

# Therapeutic Qualities of Clay-work in Art Therapy and Psychotherapy: A Review

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## Abstract

*The aim of this article is to identify and define the diagnostic and therapeutic qualities of clay-work in contemporary conceptualization (attachment theory, object relation, and psychoanalytic theory). Three central features of clay-work are highlighted: (1) procedural expression through touch, movement, and the three-dimensional aspect; (2) the reflection of construction and deconstruction processes; and (3) the regression process. The authors differentiate six therapeutic factors that emerged from a review of the literature: facilitating expression of emotions, catharsis, rich and deep expressions, verbal communication, revealing unconscious material, and concretization and symbolization. Short case examples of therapeutic processes are described to illustrate these ideas.*

## Introduction

Clay is a familiar material in art therapy and in psychotherapy. Many advocate the therapeutic potential of clay as a tool for advancing therapeutic processes in individual and group therapies (e.g. Anderson, 1995; Mattes & Robbins, 1981). Others ascribe to clay-work diagnostic qualities in family and individual therapies (e.g. Jorstad, 1965; Kwiatkowska, 1978; Keyes, 1984). However, an integrative review regarding the therapeutic factors of clay-work is missing. Additionally, a summary of conceptualizations regarding the use of clay in art therapy and psychotherapy is needed, including delineation of its therapeutic qualities, and examination of its importance in applied theory. The purpose of this study is to provide an account of the theoretical relatedness of psychodynamic and art therapy approaches in using clay processes to nurture integration and healing for participants.

This article first will review historical and developmental issues of clay-work and clay products. A discussion of the three fundamental features of clay-work (procedural expressions, constructive and deconstructive processes, and the regression process) will follow. Finally, the article will survey the therapeutic factors of clay-work as they evolve through our literature review.

By "clay-work" we mean the process of handling, manipulating, and sculpting clay, and the products of these

activities. The importance of both product and process is based on the conception that an art expression is not merely the final product but is also the process by which the product has been developed, and that both product and process foster significant psychological processes, revealing meaningful information about the creators' inner world (Betensky, 1995; Elkisch, 1947; Wadeson, 1987). We briefly describe the role clay played in ancient times, the sensual qualities of clay-work that are exclusive to this material, and some developmental issues arising from clay modeling.

## Clay-work: Historical and Developmental Issues

Clay products are well known in human history since prehistoric times in such forms as vases, pots, and symbolic figures, including human figures. According to Neumann (1955) the first vessels in the ancient world were made out of clay, which originated from earth. Humans attributed significance to earth as the source of all things. The first man in the Bible is called Adam, apparently derived from the Hebrew word for earth, *adama*, the material from which he was made.

In addition to its functional use, for creating a variety of containing tools, clay has been used throughout history by many cultures as a vehicle to express a religious dimension in human life. Anthropologists speculate that symbolic forms shaped in clay had magical and ritual meanings (Raphael, 1947). Thus we find a link between symbolic clay products and the mental-spiritual realm of humankind early in human history. Accordingly, clay figures, which are made of earth, may reflect the connection between the human mental world and the material world. This connection is central in art therapy, an activity that uses art materials to represent the inner, spiritual world.

The development of art expression, mainly in the form of drawings, has been the focus of many studies (e.g. Kellogg, 1969; Machover, 1953). By contrast, little attention has been paid to developmental issues in working and making images in clay (Golomb & McCormick, 1995; Woltmann, 1993). This neglect may be due to technical difficulties in conducting research with a plastic medium that also becomes fragile when dry. Research on clay-work requires much time and effort on the part of the researcher. However, several important observations may be made concerning this domain.

For example, with regard to the development of three-dimensional representation in clay, Woltmann (1993) in

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his significant study describes in depth the roots of modeling in clay. He argues that they lie in the early years in human development, when infants discover the plasticity of their own feces. Woltmann also delineates the developmental phases of mastering plastic materials, which he terms "maturation cycles." In this developmental process, the child moves from unintentional activity with plastic materials to representations of real objects with meanings and emotional values attached to them.

A number of important studies on developmental issues in clay-work were conducted by Golomb (1972, 1974) and by Golomb and McCormick (1995). These authors tested two alternative hypotheses on the development of three-dimensional representation in clay. The linear-graphic hypothesis specifies a sequence parallel to that of drawing, from one- to two- to three-dimensional representation (Arnheim, 1974; Brown, 1975), while the global-modeling hypothesis predicts an early (albeit primitive) three dimensional conception. Golomb and McCormick's study, which included 109 children (from four to 13 years old) and 18 college students, confirmed the second hypothesis. Specifically, they discovered that four-year-old children already exhibited some basic three-dimensional understanding and modeled primitive three-dimensional figures. As children mature, their clay products gradually become more refined and differentiated. But around the age of eight to nine years the process of differentiation in modeling generally levels off, and there is a tendency toward two-dimensional representation in modeling. Golomb and McCormick (1995) suggest that this seeming regression in the capacity to represent may be related to children's ambition to create figures with greater similarity to real-life models in their complexity, and that this ambition runs counter to the need to balance the sculptures. Hence the children resort to two-dimensional work.

In sum, the development of the ability for three-dimensional representation in clay has not received enough attention; more research is needed for a better understanding of the phenomenon. As for use of clay in therapy, a broader grasp is needed of the sculpting process and products. Such an understanding could promote an accurate phenomenological observation of the dimensions of process and product of clay-work in art therapy and psychotherapy, and thus could assist in comprehending patients' non-verbal communication and development through clay-work.

### Fundamental Features of Clay-work and Their Meanings in Psychotherapy

We chose to underscore three major therapeutic features of clay-work in our literature review and in our clinical experience as art therapists. Although these aspects are interrelated and are often difficult to disentangle in a therapeutic or diagnostic intervention, for clarity of description we will address each of them separately. They are: (a) procedural expressions through the experience of touch, movement, and the three-dimensional aspect of clay-work, (b) construction and deconstruction processes through clay-

work, and (c) the regression process, which we divide into three different types according to Knafo's (2002) concepts.

### Procedural Expressions through the Experience of Touch, Movement, and the Three-Dimensional Aspect of Clay-work.

Clay-work involves an intense and powerful tactile experience of touching and haptic involvement. Touch was identified as one of the first sensory responses to develop in humans (Frank, 1957; Montagu, 1978). Tactile contact is actually the first mode of communication that an infant learns. For humans, the early stages of life are dominated by oral and skin contact between infant and caregiver (Hunter & Struve, 1998). Thus, clay-work involves a very primal mode of expression and communication. Touch in clay-work also requires body movements in endless opportunities for touching and modeling. Thus clay-work makes possible an entire non-verbal language or communication for the creator, through which his or her mental realm, emotional life, and primary object relations can be expressed.

We chose to use concepts from attachment and object-relation theories to describe the inner processes that are relevant to clay-work. The central assumption of attachment theory is that humans form close emotional bonds with significant others (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1979, & 1980), which facilitate the development of mental representations of self and other, or "internal working models" (Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2000). According to attachment theory, there are two consecutive working models of attachment: an unconscious, fairly primitive model that a person develops during the early years of life, and later a second model, which is more sophisticated, linguistic, and conscious. The two models operate simultaneously (Bowlby, 1979): mental representations regarding self and others develop from procedural and sensorimotor representations (Case, 1996; Crittenden, 1990) that have no linguistic coding because they were developed in the pre-verbal phase (Nelson, 1996). Our assumption is that non-verbal modes of expression, including art, can function as a way of communicating these procedural representations. This is especially true with regard to clay-work, which taps into primary modes of communication and expression (e.g. through touch), and is thereby linked to actual past memories and feelings that were encoded through touch and movement. In this respect, clay-work could function as a central window to these unconscious, non-verbal representations and may be especially helpful with people who find it hard to express themselves verbally or who are very defensive. The physical-sensual-mental experience that clay facilitates can be understood by procedural expressions.

For example, a 14-year-old adolescent girl was referred to art therapy treatment because of her difficulties in establishing peer relationships and because of angry outbursts against her parents. In therapy she was guarded and distant. In one session she touched the clay with closed eyes. She manipulated the material for a longer time than usual, immersed in her work with sensual

touching. When she opened her eyes, she looked at the emergent form and described what she had created. She saw a mother and child; the mother is crying, holding her little girl who wipes the mother's tears away. This incident opened the way for her to tell her story of being a child of a depressed mother. The unmediated contact with the clay helped her bring out hidden and primary themes which had a crucial impact on understanding how she was held and her needs.

Clay and clay products are multi-dimensional objects and as such can represent real-life objects very closely. In addition to height, width and length, they also have the qualities of weight, depth, and texture. Since through clay-work one can make real-like things, clay sculptures can also function as symbolic play objects, and thus afford a much wider potential space for manifestations of fantasy and the inner world, such as fears, anxieties, wishes, and so on. This is true in psychotherapy with children as well as with adults, when the clay product is treated as an object in the therapeutic conversation or becomes part of a specific issue in the therapist-client relationship (such as how carefully the therapist held or protected the clay sculpture while the client was absent or during a change of place).

The following is another example. A 16-year-old girl, who was developmentally delayed and in the process of losing her sight, had difficulty accepting her progressive blindness and was referred to art therapy. When presented with clay, she used it to make a girl with eyeglasses. At that point in the therapy, she was in denial of the nonreversible aspect of becoming blind. Her second sculpture was of a blind, bespectacled girl. She worked for a long time on the second sculpture, during which time she let herself express her feelings of grief and loss of sight. She fashioned an environment for the clay girl and taught her to read and write in Braille. Presumably, the clay-work allowed her to form a tangible, realistic figure, which became an object for projecting her feelings and served as scaffolding for working through the integration of her loss of sight into her self-image.

Another implication of the three-dimensional characteristic of clay, mentioned above, is the kind of expression that can be seen or felt through the multidimensional aspect of a sculpture. As opposed to a painting, a clay product can be looked at, touched and examined from different sides and angles of the three dimensional form.

Some clients during therapy will sculpt forms with a number of differentiated aspects. For example, an adolescent boy sculpted clay creatures with two faces in each side: one side of the figure bore an aggressive expression with phallic organs, while the other side wore a sad expression with gentle facial features. Through looking at his clay products, this young boy could discover his conflicting feelings.

Similarly, many sculptures are made in therapy with several distinct aspects created unconsciously that can be explored later with the therapist. Examples are the inside of the clay sculpture as opposed to its outside, a soft or smooth texture as against rough texture, and the like. These help to tell us the clients' story.

## The Reflection of Constructive and Deconstructive Processes

Clay facilitates a meaningful experience of creating something out of nothing, and transforming the product into different forms. Simply by lightly touching the lump of clay, the client leaves the imprint of his or her fingers on it and thus becomes absorbed in his or her ability to transform, in the impact of his or her existence and presence on the here and now (Heimlich & Mark, 1990). These imprints may be interpreted as his or her personal signs in the real world. This experience is most evident in a client who comes to therapy with feelings of loss and grief, and in many cases with feelings such as helplessness. Heimlich & Mark (1990) describes this phenomenon:

...a child may pick up a lump of clay and begin to roll or squeeze it. The child responds tactilely to the texture, and the moldable clay changes shape. The child can experience immediately how the clay responds to his touch and feelings. Through this type of movement experience, even a timid child can quickly realize his own efficacy. (p. 42)

The opportunity to make a concrete thing out of the piece of clay, which is a symbol and a metaphor of one's inner world, is immanent to the therapeutic process. It is an alchemy-like process: transforming the pain into meaningful expression.

The unformed chunk of clay and the new clay sculpture itself can be manipulated and changed during the therapeutic process. Furthermore, "clay has the capacity to be done and undone multiple times, providing the opportunity to smash down or remake a clay-sculpture" (Rubin, 1984, p. 58). Clay-work enables the client to encounter the constructive and destructive aspects of the self, in processes of psychic change and identity formation, or in becoming himself/herself.

Change can occur with the making of one sculpture or a series. The latter is the case with many adolescents who may, in their treatment, seek their identity through series of self-portraits in clay. The self-portrait often develops gradually from a blank facial expression into a more expressive one, and one can detect development and change from one sculpture to the next.

A clinical example of meaningful change in the product may illustrate this point. A client in her forties came to art therapy because of her enraged outbursts against her children and her profound doubts about her professional identity. She had lost her mother when she was 16 and was dealing with her unresolved grief. From the clay, she made a mother's hand holding a baby's head, saying she wished to capture the tenderness in the mother's holding. After examining her sculpture, she suddenly said that the mother's hand looked aggressive to her and therefore frightening. She could not keep the product as it appeared to her: a mother (aggressive) and a baby (helpless). She turned the sculpture upside down so that the baby's head was under the palm. It turned into "an artist's hand working with clay," which symbolized her wish to become an independent artist. The way her clay sculpture developed

into its final image revealed to her the emotional roots of her art work and some significant contents of her mind: a child who was raised in an aggressive environment; a mother who finds it hard to control her anger; and an extremely sensitive artist. Additionally, it revealed her inner dialogue between the constructive and deconstructive aspects of herself.

The connection between loss and clay-work is presented in many studies; Henley (2002), for example, investigates the subject of "clay and object loss" in his text. People who are in mourning and suffering loss can use clay-work to express agony, anger, and frustration acted out on the lump of clay. Clay also can be utilized for re-creating the image of what or who was lost. The inner image of the lost person may be brought to life, and the client can face his or her deep feelings and fantasies. The sense of creating a new image of the lost object is powerful and has a healing effect as it facilitates coping with deep pain. For example, a 14-year-old girl, who lost her mother to illness, could hardly talk about her deep grief. A few months later she made a large clay cup, which she loved to hold. As she finished sculpting the cup, she engraved on it the word "mother." This freed her to talk about her longing for her mother's touch.

Another example is a seven-year-old boy who was abandoned by his father and was moved to a foster home because of his mother's illness. In art therapy, he fashioned two large male heads out of clay. One represented his biological father, the other his foster father. The boy liked to talk to them and made them talk to each other. The dialogue between the "two fathers" enabled him to integrate the newly established bond with his foster father and acceptance of his rejection by his biological father. In this process, he could recreate an inner image of his biological father and his internalized relationship with him.

In the two therapeutic processes outlined above, clay-work allowed the clients to bring to life representations of the internalized lost objects, and to work through their loss.

### The Regression Process.

Because of the sensual and primary qualities of clay, which involve the client in procedural communication, clay-work allows and even invites regression processes that are crucial in therapy. We used Knafo's (2002) definitions of three types of regression to illuminate the part clay plays in different regression processes. Knafo investigates the art-making process from a psychoanalytic perspective.

*1. Temporal regression*, or return to earlier stages of psychosexual development. Kramer (1971) described children's and adults' perception of clay as a toy. They use clay playfully, reenacting their oral, anal, and phallic fantasies through it (Schlossberg, 1983). In art therapy, we often see children using clay to represent food and engaging in symbolic acts of nourishment. Some children express anal aspects in clay when they treat it as feces, or when issues of smearing and collecting are brought out. Sexual play with clay also is common with children and adolescents as a projection of fantasies and fears.

*Aggressive regression* is common in children and adults, when angry acts are expressed through hand movements or with the use of clay tools in aggressive ways (e.g., stabbing, deep cutting, etc.).

*2. Regression as risking decompensation* such as "playing with boundaries of self, identity and reality" (Knafo, 2002, p. 25). In therapy, clients often construct images that stand for their selves symbolically. These images represent unconscious parts of themselves that could be frightening outside the therapeutic environment. Clay-work offers the opportunity to represent images that are distorted, intimidating, or ugly. These images can represent different parts of the self or the way clients perceive themselves as whole persons.

For example, a 13-year-old orphan came to art therapy because of adjustment problems and conduct disorder. She would draw caricatures of female figures with the same stereotypical facial expressions that appear on a fashionable teenager. When she was asked to manipulate clay with her eyes closed, she sculpted a figure of a man with a sad face "coming out from a swamp." She said he was rejected by everyone because of his bad odor. Through clay, she expressed an authentic aspect of herself from her past and her present, namely her rejected aspects that are primary and painful. These aspects were inaccessible to her before therapy as they were hidden beneath the stereotypical mask she used.

The shelves of many art therapy clinics often are thronged with clay monsters. As art therapists, we frequently witness clients turning clay chunks into monstrous creatures and aggressive figures. For example, a 13-year-old boy who was referred to art therapy because of angry outbursts against his environment, used clay to create such aggressive monsters. He gave them names and made up stories about them in which he identified with them. Through the therapeutic process, the boy was able to discover other aspects in his creatures such as sadness and loneliness. He could then make the connection between his aggressive tendencies and the reasons for his being so angry.

*3. Topographical and structural regression*, such as freer access to visual and primary modes of thought. This type of regression can be explained by the process of procedural expression and also by the conceptualization of object relation theory. According to Ogden (1989), the primitive edge of the human experience is described in the autistic-contiguous experience, which is dominated by sensations, mainly touch and rhythmic experiences. Clay engages us in those aspects and thus can echo our primitive modes of existence and communication.

Observation of different types of regressive expressions by clients enables us to enlarge our understanding of their inner world and their needs.

## A Review of the Therapeutic Factors of Clay-work in Psychotherapy

From our review of 35 clinical reports (marked with an asterisk in the reference list), we identified six major therapeutic factors that emerged through the use of clay-work in art therapy and in psychotherapy. In actual therapy, these

phenomena overlap considerably, so our division is for the purpose of clarity of presentation.

### 1. Facilitating expression of emotions

Clay-work is described as facilitating and enabling the expression of feelings fairly quickly, due to the tactile quality of the clay (Bratton & Ferebee, 1999; Wadson, 1987), which enables haptic involvement (Kagin & Lusebrink, 1971) and rhythmical movements that accompany clay-work. There are many descriptions in the literature describing clay figures as representing powerful emotions that previously were inaccessible to the client (Brock, 1991; Henley, 2002; Keyes, 1984; Mattes & Robbins, 1981; Mciver, 2001; Mitchell, 1984).

For example, the many opportunities of modeling in clay furnish countless ways in which anger can be expressed or ventilated, such as scratching, claspings, stabbing, throwing, smashing, and so on. As mentioned above, these emotional expressions are made through the most primal and procedural mode of communication, through tactile contact and on a somatic level. Hence there is a greater likelihood that they will be authentic with regard to affects (Horovitz-Darby, 1992). Furthermore, because clay as a material resists some of these manipulations and is not easily breakable or ruined or destroyed in its plastic state (unlike painting), the client can engage in these aggressive actions without fear of negative outcomes to the material.

### 2. Facilitating catharsis

Jorstad (1965) and Anderson (1995) describe a cathartic effect of clay-work in psychotherapy. Both authors mention client intensity of emotional engagement while working with clay. Jorstad (1965) suggests that the cathartic effect is due to the fact that working with such a primitive and original material as clay satisfies previously frustrated needs, and that it can give vent to anal tendencies for some clients. Anderson (1995) contends that because of the tactile qualities and fluidity of the clay, and because it has the potential to resemble the real object it is meant to represent by its three-dimensionality, it will inevitably evoke an affective response, such as memories, thoughts, and fantasies. Henley (2002) demonstrates how regression that occurs through clay-work facilitates cathartic release.

### 3. Revealing unconscious materials

One aspect of the cathartic effect is to bring repressed ideas, feelings, wishes, and memories of the past into consciousness. But clay-work can also uncover unconscious aspects without a cathartic effect through the procedural expression itself (Rubin, 1984; Woltman, 1993). Anderson (1995), for instance, claims that clay-work can yield some products that are not monitored by the client's intellect and that clay-work can evoke direct expression that is not filtered through the client's mind. An example is what can be detected through physical manipulation (Henley, 2002) when clients touch and mold the clay. In such cases, therapeutic conversation with the client after his or her

creative work can disclose the unconscious layers embedded in his or her visible product (Betensky 1995; Kwiatkowska, 1978).

### 4. Facilitating rich and deep expressions

Many reports describe clay-work as communicating to the therapist additional layers of expression (Elkisch, 1947; Jacobi, 1955; Kameguchi & Murphy-Shigemastu, 2001). Mattes and Robbins (1981) write: "...the image opens up possibilities for exploration and discovery in contrast to more conventional verbal communication which tends to reduce the field" (pp. 386-387).

In a qualitative study of the special contribution of clay-work compared with verbal communication of adolescents, Graziano (1999) found that the symbolic clay objects expressed deeper levels of subjective meanings. They were tied to developmental issues and concerns of the adolescents: "The clay symbols made were expressive of deeper felt meaning about: possession, mystery, entrapment, perfection, vengeance, and foolishness" (p. 5).

### 5. Facilitating verbal communication

Jorstad (1965) reported that when patients brought their clay products to their therapeutic sessions, the presence of these symbolic figures often facilitated the patients' verbal associations: "Thus verbal communication often became easier and the patients' possibility of emotional experience and insight increased in the therapy-situation" (p. 494). The phenomenon of facilitating verbal communication is demonstrated in clinical examples by several authors (Heimlich & Mark, 1990; Kwiatkowska, 1978; Oklander, 1978; Raginsky, 1962; Rubin, 1984).

### 6. Concretization and symbolization:

The embodiment of inner representations in visual images

Many have described the phenomenon of concretization, noted in psychoanalytic studies and in clay-work in individual psychotherapy (Brown, 1975; Denny & Fagen, 1970; Mattes & Robbins, 1981; Simon, 1996) and also in group therapy (Winship & Haigh, 1998). Concretization refers to the process in which thoughts, feelings, fantasies, and conflicts are embodied in concrete objects, and also in the process of sculpting and through observing the product because of its facilitating symbolization. For example, Macks (1990) describes this phenomenon in art therapy with clients suffering from eating disorders, noting that many such clients created square and angular containers rather than rounded containers. Macks interprets this phenomenon as a concretization of the denial of the feminine. Another expression of concretization was recounted by Brown (1975) who suggests that clay-work might depict some aspects of the therapeutic relationship between client and therapist. This effect makes clay-work a useful diagnostic and therapeutic tool especially in family therapy, due to its potential to illustrate many family concepts (e.g., prox-

imity and distance) through plastic representations (Kameguchi & Murphy-Shigemastu, 2001; Kwiatkowska, 1978; Vandvick & Eckblad, 1993; Ventre & Keller, 1986).

## Summary

We set out to identify and define the therapeutic implications of clay-work, using contemporary conceptualizations for this purpose. We drew our explanations from various studies on the theory and practice of art therapy, attachment theory, object-relations, and psychoanalytic theory.

Clay-work combines primitive modes of communication through the elementary substance of clay, its primal usage in our human history, and echoes of our experience of the early stages in life.

Clay-work involves body expression through the physical work with clay, and mental processes through the act of modeling and through observing the product. Thus it allows integration of emotions, memories, and fantasies from different levels of consciousness. The potential intensity of clay-work in bringing up unconscious material, and amplifying the personal meaning of a symbol (Kagin & Lusebrink, 1978) indicates the hazards that lie in premature disclosure, especially in treatment of traumatic issues. Caution must be applied in the use of clay-work in art therapy and in psychotherapy.

We have highlighted here some central features of clay-work in the therapeutic process, namely the procedural expression which can enable access to non-verbal representations of self, other, and the relationships between self and other: The reflection of constructive and deconstructive aspects that enable clients to explore their transforming abilities, as in process of identity development, and in themes of loss and bereavement; and finally, the regression process, according to Knafo's (2002) definition. These fundamental features of clay-work contribute to a significant exploration of self by clients and therapists that enable the detection and integration of primal experiences of the self, and its multifaceted nature. It is by which clients widen their access to their inner selves and thus continue their journey of becoming.

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