

## The Effects of Expressive Arts on the Evoking of Automatic Thoughts during the Training at A Graduate Level of Personal and Professional Development of Cognitive-Behavioural Clinical Psychologists: A Qualitative Study

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### Abstract

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The clinical psychologist rooted in a cognitive-behavioural perspective of learning guides interventions on the principle that automatic thoughts have a controlling influence on emotions and behaviours and on the practice of accessing these thoughts and bringing them to the level of processing where they will be subjected to conscious analyses. Will expressive arts activities evoke automatic thoughts? Eleven graduate level cognitive-behavioural clinical psychologists in training described their unique subjective experiences with expressive arts activities during five sessions. Qualitative data collected from interpretations made by the participants themselves were subjected to triangulation and systematically converged in the way to confirm the theory that expressive arts do evoke automatic thoughts, lead to individual insights about personal problems and issues, and benefit the grasping of the theoretical concepts being trained.

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**Keywords:** Expressive arts, automatic thoughts, personal and professional training, cognitive-behavioural, clinical psychologist

### 1. Introduction

The clinical psychologist rooted in a cognitive-behavioural perspective of learning guides his/her interventions on the principles that, on the one hand our cognitions have a controlling influence on our emotions and on our behaviours and, on the other hand the way we behave may deeply affect our patterns of thoughts and our emotions. Cognitions, emotions, and behaviours represent a person's areas of cognitive-behavioural functioning. The essential strategy for the modification of cognitions and behaviours requires, first of all, the development of the ability to evoke automatic thoughts, that is, to call forth or to make appear, occur, flow or to make known automatic thoughts, which are cognitions triggered in certain contingencies, that is, circumstances, events, situations or phenomena. Such automatic cognitions, usually not subjected to careful rational analyses, flow quickly immediately below the level where there is a flux of thoughts subjected to conscious attention (Zheng, Paterson, & Yap, 2013).

The training at a graduate level of personal and professional development of cognitive-behavioural clinical psychologists demands that the trainees try out strategies that will potentially facilitate the flow of automatic thoughts, aiming at accessing these thoughts and bringing them to the level of processing where they will be subjected to conscious analyses. Such abilities are a necessity in the identification of characteristic patterns of thoughts. In order to highlight the personal and professional development of cognitive-behavioural clinical psychologists' training, strategies such as "Written Records of Automatic Thoughts" and "Mental Imagery Exercises" are implemented as part of the experience on identifying relevant cognitions. During this practice, psychologists in training are asked to remember a recent situation that had elicited emotions and to put themselves mentally back to that exact situation with the aim of identifying automatic thoughts that flowed immediately before the emotional reactions described.

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Psychologists in training also experience “Activities of Expressive Arts” as a strategy or an exercise that potentially facilitates the flow of automatic thoughts (Hogan, 2016; Zheng, Paterson, & Yap, 2013). All those contingencies of training (“Written Records of Automatic Thoughts”, “Mental Imagery Exercises”, and “Activities of Expressive Arts”) represent an opportunity for undergoing the same kind of automatic thoughts, feelings, and behaviours that might be experienced by others and also for experiencing the same potential benefits associated to the cognitive-behavioural perspective of learning applied to the therapeutic context. In other words, this training of personal and professional development influence both the development of a personal consciousness and the development of interpersonal consciousness (Keller-Dupree & Perryman, 2013).

This article presents the results of a qualitative analysis on the effects of circumstances involving activities of expressive arts (phenomena) during the training at a graduate level of personal and professional development of clinical psychologists rooted in a cognitive-behavioural perspective of learning. Such analysis aimed specifically on the effects of expressive arts activities on the evoking of automatic thoughts. The term “expressive arts” makes reference to a set of activities (e.g. drawings/images, fables/tales, movement/dance, music, drama, writing, and poetry) that are put into service in an integrated manner in the process of self-discovery and change (Hogan, 2016; Knill, Levine, & Levine, 2005). The research questions guiding this analysis were the following: a) Would expressive arts have an effect of evoking automatic thoughts? b) What would be the themes that would manifest themselves from expressive arts in the training of cognitive-behavioural clinical psychologists? c) Would these automatic thoughts continue to be examined outside the training context? d) Would these analyses lead to individual insights about personal problems and issues?

## **2. Method**

### **2.1. Participants**

Eleven graduate level cognitive-behavioural clinical psychologists in training, between 21 and 44 years of age, participated in this training of personal and professional development. Ten of the participants were females and one participant was male. These trainees were all attending a discipline on cognitive-behavioural psychotherapy for a master's degree in clinical psychology in a public University and were knowledgeable individuals regarding the cognitive-behavioural perspective of learning.

### **2.2. Materials and Procedure**

During the training sessions, trainees were asked, along five sessions, to describe their unique experiences with each of the expressive arts activities.

#### **Sessions happened as follows:**

##### **Session 1 – Introductory Session and Phenomenon 1**

During the introductory session, group norms, confidentiality and the purpose of process were discussed. Trainees talked a little bit about their professional interests and about their feelings associated to this phase of training on personal and professional development. Next, trainees were handed a sheet of lined paper and asked to register in it her/his personal reflections on the following question: “If you were a fruit or alternatively a tree what kind of fruit or tree would you be?” (Phenomenon 1). After finishing making a written record on phenomenon 1, trainees were invited to voluntarily share with the group their unique subjective experience with it. Participants were also asked to create a weekly written record of reflection, where they would retrospectively register their reflections on their experiences with each of the circumstances (phenomena) and the effects those circumstances had on the evoking of automatic thoughts. Every week a new chapter was presented on the previously experienced circumstance.

##### **Session 2 – Phenomenon 2**

On the top of a table were freely available several differing colouring drawings, a variety of colouring pencils, sheets of lined paper, and trainees were asked to approach the table and to select one of the colouring drawings, some colouring pencils in order to freely colouring it (Phenomenon 2), and also a sheet of lined paper. When trainees ceased colouring, they were asked to register in the lined sheet of paper her/his personal reflection on the activity. After that, trainees were invited to voluntarily share with the group their unique subjective experience with phenomenon 2.

### **Session 3 – Phenomenon 3**

At the end of Session 2, participants were asked to bring for Session 3 a photography taken by them picturing something of the Nature that truly caught their attention and interest in their daily lives inside the University Campus. At the beginning of Session 3 trainees were asked to present to the group the photograph they took and brought to this session and to talk briefly about their option. On the top of a table, drawing papers, colouring pencils and crayons were available and trainees were asked to consider the following question: "If you decided to draw a frame for this photography, what kind of frame would you draw?" (Phenomenon 3). Participants also received a sheet of lined paper and were asked to register in this paper her/his personal reflection. When the written record was finished, trainees were invited to voluntarily share with the group their subjective experience with phenomenon 3.

### **Session 4 – Phenomenon 4**

For session 4 trainees were provided with a blank sheet of paper and a lined sheet of paper. On the top of a table were available colouring pencils and crayons. Trainees listened to two little La Fontaine fables. Then, they were asked to draw on a blank sheet of paper an image they thought would represent one of the two fables they had just heard (Phenomenon 4). Participants were asked to register in the lined sheet of paper provided her/his personal reflection on phenomenon 4. After concluding this activity, trainees were invited to voluntarily share with the group their subjective experience with the phenomenon just experienced.

### **Session 5 – Phenomenon 5**

For session 5 participants were provided with a sheet of lined paper. They were then read a phrase rendered by Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche and were then asked to reflect on its meaning on the sheet of lined paper provided (Phenomenon 5). At the end of the activity – reflecting and making a written record on the reflection, trainees were invited to voluntarily share with the group their subjective experience with phenomenon 5.

## **3. Results**

Data sources were: a) written registers of the personal reflections produced after each of the expressive arts activities (phenomena) during each of the five sessions; b) written registers of the reflections made in the weekly written record of reflection (the set of reflections registered during the following week of each experience with expressive arts activities). Sources of data were subjected to triangulation, that is, a process of combination of data obtained from multiples sources of data in a single study in order to examine a phenomenon in particular, in the search for convergence, to concentrate a spectrum of information in a single point and providing insights. The basic approach used for data triangulation involved formulating the triangulation's objective and data treatment. Triangulation's objective was discovering or prospecting the effects of expressive arts activities, according to the trainees own descriptions of their unique subjective experiences, on the evoking of automatic thoughts during the training at a graduate level of personal and professional development of cognitive-behavioural clinical psychologists.

The specific research problems were the following: a) Would expressive arts have an effect of evoking automatic thoughts? b) What would be the themes that would manifest themselves from expressive arts during the training of cognitive-behavioural clinical psychologists? c) Would these automatic thoughts continue to be examined outside the training context? d) Would these analyses lead to individual insights about personal problems and issues?

For data treatment, conceiving that qualitative data do not aim at nor are designed to measure, count or express in numbers, that they are related to the quality or character/characteristic of something, that they provide understanding of situations and interactions, perceptions, feelings and behaviours, that they are generally conveyed in words, images or objects, and that they are collected through the use of qualitative methods, the qualitative data collected during this training were critically compared and grouped before being analysed. After being examined, data were analysed and conclusions were drawn. The analysis carried out set priority towards the most relevant findings regarding the triangulation's objective, trends in the data were identified and the conclusions were connected to the objectives of data triangulation. After that, considering that the research design adopted was based in the phenomenological approach.

That is, a method of qualitative research in psychology that focuses in the analysis of the mental experience instead of focusing in the behaviour analysis, a Grounded Theory was implemented, that is, a theory that is constructed from naturalistic observations of the phenomena and reflecting the interpretations of the participants themselves, reflecting the subjective nature of the trainees' mental experience, which are considered to be fertile as a source of information. The theory developed states that expressive arts activities (phenomena) have an effect of evoking automatic thoughts during the training of personal and professional development of cognitive-behavioural clinical psychologists. In registering their subjective experiences with the phenomena, trainees described the effects of those activities of expressive arts on the flow of automatic thoughts. Moreover, they tended to describe the consequent activation of emotions that influenced their behaviours. Trainees described the flowing of automatic thoughts during the activities (phenomena), thoughts that flowed in the form of words (internal signals in a linguistic form) or in the form of images (internal signals in a visual form). A few examples of automatic thoughts that flowed in the form of words are (in alphabetical order), "...I am so unsettled...", "...how many times I have been deceived by people...", "...I am unable to part...", "...when one does something mean, one tries to forget...", "...You have no tranquillity...". A few examples of automatic thoughts in the shape of images are the following, "...grandparents house...", "...almond trees...", "...red colour...", "...uncle..."

Trainees also described the experience that those automatic thoughts that flowed, in words or images, triggered a variety of emotions. A few examples (in alphabetical order) are: "...anxiety...", "...calm...", "...missing some situation or someone...", "...regret...", "...remorse...", "...sadness...", "...shame...", "...well-being..." Trainees described the experience that emotions contingent to automatic thoughts led to certain behaviours during the group process. A few feeling/behaviour examples are (in alphabetical order), "...self censorship/avoid sharing with the group...", "...tranquillity/being a part of the group...", "...well-being/share with the group something so significant in my life..." Trainees shared the subjective experience that those sensations felt immediately before each session were very different from the sensations experienced immediately after each session. A few before/after examples are (in alphabetical order): "...anxiety/happiness...", "...anxiety/well-being...", "...fear/tranquillity...", "...happiness/inner emptiness without the activity...", "...melancholy/calm...", "...spine-chilling/peacefulness..."

#### 4. Discussion

Would expressive arts have the effect of evoking automatic thoughts? Collected data converge in the way of supporting the theory that expressive arts activity or expressing oneself artistically evokes automatic thoughts during the training at a graduate level of personal and professional development of cognitive-behavioural clinical psychologists. What are the themes that would manifest themselves from expressive arts in the training at a graduate level of personal and professional development of cognitive-behavioural clinical psychologists? Three were the themes evidenced in the flow of automatic thoughts evoked by expressive arts activities: Childhood, family, and loss. The expressive arts activities evoked or called forth or made appear or occur or made known or called to mind automatic thoughts whose themes were childhood life experiences. These same activities brought a flow of automatic thoughts associated to family experiences (with parents, brothers and sisters, grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins). Associated to expressive arts activities were also mentioned automatic thoughts related to sickness, death, and loss. The themes or the content of automatic thoughts, especially contents that are repetitive and persistent, are idiosyncratic and these contents tend also to be peculiar to all individuals facing similar circumstances or emotional problems, troubles and issues (Beck, 1976).

Would these automatic thoughts continue to be examined outside the training context? Trainees shared the experience of having these automatic thoughts returning afterwards in certain circumstances and that they would think, at a conscious level, about those automatic thoughts evoked during the sessions. They also registered a mix of thoughts, feelings, and behaviours outside the training sessions. These are some examples (in alphabetical order): "...fear of re-experiencing automatic thoughts...", "...I feel so good in the countryside...", "...I will definitely start to implement colouring activities with my son...", "...incomplete life...", "...it brought up good memories...", "...produced well-being...", "...reflecting on past experiences...", "...retrieve forgotten memories...", "...sometimes it feels like something is changing inside me...", "...to become aware of myself, to open the drawers and to take what was stored there, which was part of me, but which I had no idea...", "...to realise stuff about my life...", "...how lovely it is to remember childhood...", "...how to colour and to fill my life more...", "...I always make choices favouring aversive stimuli...", "...that activity made me feel well..."

Would the examination of automatic thoughts outside the training context lead to individual insights about personal problems and issues? Trainees registered that the evoking of automatic thoughts during expressive arts activities led to individual insights into personal issues. Some examples (in alphabetical order) of these individual insights are: "...the influence people have on our lives...", "...high levels of fear and anxiety...", "...I am sweet and sour with myself...", "...I do not have a close, caring, understanding, and affectionate family...", "...initially a concern with creativity...", "...lack of confidence on revealing myself to the group...", "...missing what will never come back...", "...self censorship...", "...there is not many people who are fond of me...".

Trainees mentioned the difficulty in sharing with the group their vivid subjective experiences with expressive arts activities and their concern in "...actively participating in the group...", "...volunteering to share...", "...self censorship in accepting the invitation to share with the group..."

Qualitative data collected from interpretations made by the participants themselves systematically converged in the way to confirm the theory that expressive arts evoke automatic thoughts, to reveal that the adoption of expressive arts in the process of training of personal and professional development of cognitive-behavioural clinic psychologists benefits the grasping of theoretical concepts, and also, in a certain way, to replicate Keller-Dupree and Perryman (2013) findings that expressive arts activities lead to the development of a better capacity of understanding of one's own life and the lives of future patients and of the anxiety, enthusiasm, hesitation, fear and resistance that patients will experience during the psychotherapeutic process.

## 5. References

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