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The role of a psycho/social model in interpreting the art of children and the usefulness of such a model for education in tertiary art institutions.

Abstract

The debates on the viewing of art from cognitive, psychoanalytic and more recently therapeutic perspectives have, like so many current debates resting on positions of difference, been hindered by the rigidity of the premises on which these ideologies are based. There is an ensuing failure to accept the legitimacy of what are seen to be more eclectic disciplines such as social psychology which are reliant on cross disciplinary explanations. This paper argues that the psychologist may well ignore the socially shared significances underpinning behaviour and the postmodernist of sociology may well be too intent on dis-aggregating the art work making agreement on personal significances unlikely. This paper suggests that a social/psychological model of explanation encourages a more coherent and morally defensible exploration of the reciprocal interconnections between individuals, their unconscious representations of sublimated states, their conscious cognitive representations and the effects of their social environments. However such a model poses real dilemmas for current models of education in art institutions when disciplines seem to be becoming more discrete and less inclusive. The question is posed as to whether there is a need in tertiary art institutions to explore a more cross disciplinary approach which is less fearful of the tag of eclecticism?

Biography

I am a registered (and practising) Psychologist and a Member of the Australian Psychological Society. I have taught in secondary schools in both the country and the city, in the TAFE system and in Teachers' Colleges. I am now a full time lecturer in Psychology at the College of Fine Arts, UNSW. . Whilst teaching Developmental and Educational psychology I have become more interested in the cross disciplinary connections between art and psychology and teach a number of introductory courses in the emerging discipline of Art Therapy. My private practice is primarily concerned with children and their families.

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Education is a changing social institution with an increasingly political nature that seems to encourage decision making on the basis of expediency rather than educational philosophy. In both the secondary and tertiary sector it is subject to the increasingly economically driven demands of a society that relies on the products of education but is loathe to allocate the resources necessary to maintain an exciting and dynamic system. As public education becomes the scapegoat of the politicians and the media in its perceived failure to produce the type of 'educated' young people the society believes they have the 'right' to expect, and students come with greater expectations of this education, then institutions come increasingly under question. Added to these problems are the counter forces of research academics who recognise and encourage specialisation while the institutions understand from a pragmatic, economic perspective, the need to encourage cross disciplinary research and teaching. How then does an art institution respond to these multiple and often conflicting demands? This paper argues that the dilemmas facing tertiary art institutions are exacerbated by a failure to recognise and respond to the concept of binaries where explanations achieve status by excluding and marginalizing what they are not. These are the same dilemmas that face practitioners when trying to explain the art of children.

An analysis of the art of children illustrates the potential consequences when there is a failure to cross the boundaries of disciplines and serves well to highlight the academic and administrative dilemmas for art institutions. While the paper suggests a model for the analysis of children's art, a model which encourages the exploration of the possible multiple and interdependent layers of meaning and intent it does not provide such a clear solution for the problems of teaching within a multidisciplinary art institution. Rather it proposes a process that does not deny the integrity of academic disciplines but may prove more useful in answering the questions that the administrators and academics must investigate if they are to continue to satisfy the academic, social and economic demands of their consumers. It argues against adherence to narrow ideologies where the purism of specific theory is seen to leave us with no clear understanding of the world of children and their art and the rigidity of academic boundaries that limit cross disciplinary research and teaching and limit the possibilities for students to move between art disciplines. It advocates that accepting diverse and interdependent positions is not only legitimate but also worthwhile. What is proposed here then, is a model of social psychology where there is no centre and no 'other', where the interest is focused on the intersection at boundaries and the reciprocal influences of allied influences.

How then do the various theories explain the development of art making abilities and explain the images that result? Developmental psychologists such as Piaget (1929) systematically mapped age related stages of artistic development that are dependent upon qualitative changes in thinking which themselves are dependent upon some common maturational timetable. Thus the development of a child's images from unrecognisable scribbling to realistic representations and finally to more conceptual or symbolic representations, is seen to be a reflection of changes in cognitive processes from an approach that relies solely on the immediate sense, through a stage where representations are dependent on concrete experience, through finally to an ability to conceptualise in the abstract.

In an attempt to categorise the cognitive processes involved in the art making process, theorists such as Lowenfeld (1975), Eisner (1984) and Goodnow (1977), have itemised descriptions of the typical artistic characteristics of each of the stages of development, including documentation on the representations of the human figure, its perspective, its attention to detail and its portrayal of that which is 'expected' or 'unexpected' from a normative developmental perspective. Such taxonomies have come to be used by psychologists who use children's representations as a non-verbal indicator of cognitive development.

So they argue that changes in drawings will reflect changes in thinking, and the increasing ability to discriminate amongst stimuli, to categorise according to existing schemata and to make conceptual decisions as to an appropriate way of representing the resulting cognition. This the cognitivists argue is the rationale for a child's shift from representing 'what they know' rather than what they see, to an ability to represent what they see regardless of the perceptual 'leaps' this might involve. So a child will draw a chimney perpendicular to the roof, reflecting at least an understanding of the horizontal and perpendicular -if not of gravity. A child when asked to draw one object in front of another will inevitably draw them as though they are both in full view in spite of the fact that only part of the rear image will be visible. Similarly a child will depict swimmers as bodies floating on the top of the water. All such practices reflect changes in cognition and a growing understanding of 'rules' and an increasing willingness to abide by these. Therefore as a child's experience broadens so too will their ability to adapt their existing cognitive schemata in order to accommodate both new incoming stimuli and cognitions that have been modified as a result of experience. Thus the construction of their 'reality' is an active, dynamic process dependent on developing cognitions.

However such an explanation fails to reflect the influence of the child's personal and social context except to the degree that it provide opportunities for new experiences. Furthermore, even cognitive constructionist such as Vygotsky (1978) who recognise the 'socialised' nature of learning and who rely on the idea that learning occurs within a 'scaffolding' framework provided by a social context, fail to explain the intersections of intra and inter personal contexts on emerging understandings as depicted in children's art.

More recently Lowenfeld and Brittain (1987) have proposed that the art process itself provides a means of social growth.

The viewing and looking at one another's work and one's ideas is a first step in communicating these thoughts and ideas to others. Art has often been thought of primarily as a means of communication, and as such it becomes a social rather than a personal expression. The (drawing) can then become an extension of the self out into the world of reality as it begins to encompass others in the viewing of the subject matter (1987, p65).

Such an interpretation begins to explore the ways that an individual constructs personal meanings which may or may not reflect their 'objective' reality and accepts the role of socialisation in these interpretations. However, in its reliance on conscious cognitions it fails to account for those expressions in art which bear no resemblance to any understanding of reality.

While these cognitive processing abilities are obviously relevant in the learning to assimilate and accommodate new images, they are no less important in the development of emotional and social relationships. As the child moves from the pre-conceptual thinking of the two year old where transductive thinking may well lead to the conclusion that as "witches are bad, Mummy is bad, therefore Mummy must be a witch" to the more intuitive thinking of the seven year old and the more concrete thinking of the pre-adolescent, then the concomitant issues concern the way that children select, perceive, categorise and make attributions of cause and effect in social relationships.



Picture 1: Mum the Witch

Psychoanalytic theory is most often proposed to explain the unconscious underpinnings of beliefs and their effects on art making, as the goal of psychoanalytic understandings is to “enlarge the domain of conscious thinking, to fill gaps in it, to uncover and dissolve resistances against permitting psychic contents to gain consciousness” (Anna Freud, 1958, p.259). Central to this theory is an acceptance of the unconscious determinants of behaviour. What the artist creates is a unconscious compromise resulting from the inner conflict between the need to express certain feelings directly and a fear that these feelings will be inappropriate or socially unacceptable. The compromise is manifested in the concrete expression of fantasies and fears in an altered art form. This has two effects. Firstly it allows a reconciliation of internal impulses in opposition to the requirements of the outside world. Secondly, because of its aesthetic quality, the work permits a conscious pleasure in forbidden wishes and impulses that remain in the unconscious.

Those such as Freud would argue that it is this very process of sublimation that facilitates creative energy. How better for the young child to be ‘rid’ of the newborn member of their family, the baby that is seen by him to be usurping his rightful position as the centre of the mother’s attention than to painlessly and with great consciousness “paint out” that figure. How better to express the anger a child feels as they try to reconcile their dependence and their need for separation from symbiotic relationships with primary caregivers than to paint those figures as the “wicked witch” a figure one can rightfully reject!

The more recent psychoanalytic theorists such as Winnicott (1971) proposed a path by which we can trace the child’s early representations and later cultural constructions. The art work becomes the transitional object conceived internally and expressed externally in a space where inner and outer realities can be woven together through an object that participates in and draws upon both inner psychic world and the outer. Thus in the way that the art object represents or substitutes for the unconscious thought (or indeed conscious but not wished to be exposed), then the art becomes more than a symbolic representation and its importance rests not simply in what it represents. It implies a process as well as an object, a “journey of progress toward experiencing”: a journey representing something in between primary creative activity and projection of what has already been introjected (Winnicott,1971, in Adams, 1993, p178)

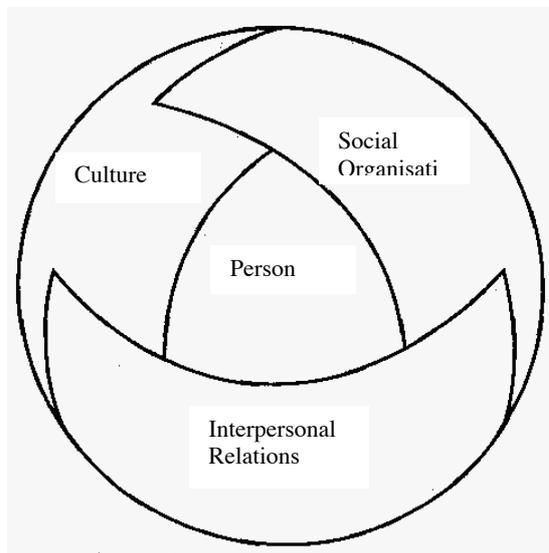
The formation of social and emotional beliefs is also dependent on the ability to express emotion and on a shared understanding of referential meaning. Children need to communicate how they feel and what they want. But such ability depends on the development of a communication system both verbal and non-verbal. Vygotsky would argue that the construction of social meanings is partly dependent on language. Yet clearly a child has needs, thoughts and emotions before these can be expressed in socially and linguistically correct form. And of course psychoanalytic theory would have us believe that our real needs are difficult to access let alone express.

To what extent can the theories of cognitive development, and psychoanalysis and object relations theory guide us in the interpreting of children’s art? From a cognitive perspective the art making process represents the means by which a child can explore their environment through the increasingly sophisticated and ‘educated’ manipulation of different mediums. The choice of media, the choice of style and the selection of what is to be included and what excluded, is dependent on the cognitive processes of the relevant and the personally salient. From an analytic perspective the process provides a cathartic experience, a channel for resolving unconscious conflict and for expressing that which is too hard to put into words. The product represents that which is

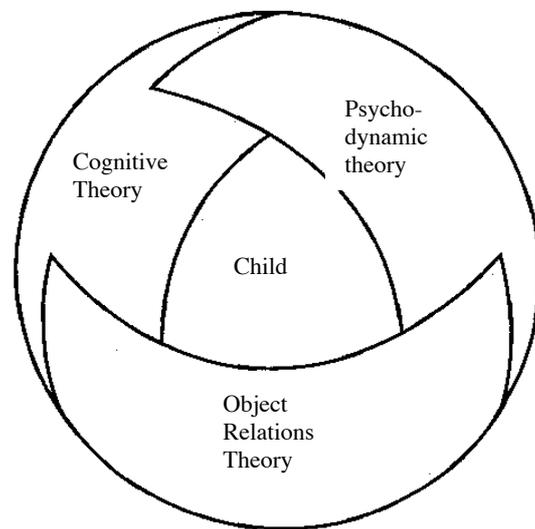
unconscious and therefore not known. So, analysis of the symbols becomes as concerned with the way they reflect, reinforce and extend each other in ways that allow the art to reflect the self but not only the self.

The problem lies in that each of these approaches ignores the contribution of the other. How can the child's willingness to postpone the pleasure of using a particular medium be seen to be more than the result of a cognitive selection process, more than the effect of a cognitive understanding of shape, colour, form and balance and more than the result of unconscious motivations transformed into unpre-empted images? Perhaps a more holistically satisfying method of approaching a child's artwork is the application of a social-psychological theory. Such a theory with its emphasis on both the intra-personal dynamics of personality as well as the interactions of intra-personal relationships - that is both with individuals and their environments - has long been seen to be an uncomfortable and theoretically unacceptable compromise discipline accepted by neither psychology nor sociology.

However from a practical perspective a social/psychological model provides a means by which the art work can be construed to have meaning as a representation of the individual's construction of their own reality within their own environment. Gold (1997, p.49) proposes a specific model whereby it is possible to explore four areas of influence. The four areas are not hierarchical, as one might expect from developmental psychology, nor are they 'nested' as one might expect from a systems or sociological approach. There are no assumptions made that one section of the model exerts supreme influence, yet each shares a boundary with the other three.



Gold's Original Model 1997



**Adaptation of Gold's Model to Explain
A psycho-social interpretation of Children's
Art**

Thus the effect of any one area of influence on another can be direct without the involvement of any of the others or may be indirect via the penetration of other boundaries. Nor is it the case that the analysis of the 'person' segment is restricted to intra-psycho phenomena be they cognitions or emotions, any more than the analysis of the culture need be limited to the deconstruction of accepted social belief systems. It is a model that not only acknowledges a recognition of the discreteness of each area but also encourages a search for points of intersection and shared significances across areas.

This model would accept that through the interactions with each of the areas of analysis, the ego will achieve an integration of external and internal influences. In so doing it encourages the notion of alternatives to the immediacies of experience. So the individual's experiences are mediated by their intersections with others in both micro and macro social systems. In accepting the inevitability of such interactions the model accepts the bi-directionality of influence. While on one hand the model expands potential explanations, on the other hand it restricts the overpowering influence of individual explanations of behaviour and renders them limited.

So it would be seen that an individual might categorise (either consciously or unconsciously) experiences that come from relationships with others within the context of a particular social organisation and the influences of the socialised customs of the macro culture. But as importantly there is recognition that the personal meanings an

individual constructs will also be dependent on unconscious integration of these experiences with existing schemata. It is this integration that might further 'camouflage' the reality by rendering it more acceptable to the individual on a conscious level. In terms of understanding children's art it reflects not only the more obvious influences but points to the reciprocal influence of the transitional art object which carries the meaning of that which mirrors the self and, like the self mirrors the other, and yet can be reduced to neither the self nor the other (Winnicott 1971). That is, children will frequently employ the graphic symbol system to make art in order to build for themselves (and sometimes for others) tangible, semi-permanent, somewhat iconic models of, and for self and world – past present and future" (Wilson, 1985, p93).

To return to the images portrayed above, how can any sense be made of the painting out of figures (the mother) if the cultural environment is not understood, if the dynamics between existing siblings and parents are not recognised and if family dynamics are not recognised? Similarly, how might one interpret the depiction below of overemphasised teeth (a commonly assumed indicator of aggression)? Does it represent a very overt self consciousness at the lack of teeth in relation to her peers or does it in fact indicate aggression? The drawing makes more sense when it is understood that this three year old lost her teeth in an earlier accident – an accident of which she has no memory. Then an equally plausible explanation is that it represents repressed fear of the earlier accident.

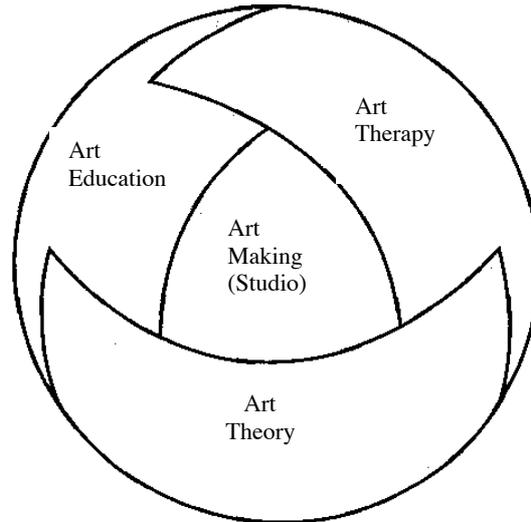


Picture 2: Teeth

So while it may seem acceptable to all theories to say that the concrete visual forms produced in artwork objectify inner representations by externalising them, the question remains whether externalisation brings an unconscious referent to consciousness or changes it in any other way? Does the externalising involve conscious or preconscious mediation of the referent? Does the externalising in the art work serve to encourage a form of less subjective mediation by allowing the individual to put social distance between themselves, their inner conflicts and the concrete work? Does the art work occupying as it does "the space between illusion and reality constitute a stable created space, distinct from and related to a changing environment" (Adams, 1997, p180).

It might be argued those specific discourses such as psychoanalytic theory, cognitivism and social theory, depend for their survival on the existence of dualities and difference and the perception that their particular theory satisfactorily explains created art. On the other hand a psycho-social approach far from being ideologically tentative is a means of denying the shackles of narrow theory parading in the garb of purism and a means by which the art work can be draped with multiple layers of purpose and meaning.

If such a model of explanation is accepted then it is also possible that it can serve to highlight the potential integration of specific disciplines within a tertiary art institution without compromising their individual academic integrity.



Application of Gold's Model to a Tertiary Art Institution

Here the areas of art making (studio arts) meet with art education (understandings of cognition), art theory (understandings of cultural influences) and art therapy (recognition of the role of the individual). The boundaries represent the places of potential interaction because there are “conceptual counterparts across the boundaries....the distinctiveness of each (area) of analysis generates distinctive processes across each boundaries” (Gold, 1997,p49). Rather than negating the relevance of any area, the model serves to highlight points of commonality and points where influence can be dispersed through adjacent areas. Such a model has quite profound implications in the way that disciplines are designed, delivered and assessed as each tends to have inherent approaches and criteria for acknowledging success. As well such a model poses problems for administrators in terms of ensuring a degree of autonomy to particular disciplines whilst at the same time encouraging greater cross disciplinary opportunities.

This paper does not advocate that boundaries between psychological explanations or academic disciplines be removed. Nor does it advocate that one interpretation or one art discipline has more integrity and worth than another. What it does suggest is that crossing boundaries encourages greater depth of understandings not possible when theories of explanation and discipline boundaries are rigid. It remains the challenge for tertiary art institutions to incorporate such possibilities at a time when ‘exclusivism’ and discreteness tend often to be the rationale for independent existence.

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