, the Babylonian hero and the ark he built (actually a huge coracle) lasted (undergoing, as it might be expected, various adaptations to the distinct circumstances of different epochs and places) and to these days it is still recounted (Collins, 2008; Finkel, 2014) to children everywhere.

### 1.4 Collection of factual and ancient information and assemblage of shared memories

Through conditioning, humankind's mental schemas or core beliefs, notions, opinions, impressions were shaped from one's very early stages of development (Bowlby, 1958; Bowlby, 1985; Ginsburg & Opper, 1988). One's core beliefs, notions, opinions, impressions give direction to one's thinking and impose regulations on one's cognitions (thoughts) which will govern one's emotions and behaviours.

Such knowledge, obtained from a predecessor or from direct observation or participation in an event, may actually be detrimental to one's change when it comes to the modification of one's

dysfunctional behaviours and maladaptive emotions (Beck, 1991; Bowlby, 1985). If one considers that "... memories are ashes of everything dead and buried..." (Krishnamurti, 1976) and that the psychological record providing permanent evidence of or information about past events contains the good and the bad, the pleasant and the unpleasant, and also several labels or tags created by humans and used to mark and to judge each other, one becomes lucid about the character of the source for one's own thoughts, emotions, behaviours, and self-examination. One then begins to realise that one's pouring of automatic thoughts (cognitions), in a kind of pendulum-like swing between the past and the future, are the movement of one's core schemas or roots of thinking or upbringing or, in other words, one's conditioning (Beck, 1991; Beck & Dozois, 2011, Skinner, 1984).

From that very source one experiences, learns and consequently the learning about anything at all or about one's self does not offer real learning, but just more knowing, acquiring, accumulating or translating (thoughts) from the perspective of one's upbringing, core beliefs, from one's previous knowledge, that is, one's past, one's conditioning, one's already clouded, troubled, distressed, corrupted, fogged, obscured perspective by one's past.

One's cognitions, streaming from the deeper layer of the schemas, moving through the layer of automatic thoughts, arriving at the more outer boundary of consciousness, are all and always conditioned. There is not a single cognition or behaviour that is unconditioned. Knowing it, thinking about it, and attempting to change it are also conditioned. Everything anyone thinks or does is conditioned by one's memories. Conditioning creates a vicious cycle where thoughts control emotions that control behaviours that control emotions that control thoughts (Beck, 1991; Beck & Dozois, 2011).

## 1.5 The troubling question

If one, whose occupation is to prepare postgraduate students enrolled in a cognitive-behavioural psychotherapy course, sees in oneself what conditioning does, how would one educate those postgraduate students in order for them to see in themselves what their upbringing or conditioning does? More specifically how to design education which would potentially provide favourable conditions to facilitate the process of becoming aware and able to observe, to watch, to look attentively, to see in themselves, to discover the fact, to come upon the contents of one's own streaming of automatic thoughts?

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Participants

Thirteen postgraduate students enrolled in a cognitive-behavioural psychotherapy course, two males and 11 females, participated in a session of an expressive art form which aimed at creating a context where, while the students would be engaged in a relaxing activity, automatic thoughts would move, would keep on talking inwardly at differing layers of cognition, prompting in one certain emotions and behaviours.

### 2.2 Materials and procedure

A white rectangular sheet containing black thin lines depicting the contours of different images, which could be freely coloured, were randomly distributed among the participants. There were then 13 different motifs, one for each of the 13 participants. The motifs to be coloured were (in alphabetic order): a) A bird in its nest, a huge bee, several flowers; b) A bird's bath with three birds bathing, a blooming garden; c) A cat sleeping in a rock chair surrounded by vases with and without foliage; d) A huge rabbit, mountains, and flowers; e) A mermaid sharing the deep ocean with fishes and leaves; f) A narrow street with a boy playing with his dog, another boy in front of a mailbox, and a couple crossing the road; g) An elephant surrounded by leaves; h) An Indian abstract drawing; i) An old typewriter, an old camera, two old cassettes, an old phone, a foot of roller skates, a magic cube; j) One single horse surrounded by huge leaves and flowers; k) Royal chairs, old books, clothing of an ancient magician; l) The entrance to a farmhouse, vases with flowers, an old wood wheel; m) Three children ice skating.

After having received a specific drawing, that is, a particular representation of forms or objects on a surface by means of lines, the students were alerted to the presence of a table where dozens of colouring pencils were displayed. There were also available several pencil sharpeners.

The students were then instructed to look at the drawing they had in hands with attention, then, when ready to act, to go and to freely select the colouring pencils they wished, and then to get back to their sits and quietly wait for more instruction.

When the students were back in their sits, ready to begin colouring, they were instructed to quietly do the painting while at the same time being attentive, giving complete attention to their streaming of automatic thoughts, that is, those thoughts flowing or operating without volition or conscious control. They were further instructed to just watch those thoughts passing by, not reacting to those thoughts, letting them go, without following any of the thoughts, without judging them.

At the end of the expressive arts activities, each student was provided with a white lined sheet of paper and instructed to describe or to give an account or representation in words of their mental experience during the activities.

## **2.3 Results**

Students' reports on their subjective mental internal experiences (automatic thoughts) during the expressive arts activities were considered in detail and subjected to an examination in order to discover essential features or meaning in terms of their content (Bardin, 1977). Data were compared, grouped, and classified bringing out the following facts.

All (100%) of the postgraduate students enrolled in a cognitive-behavioural psychotherapy course reported that they detected several different automatic thoughts flowing simultaneously during the act of colouring. Also all (100%) of them reported detecting automatic thoughts of being worried about selecting the appropriate colours for the task at hand in order to colouring realistically (for instance, "...leaves exist in shades of green...") and thoughts related to being concerned about being able to finish colouring before the end of the session.

### **2.3.1 One's memories (the past)**

Postgraduate students enrolled in a cognitive-behavioural psychotherapy course also reported noticing, amongst other flows, several automatic thoughts regarding one's past, that is, they (53.8%) reported noticing streaming of automatic thoughts that were in fact memories passing by, past experiences being remembered and running through one's mind, and reported being able to watch, for instance, good and bad episodes of their childhood and/or adolescence passing by, good and bad episodes of their early school years moving past, and episodes of several Christmas holidays in family.

In addition they reported unexpected, surprising thoughts like, for instance, thoughts about the roots of one's family's surnames, the first names of people met long ago and never seen again, and the automatic cognitive build up (conceived by the imagination) of a pretend story for the image being coloured.

### **2.3.2 One's schedule (the future)**

Some (23.0%) of the postgraduate students reported noticing, amongst other flows, automatic thoughts that were actually reminders of one's schedules for that particular day, after finishing the training session.

### **2.3.3 One's profusely flowing of automatic thoughts**

Some (15.4%) of the students reported that the activities put in motion a great deal of automatic thoughts: "...so many automatic thoughts that I decided to try and ignore them..."; "...automatic thoughts originated by those initial automatic thoughts..."; "...being pulled by those automatic thoughts..."

### **2.3.4 Acknowledging the here and now, the present moment**

One student reported detecting a feeling of joy associated to the colouring (behaviour) activity itself (expressive art form) and a distinct realisation or recognition of how joyful it was not having anyone distressing her on that exact instant (the here and now, the present moment).

### 3. Discussion

Results showed that expressive arts activities provided favourable conditions that in fact facilitated the postgraduate students enrolled in a cognitive-behavioural psychotherapy course to observe, to watch, to look attentively, to see, to discover, to come upon the contents of one's own streaming of automatic thoughts.

All of the students, not just the females (Keller-Dupree & Perryman, 2013), reported noticing layers of streaming of thoughts during the expressive arts activities and also reported on the specific contents of those flows. The only two male participants, in writing their reports on their mental experiences with the expressive art activities, developed or executed their reports with utmost care and in minute detail on their flowing of cognitions.

Automatic thoughts reported were mostly about the past and the future and only one participant reported thoughts about the present moment (the joy of not having anyone disturbing her activities), even though as a consequence of a previous thought related to the past. Results showed that expressive arts activities provided favourable conditions that in fact facilitated the postgraduate students enrolled in a cognitive-behavioural psychotherapy course to come upon the contents of one's own streaming of automatic thoughts but also that expressive arts activities would indeed potentially provide pleasing conditions for the students to learn and to acknowledge the here and now, that is, the present moment.

Being attentive to one's thoughts that flow without volition or conscious control is the first step to becoming aware of one's core schemas and thus to understand how one's past strikes one's present. One's past, actually built by one's own thoughts, seem to need a story, a conceptual identity ("...my ancestry..."; "...the roots of my family's surnames..."; "...pretend story for the image being coloured...").

Knowing how one's cognitions, emotions, and behaviours are conditioned and discerning the dynamics among these three elements is the second step to becoming aware of one's core schemas. Seeing the streaming of automatic thoughts pouring freely allows one to refuse to consider or to hold those automatically running thoughts as the truth or as a fact that has been verified, a true statement.

The third step is one's conscious awareness of one's present moment ("...this is such a joyful moment and nothing upsetting my activity..."). Such awareness of the here and now breaks one free from one's conditioned schemas or core beliefs, which even though may be awakened, aroused or activated from time to time, will not control one's emotions, behaviours and cognitions neither will stay alive and strong continuously feeding on one's cognitions (Beck & Dozois, 2011). Humans are always thinking, feeling, acting in an endless vicious circle, never breaking that circuit, which conditions the brain to function entirely monotonously, generating an entirely mechanical life form.

According to the cognitive-behavioural model of learning one's mental schemas act as the backdrop against which one's thoughts, emotions, and behaviours unfold. This backdrop or scenario operates at the present moment, for example, the very instant the student sees the white rectangular sheet containing black thin lines depicting the contours of different images. The student sees and interprets the content of the contours giving it a certain meaning, a meaning that will depend on the student's mental schemas, core beliefs, acquired knowledge, past experiences, conditioning. Thus, the present moment contains both the past and the future, tomorrow.

The past, modified in the present (by one's cognitive flows), continues into tomorrow, which is the future. Thus, the future is also the present moment. The present moment contains all time, that is, the future, the past, and the present is the now, the present moment. The now is both time and thought. Thought is memory, thought is the past stored as knowledge, and knowledge is always the past. This past infiltrates the present (one's present circumstances, one's present difficulties that cause one's worries or emotional tension), changes itself and moves on. Thus, the past is the future and the future is the now, the present moment.

From the past, traversing the present and moving toward the future, there is a constant movement, a cycle. Would it be possible to remain in the present, which is all the time, without any movement? One student clearly and specifically reported staying (even if briefly) in the present moment or, in other words, reported experiencing the comforting character of the present moment or acknowledged the here and now.



All of the students quietly executed the expressive arts activities and reported watching automatic cognitions travelling by. Expressive arts activities in the instruction of postgraduate students enrolled in a cognitive-behavioural psychotherapy course greatly assisted the students in learning the identification of automatic thoughts that arise from schemas that do not represent the present moment but the past, the acquired knowledge. This acquired knowledge includes phylogenetic, ancient (belonging to times long past, from ancient civilizations), ontogenetic, and knowledge related to circumstances and ideas of the present age.

#### 4. Conclusion

In the process of educating postgraduate students enrolled in a cognitive-behavioural psychotherapy course, and aiding them to perceive mentally in themselves, to see in one's mind, to become aware of what conditioning does to one's cognitions, emotions, and behaviours, the application of expressive arts activities ensue quite friendly circumstances for the student to notice and observe in oneself the occurrence of streams of automatic thoughts and also the contents of those flowing cognitions. To become aware of one's automatic cognitions through the senses make it possible for the student to genuinely grasping the central principles and the main elements of the cognitive-behavioural model of learning and its related interventions.

##### 4.1 Policy implications

The inclusion of expressive arts activities in the instruction of cognitive-behavioural clinical psychologists in training requires the presence and the expertise of a psychologist who embodies awareness of what conditioning does to one's cognitions and behaviours.

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