Art: An Occupation With Promise for Developing Empathy

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Empathy is central to the interactions of occupational therapists who value personal dignity. Persons from various sectors of the behavioral sciences and the medical humanities have proposed that engagement with the arts can develop empathy, an assumption that prompted this inquiry. The observations of artists and art philosophers suggest that the assumption that art may develop empathy is grounded in the kindred natures of the two practices and in the actions that occur when a person engages with a work of art. The assumption that art may develop empathy is grounded in the kinship of the actions common to both practices: response, emotion, and connection. Artists and art philosophers' observations of human practices have uncovered three rules of art that may dispose one toward empathy: reliance on bodily senses, use of metaphor, and occupation by virtual worlds. Analysis of art's potential suggests that a person who would derive empathy from art must (a) use the senses to grasp feeling, (b) stretch the imagination to see a new perspective, and (c) invite an occupation that enhances understanding. Persons who hope to develop empathy must pursue an experience that evokes the fellow feeling that inspires it. Art can offer this experience.

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Therapists have discussed the importance of empathy in the occupational therapy process (Baum, 1980; King, 1980; Yerxa, 1980), and a select few have engaged in research efforts related to the construct (Christiansen, 1977; Wise & Page, 1980). In an official document that supported this earlier work, the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA, 1993a) identified empathy as central to the interactions of occupational therapists. Rogers (1975) described the disposition that is so valued in occupational therapy:

"It means entering the private world of the other and becoming thoroughly at home in it. It involves being sensitive, moment to moment, to the changing felt meanings which flow in the other person, to the fear or rage or tenderness or confusion or whatever, that he or she is experiencing.... In some respects it means that you lay aside your self. (p. 3)"

Decades ago, May (1939) argued in the behavioral science literature that the artistic experience coaxes persons toward empathy by taking them out of themselves. More currently, the enfranchisement of humanities subjects within a number of medical schools rests on several assumptions, one of them being that art fosters empathy (Charon et al., 1995).

Within the occupational therapy literature, art has been linked with empathy indirectly. The Essentials and Guidelines for an Accredited Educational Program for the Occupational Therapist (AOTA, 1993b) recommended a broad foundation of the liberal arts to develop capacities in communication and understanding—constructs linked with empathy. The use of specific works of art has been described as a workable means of sustaining the art of practice and enhancing therapists' understanding of their patients (Peloquin, 1989, 1996).

Art's association with empathy also appears in fiction. Shem's (1981) novel about the depersonalizing force of the medical system showed the effect of art on an intern named Roy Basch. After working for some time at the House of God hospital, Basch recalled:

"I lay on top of my bed and did not sleep. I imagined I felt what the gomers felt: an absence of feeling. I had no idea how bad I might be, but I knew that I could not do what Dr. Sanders had told us to do, to "be with" others. I could not "be with" others, for I was somewhere else, in some cold place. (p. 317)"

Friends got Basch away from work for an artistic event, and as one performer mimed the stages of youth, maturity, old age, and death, the intern was touched: "All of a sudden I felt as if a hearing aid for all my senses had been turned on. I was flooded with feeling....A handkerchief was placed in my hand, I blew my nose. I felt a hug" (p. 360). He later thought:
This assumption about art’s capacity to rekindle sensibility resonates with truth on an intuitive level. May’s (1939) hypothesis that art can coax persons toward empathy seems equally plausible. Most assumptions about art, however, lack the clarity and specificity of an articulate argument. Why do the arts invite the assumption that they will awaken a person’s sensibilities? What happens during an engagement with art that may yield fellow feeling? Do persons with expertise in the arts express similar views about the potential of art? These questions structured this inquiry.

The Nature of Art and Its Connection With Empathy as Seen in the Literature

The literature on art is vast, reaching back into antiquity and stretching across numerous fields to constitute a wealth of statements. In the face of this abundance, one possibility resonates with truth on an intuitive level. May’s (1939) hypothesis that art can coax persons toward empathy seems equally plausible. Most assumptions about art, however, lack the clarity and specificity of an articulate argument. Why do the arts invite the assumption that they will awaken a person’s sensibilities? What happens during an engagement with art that may yield fellow feeling? Do persons with expertise in the arts express similar views about the potential of art? These questions structured this inquiry.

The Nature of Art and Its Connection With Empathy as Seen in the Literature

The literature on art is vast, reaching back into antiquity and stretching across numerous fields to constitute a wealth of statements. In the face of this abundance, one can scarcely make an assertion about art without knowing that someone has elsewhere or at a different time disclosed another view. Moreover, to speak of art is to minimize the distinctions among the individual arts. Listening to a symphony is an act that differs from reading a novel or contemplating a sketch. Yet the likenesses among these acts—that each is art—make the world of art. When one steps into this world to explore the claim that art develops empathy, one restricts the search minimally.

For this inquiry, the visual and literary arts served as focal points for discussion. The nature of empathy as found in an earlier review of the behavioral science and philosophical literature further narrowed the search to the themes that characterize an empathic encounter: (a) an expression of being there, (b) a turning of the soul, (c) a recognition of both likeness and uniqueness in another, (d) an entry into the other’s experience, (e) a connection with the other’s feelings, (f) a power to recover from that connection, and (g) a personal enrichment that derives from these actions (Peloquin, 1995).

A sampling of 50 twentieth-century books on art available on a medical school campus that houses a humanities program served as resources. Any text or chapter that promised, by title, to address the aforementioned themes was reviewed. Citations and bibliographies from these first texts enlarged the search to more than 90 books and articles. The citations within this article are a representative sampling of a larger discussion.

A significant association between art and empathy that comes from the literature is that their natures are kindred. Artists and art philosophers identify three actions that works of art elicit from those who produce or appreciate them: (a) response, (b) emotion, and (c) connection. It can be argued that each of these actions resembles the actions of empathy.

Response

Art is known for the response that it prompts. Panofsky (1955) described the receptivity that characterizes this response. A work of art begins with an artist disposed to respond; it culminates in the response of those who appreciate it.

When a man looks at a tree from the point of view of a carpenter, he will associate it with the various uses to which he might put the wood; and when he looks at it from the point of view of an ornithologist he will associate it with the birds that might nest in it. Only he who simply and wholly abandons himself to the object of his perception will experience it aesthetically. (p. 11)

Art invites an immersion in some reality for the sake of understanding it.

An artist is also responsive to the artistic medium. Suppose that the cycles of natural events catch an artist’s attention. Depending on the medium used, the artist will respond differently:

A pencil creates objects by circumscribing their shape with a line. A brush, which creates broader spots, may suggest a disk-shaped patch of color. In the medium of clay or stone the best equivalent of roundness is a sphere. A dancer will create it by running a circular path, spinning around his own axis, or by arranging a group of dancers in a circle. (Arnheim, 1966a, p. 92)

In the making of art, the response that occurs is an interaction among artist, art—object, and medium. In the appreciation of art, the response is an interaction among audience, artist, and art—object. Both responses are interplays between thoughts and feelings. Carpenter (1919) thus said that artistic endeavors extend a basic human activity: “Within ourselves there is a continual movement outwards from Feeling towards Thought, and then to Action” (p. 15).

The movement is not linear, as Edman (1939) explained: “Anyone, indeed, who has ever written poetry knows how a poem often begins in the mind as a kind of cadence with a hardly specified meaning” (p. 68). Gilmour (1986) shared Edman’s sense of how meaning develops:

It is a misconception of the creative act to think of it as arising from a clear-cut intention of the artist, as if the materials employed were a mere means of expression.... A more realistic picture of the creative process is that after a certain amount of work has been done, the artist looks at the result, considers how to go on, and then modifies the piece as seems appropriate. (p. 16)
When an artist begins to create, so does a responsive search for meaning. When that search culminates in a work of art, a new search—for the meaning of color, cadence, or image—begins with the audience.

A work of art is so responsive in its becoming that it seems to be alive. Dillard (1982) saw life in the medium:

One does not choose a prose, or a handling of paint, as a fitting tool for a given task, the way one chooses a 5/16 wrench to loosen a 5/16 bolt. Rather—and rather creepily—the prose "secretes" the book.

(p. 124)

But Booth (1988) argued that the medium merely prompts creative action. It is the artist's engagement, he said, that turns art into something human: "To dwell with a creative task for as long as is required to perform it well means that one tends to become the work—at least to some degree" (p. 51). To dwell with a work for as long as it takes to appreciate it demands a similar engagement.

Art evokes a response that is deep and personal.

Empathy is known for a response similar to that found in art. One who empathizes enters into an exchange that shapes understanding of another's reality. Empathy calls for a receptivity to and active grasp of the situation and feelings of someone else. An empathic encounter is an interplay among a person who empathizes, a person who seeks understanding, and an event that prompts their connection. Like in art, the exchange of empathy moves back and forth from feeling to thought to action. When one person empathizes with another, the action is deep and personally responsive. The parallels between art and empathy are striking.

Emotion

The response that art evokes is often emotional. Emotion is thus the second characteristic in art that suggests its kinship with empathy. Langer (1953) called art the "envisagement of feeling" (p. 380) because many persons seem to turn to it for its emotionality. Edman (1939) described the intensity of the open-faced expression rendered in art:

The artist, be he poet, painter, sculptor, or architect, does something to objects, the poet and novelist do something to events; that compels the eye to stop and find pleasure in the beholding, the ear to hear for the sheer sake of listening, the mind to attend. (p. 17)

Such intensity of expression evokes strong feelings:

Suppose someone has studied certain facts, say, the physics of gravitation. He may have thoroughly understood the theoretical and practical consequences of the phenomenon. One day, suddenly, he is seized by the experience of what gravitation actually does to life and nature. He acknowledges the sensation of being pulled downward and he feels the same pull in all the animate and inanimate things about him...Such sensitivity is closely related to, or perhaps identical with, art. (Arneheim, 1966b, p. 342)

Because works of art customarily rouse feelings, Edman (1939) called them truancies from rational practices. He argued that literature teaches fellow feeling more clearly than life does. Dillard (1982) agreed:

In daily life we never understand each other, neither complete clairvoyance nor complete confessional exists. We know each other approximately, by external signs...But people in a novel can be understood completely by the reader, if the novelist wishes: their inner as well as their outer life can be exposed. (p. 47)

Goodman (1976a) said that although it would be absurd to see art as an emotional orgy, persons are so open to feelings in art that they often welcome works that arouse negative emotions of fear or disgust, accepting these as natural expressions of humanity.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Tolstoy (1960) argued art's responsibility in terms of feeling. He said, "The task for art to accomplish is to make that feeling of brotherhood and love of one's neighbor, now attained only by the best members of society, the customary feeling and the instinct of all men" (p. 190). Art's validation of emotions is one way of fostering fellowship.

Like art, empathy affirms emotionality. Empathy demands a sensitivity that stops, attends, and then grasps the feelings of someone else. The heightened sense of another's emotion may be seen as the turning that is called soulful in the literature on empathy (Buber, 1965). A fundamental aim of the empathic encounter, like the fundamental responsibility of art, is to make the feeling of brotherhood more customary.

Connection

The third characteristic action that art and empathy share is connection. Art both asks and helps persons to make connections with others. For this reason, Gilmour (1986) called visual works rehearsals for taking new perspectives: "Once we have experienced a Cezanne landscape, for example, we begin to see our own surroundings with his eyes...After intense involvement with art works we return to the world with new eyes" (p. 22).

Artists introduce their audiences to others whose views may differ:

One moves with [artists] in lands where one has never been, experiences loves one has never known. And this entrance into lives wider and more various than our own in turn enables us more nicely to appreciate and more intensely to live the lives we do not know. (Edman, 1939, p. 84)

Because of its capacity to bring strangers together, Dewey...
As they discuss that which causes response, emotion, and connection. This likeness of action suggests that those who would enhance their capacity to empathize in health care practice might learn from art how to respond, feel, and make meaningful connections.

The Specific Rules of Art That Promise to Develop Empathy

As they discuss that which causes response, emotion, and connection to occur, artists and art philosophers make observations that further clarify the hypothesis that art can develop empathy. These observations begin within a discussion of human practices.

Whether in the realm of art, science, or health care, MacIntyre (1984) defined practice as any coherent form of socially established activity within which goods internal to that activity are realized in the course of meeting its standards. An example may clarify his meaning. Chess players can increase their capacity to solve problems—an internal good—as they master the rules and steps of the game. MacIntyre elaborated:

We call them internal goods for two reasons: first...because we can only specify them in terms of chess or some other game of that specific kind and by means of examples from such games; and secondly because they can only be identified and recognized by the experience of participating in the practice in question. (pp. 188-189)

MacIntyre’s (1984) conceptualization of internal goods is apt for this discussion because empathy seems to be an internal good that may follow engagement with art. Those who discuss art cite certain aspects with such regularity that they emerge as rules. Three of these rules may dispose a person toward empathy: reliance on bodily senses, use of metaphor, and occupation by virtual worlds. Each rule warrants further discussion in terms of its potential.

Reliance on Bodily Senses

Art relies on the senses. Arnheim (1969) proposed that a person who paints, writes, composes, or dances, thinks with the senses. He also described the confluence of cognition and sensation that occurs in most persons:

As I open my eyes, I find myself surrounded by a given world: the sky with its clouds, the moving waters of the lake, the wind-swept dunes, the window, my study, my desk, my body....Through that world roams the glance, directed by attention, focusing the narrow range of sharpest vision now on this, now on that spot, following the flight of a distant sea gull, scanning a tree to explore its shape. This eminently active performance is what is meant by visual perception. (p. 14)

Because of its intelligent aspect, Arnheim renamed perception visual thinking. Artists engage their visual thinking capacities and ask their audiences to do the same.

As one example, artists read muscular behaviors at their emotional levels and re-create them to show the expressive nature of persons. Everyday total body movements become expressions in art: “Muscular behavior such as grasping, yielding, lifting, straightening, smoothing, loosening, bending, running, stopping, seem to produce mental resonance effects constantly” (Arnheim, 1966b, p. 69). Arnheim (1966b) thus asked persons to note the joyful abandon in the high-stepping bodies of Matisse’s dancers and to see oppressive fatigue in Picasso’s rendering of a woman at her ironing. In addition to the dancing and ironing that they portray, these bodies express emotion. One who engages in visual thinking about these bodily movements can derive a deeper understanding of what a high-stepping kick or a bending back can mean.

This rule of relying on the senses is not restricted to the visual arts. Wilde (1970) claimed that “it is Literature that shows us the body in its swiftness and the soul in its unrest” (p. 130). The expressive gestures in Tolstoy’s (1981) work are fine examples, particularly at that point when the title character lies near death:

"But what is the real thing?" he asked himself and grew quiet, listening. Just then he felt someone kissing his hand. He opened his eyes and looked at his son. He grieved for him. His wife came in and
No matter where in art one finds bodily expressions, one hones sensitivity in grasping their meaning (Panofsky, 1995).

Art builds on a common understanding that derives from the bodily senses. Paradoxically, however, art affirms the idiosyncratic character of human expression. Most artists, like Goodman (1976a), readily acknowledge their work as one way of seeing: “The eye comes always anciet to its work, obsessed by its own past and by insinuations of ear, nose, tongue, finger, heart, and brain” (p. 7). Because art is so open to various interpretations, it proves human subjectivity.

Art’s rule of relying on the senses may foster empathy by reminding therapists to scrutinize bodily expressions for their universal meaning. Therapists who master this rule might see others more fully, attending to the meaning of their gestures and intimations. A reaching hand or whining voice might be read as communications of familiar sentiments. Treatments might then include a hopeful nod or caring touch in a nonverbal reciprocity of feeling.

Art’s rule of relying on the senses may also foster empathy by reminding therapists of the singularity of personal views. After repeated encounters with subjective portrayals, therapists might see the tenuousness of book-learned theories. Claims to professional objectivity or better knowledge might yield to collaborations that include the patient’s perspective. Therapists sensitized through art might act on art’s lesson that any human reality implies a point of view.

Use of Metaphor

A second rule that promises to develop empathy is art’s use of metaphor to convey meaning. When using metaphor, an artist consciously likens two entities. Goodman (1976a) discussed metaphors in the context of travel. A metaphor, he said, has a home realm in which it dwells as a fact; an artist coaxes words or symbols into alien realms where they become “calculated category-mistakes” (p. 79). The word pistol, for example, dwells in the realm of firearms as a fact. It becomes a calculated category-mistake when placed in the alien realm of the comment, “She’s a real pistol!”

Gilmour (1986) saw the visual metaphor of New York City in Mondrian’s painting Broadway Boogie Woogie, with its grid-like bands and vivid shapes filling the canvas. Metaphor demands imagination. After engaging with Mondrian’s metaphor, a person might more readily see the rhythmic design in most cities.

Because metaphors make fresh connections, Gilmour (1986) argued that this mental activity stretches the capacity to understand. Booth (1988) argued more boldly that metaphor is an invitation to intimacy. He said that when Shakespeare had King Lear cry out, “Take physic, pomp” (p. 190), he pulled others into his perspective:

No matter how strongly I might object to having my mind turned to compare the flow of wealth to flowing feces, the command issued by the metaphor will have been obeyed even as I understand it. A part of my mind has thus been shaped into an intense active discussion about the gross parallels between taking a physic and curing pomp’s indifference to poverty and suffering. (p. 190)

Some persons may not agree that they should purge their lives of proud displays. But they must know Shakespeare’s meaning before they disagree. Understanding starts with this grasp of meaning.

Mastery of metaphor might dispose a person to empathize. A therapist grown accustomed to meanings found in metaphor might learn how disability affects a patient by asking, “What is this like for you?” Upon hearing that a patient feels like so many pounds of meat, a therapist might imagine the pain in such reduction. Therapists at ease with the travel of metaphor might more readily visit the alien realms of their patients.

Repeatedly exposed to metaphors that stretch their imagination, therapists might see humdrum in mindless routines and lock-step protocols. They might liken therapy to gardening or friendship and thus personalize their practice. Having found the worth of calculated category-mistakes, they might seek dissonant views as a source of fresh connections.

Occupation by Virtual Worlds

The third rule of art that may develop empathy is its call to inhabit virtual worlds. Goodman (1976b) affirmed the reality of fictional worlds: “Worldmaking as we know it always starts from the world that is already on hand; the making is a remaking” (p. 6). Fictional works seem real, and most readers engage with art because they find it meaningful.

In fact, works of art offer a coherence not so obvious in reality. Edman (1939) thus proposed that “the place to seek for reality is not in some metaphysical formula, but in the unimpeachable realities in works of art” (p. 57). Booth (1988) cast the process of engaging with art in terms of occupation:

When a story “works,” when we like it well enough to listen to it again and tell it over and over to ourselves and friends...it occupies...
Such occupation allows this discovery: "We find in art objects qualities in which the great world and its parts seem often wanting: human significance, human order, reason, mind, causality, boundary, harmony, perfection, coherence, purity, purpose, and permanence" (Dillard, 1982, p. 176).

Repeated sojourns into virtual worlds can develop empathy. Through art, therapists can learn about life from a number of scenes and characters. They can step into experiences with illness, disability, and occupation, using the realities of fiction as opportunities for observation, reflection, and understanding. They can learn from fictional caregivers how they succeed or fail. And in doing all of this, therapists can rehearse the call of empathy—to walk in another's shoes.

The comments of artists and art philosophers give clarity and support to the otherwise vague assumption that art might foster empathy. It can be hypothesized that reliance on bodily senses, use of metaphor, and occupation by virtual worlds can prepare therapists for the sensing, imagining, and understanding that structure empathy.

Discussion

This inquiry may be seen as an analysis of those aspects of art that promise to develop empathy. Whether they practice as clinicians, educators, or administrators, therapists who hope to foster empathy may find in this search a reason for using the arts.

Two disclaimers need to be made; however. No one can guarantee that exposure to works of art will foster empathy. The strongest suggestion from the literature is that regular engagement in the actions of art may rehearse the actions of empathy. To derive the internal good of empathy, a person must practice the rules of art. The requisite practice thus consists of (a) using the senses to grasp feeling, (b) stretching the imagination to see a new perspective, and (c) inviting an occupation that allows understanding. Only after such an involvement might a person enhance the capacity to respond, feel, or make connections.

A second disclaimer associates with the work of art. In a culture enchanted by rationality, artists can lose their evocative power. Arnheim (1969) saw the dilemma: "Nor are pedantry, sterility, and mechanization found only in the sciences; they are equally present in the arts" (p. 296).

Wind (1985) presented a jarring image of artists as technicians:

Often they seem to act in their studios as if they were in the laboratory, performing a series of controlled experiments in the hope of arriving at a valid scientific solution. And when these stringent exercises are exhibited, they reduce the spectator to an observer who watches the artist's latest excursion with interest, but without vital participation. (p. 21)

If a work is a technical exercise that fails to evoke a participation, it is not likely that response, emotion, or connection will occur.

Summary

Empathy is valued in occupational therapy as an attitude that affirms human dignity. A number of persons from within the behavioral sciences have suggested that the artistic experience can develop empathy. The vagueness of their suggestions prompted this inquiry and literature review guided by three questions: (a) Why do the arts invite the assumption that they will awaken a person's sensibilities? (b) What happens during an engagement with art that may yield fellow feeling? and (c) Do persons with expertise in the arts express similar views about the potential of art?

The answers to these questions clarify the assumption that art may develop empathy. Artists and philosophers suggest that art rouses a person's sensibilities because it invites response, emotion, and connection. The derivative suggestion is that art can be a rehearsal for empathy because empathy's actions are similar to those of art. The literature clarifies this second assumption by describing three rules of art: the reliance on bodily senses, the use of metaphor, and the occupation by virtual worlds. These rules may dispose therapists to empathize in practice.

This analysis of art's potential began with an observation from Shen's (1981) novel about the House of God hospital. At the story's end, Basch expressed his sadness over the lingering bitterness that followed his year of internship in a depersonalized environment. When his fiancée suggested that he might be a better person because of his experience among the hopelessly demented and dying, Basch asked how. She replied:

This might have been the only thing that could have awakened you. Your whole life has been a growing from the outside, mastering the challenges that others have set for you. Now, finally, you might just be growing from inside yourself. It can be a whole new world, Roy, I know it. A whole new life. (p. 418)

Her comment goes to the heart of this inquiry because there is no escaping this fact: Empathy requires a growing from inside the self. A person who hopes to be
empathic must pursue an experience that awakens the sense of fellowship. Artists and art philosophers suggest that such an awakening can occur through art.

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