



UTILIZING THE CIRCUS PHENOMENON AS A DRAWING THEME IN ART THERAPY

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Historical Overview

Due to the limited scope of this paper, as well as the vast number of drawing directives, I will provide only a brief outline of widely accepted drawing directives that have been incorporated into the individual evaluation of children and adults. For a more comprehensive overview refer to Buck (1964); Hammer (1967); Klepsch and Logie (1982); Oster and Gould (1987); Oster and Montgomery (1996); and Wohl and Kaufman (1985).

The use of human figure drawings as a means of measuring a child's cognitive maturation was first introduced by Florence Goodenough (1926) and later refined by Dale Harris (1963). Briefly, the directions for the Draw-A-Man test consist of drawing three figures—a man, a woman and a self-portrait. A scoring system gives credit for the inclusion of individual body parts, clothing details, proportion and perspective. Tables are provided in the test manual that convert raw scores to standard scores and percentile ranks (Harris, 1963).

Goodenough, along with other clinicians, realized that the Draw-A-Man test provided indicators of personality dynamics in addition to intellectual aptitude. Through her previous experience with Goodenough's technique, Machover (1952) devised the Draw-A-Person (D-A-P) test. The directions are simply to "draw a person." Upon completion of the initial drawing the individual is asked to draw a person of the opposite sex.

Machover (1952) hypothesized that certain graphic traits reflect specific personality characteristics. For example, she asserted that the head is essentially the center for intellectual power, social balance and the control of body impulses. The arms and hands are believed to be primarily symbolic of ego development and social adaptation. The figure's legs and feet bear the responsibility of supporting and balancing the body or moving the body about.

Machover also placed particular emphasis on certain aspects of a drawing, such as size of the figure, pencil pressure, line quality, the sequence in which parts are drawn, the use of background and whether the figure was drawn in profile or frontal view. In analysis, she considered the properties of each body part, the tendency toward incompleteness, areas of detail, areas of line reinforcement, erasures and line change, the degree of symmetry, the treatment of the midline, and the mood expressed in the face or posture of the figure (Klepsch & Logie, 1982).

A simple adaptation of the D-A-P is the Draw-A-Person-In-The-Rain technique. Hammer (1967) sighted Arnold Abrams and Abraham Amchin as possible innovators of the drawing task; however its origins remain unclear. The instructions are simply to "draw a person in the rain." The assumption in this technique is that the amount of rain represented in the picture symbolizes the amount of environmental stress experienced by the individual. The person's emotional defenses are represented by the means of protection against the rain (e.g., coat, boots, umbrella)

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(Hammer, 1967; Oster & Gould, 1987; Oster & Montgomery, 1996; and Verinis, Lichtenberg & Henrich, 1974).

In addition to the human figure, clinicians began testing other subject matter as possible drawing directives. The House-Tree-Person (H-T-P) technique was initiated by Buck (1948) to aid the clinician in obtaining data regarding the person's degree of personality integration, maturity and efficiency. The directions are simply to "draw a house, a tree, and a person." Each object is drawn on a separate sheet of paper. The order always remains the same because the sequence is experienced as becoming progressively more psychologically difficult (Oster & Montgomery, 1996). Buck emphasized these three objects due to their familiarity to very young children, their acceptance by people of all ages and their ability to elicit a wealth of associations in comparison to other subject matter (Hammer, 1967; Oster & Gould, 1987; Oster & Montgomery, 1996).

The house tends to evoke associations concerning home life and intrafamilial relationships. In children, it seems to access their attitude regarding the home situation and relationships toward parents and siblings. For married adults, the rendering of a house may represent the person's domestic situation in relationship to his or her spouse. The drawing of a tree may illustrate the person's deeper and more unconscious feelings about one's self (Hammer, 1967). The tree drawing is also related to the person's life role and abilities to obtain gratification from their environment (Oster & Gould, 1987). The person drawing conveys the individual's "closer to conscious" view of their self and their relationship to the environment (Hammer, 1967).

The Draw-A-Family (D-A-F) technique is another elaboration on using figure drawings as projective indicators of personality. It was initially developed by Appel (1931) and later elaborated upon by Wolff (1942). The directions are simply "draw a picture of your whole family." Once completed, the drawing tends to portray the individual's attitude toward family members and their perception of family roles (Oster & Gould, 1987). The directive reveals the person's feelings for spouses, parents and siblings, as well as the person's concept of their place in the family.

Adaptations to the H-T-P and D-A-F are the Kinetic-House-Tree-Person (K-H-T-P) (Burns, 1987) and the Kinetic-Family-Drawing (K-F-D) (Burns & Kaufman, 1970, 1972). The instructions are basically the same; however, the person is instructed to include

some kind of action in the picture. The kinetic component is used as a means of increasing the amount of information portrayed in projective drawings. The kinetic factor allows the figures and objects to interact with one another. Through these patterns of interaction there is the capacity to view the person's current ability to interact with forces and significant objects within their environment.

The Circus Phenomenon as a Preferred Drawing Theme

The circus motif is well-suited for a drawing task by reason of its familiarity and universal appeal with the general public. Truzzi (1979) pointed out that, in 1932 alone, about 20,000,000 Americans attended circus shows throughout the country. Since that time, attendance at circus shows has declined; however, the circus' total audience has grown substantially due to television and other types of mass media. For instance, CBS television broadcasts the annual special, *Circus of the Stars*, which portrays well-known television celebrities performing various circus acts. The general public has also come to know the circus through literature that has vividly depicted the circus and its performers. In his book, *Circus and Allied Arts: A World Bibliography*, Stoot (1971) catalogued over 16,000 books that give written testimony to the circus phenomenon.

The notability and popularity of the circus is demonstrated by its prominence in other cultures throughout the world. Sebeok (1976) concurred that for centuries the circus phenomenon has been a spectacle cross-culturally relevant to many societies. In virtually every continent, from Asia to Europe, the circus phenomenon has existed in one form or another (Pereira, 1988). Schoonbeck (1987) spoke of the circus' universal allure and alleged, "Anyone from any culture and in any language, understands and knows exactly what is going to happen in a circus act" (p. 34).

The circus phenomenon is, as well, a form of non-verbal expressiveness and a visual language. Engibarov (1988) suggested people go to the circus to watch a performance and not to hear one. The circus phenomenon is virtually wordless; yet, each performance contains an underlying text that communicates a specific meaning to the onlooker. Bouissac (1976) wrote of creating an analogy between the circus phenomenon and theoretical models of human communication; hence, viewing the circus as a "multimedia

language." He asserted that meaning is communicated to the audience through the various circus acts, costumes and paraphernalia. The concealed text of the circus acts can be analyzed and understood when compared to widespread cultural phenomena such as ritual, myth and language.

The circus motif mirrors the struggles of everyday existence, making the circus phenomenon well-suited for revealing areas of conflict with which the person is confronted daily. Adoum (1988) agreed and compared the circus with the daily routine of life when stating, "everyday people must contend with cuffs, kicks and shabby treatment, and perform their own leaps into the void and their own balancing acts as they move forward along an unsteady and endless tightrope" (p. 15).

The circus phenomenon also mirrors aspects of the human condition that are experienced as disturbing, unusual or challenging. Pereira (1988) recognized this relationship and stated,

The circus is the world back to front. Whatever is unusual, eccentric or disturbing, whatever is, so to speak, a challenge to us, has always found an ideal refuge there . . . The natural order of things is inverted to produce an exciting spectacle. This desire to turn things upside down is the essence of the circus. (p. 35-36)

The circus acts and various oddities convey our engagement and struggle with life's unpredictability, irrationality, unconventionality and loss of control.

It is reasonable to assume a person may identify with a specific act or oddity because it embodies a component of the self, which is viewed in a similar manner. For instance, the bearded woman (Hermaphroditism) may represent an individual's struggle with his or her sexual orientation; the trapeze artists ("romantic act of the circus") may embody a person's engagement with interpersonal relationships; the tightrope walker ("death-defying act") may communicate an individual's strife with survival or self-control; and the "human skeleton" or "fat lady" may represent a person's struggle with a negative body image. The preceding are rather simplified examples; however, they serve to illustrate the basis of my assumption.

In addition, the circus performers' strive for mastery can serve as a metaphor for the client's capacity to persevere life's mishaps and the will to master the struggles of everyday life. Circus performers pains-

takingly practice their performances until they are flawless and routine. Their skills are perfected as they overcome their shortcomings, ultimately achieving mastery. So too must we overcome the challenges of everyday life by perfecting our skills until mastering that which is challenging and disturbing about ourselves and our lives.

Many points can be raised in favor of the circus phenomenon over other projective themes, but it is not my intention to argue for absolute superiority of this theme over all others. My experience, however, has shown me that the circus phenomenon is felt by the person to be a more neutral theme; thus circus drawings are more spontaneous and unencumbered by the stereotypic or conventional censors that inhibit the emergence of unconscious content. Often, undesirable personal traits are more readily ascribed to circus drawings because the person believes it is unrelated to self-description. Furthermore, the gleeful and festive atmosphere of the circus phenomenon offers a non-threatening avenue for accessing portions of the inner self a person is reluctant to acknowledge. The circus phenomenon is seen as amusing and entertaining; thus circus drawings are often capable of bypassing a person's defenses because of the theme's playful appeal.

Hemingway once stated, "The circus is still the only show that gives the audience the feeling that they are living in a happy dream" (Dauven, 1988, p. 13). The hypnotic-like state of the circus phenomenon lends itself to tapping into a person's fantasies and unconscious impulses that are denied expression in everyday existence. Like a dream, circus drawings permit inhibitions to find pictorial representation and limit the person's ability to knowingly control the emergence of unconscious content. In addition, this dream-like spectacle has the ability to elicit a wealth of associations in comparison to other subject matter.

Lastly, my experience has led me to believe that the circus phenomenon is the most suitable motif when attempting to gain swift access to aspects of the human condition that are experienced as disturbing, unusual, eccentric or challenging. Hrenko and Willis (1996) recognize the need to rapidly evaluate and stabilize patients due to the emergence of managed health care systems. They state, "Therapists must search for techniques and interventions which will quickly engage the patient and reveal important diagnostic information" (p. 261). Clients are quick to engage the circus drawing technique, and circus drawings are capable of gathering a wealth of information—even from a single drawing.

Method

The instructions for obtaining a circus drawing are: "I would like you to think about the circus and its performers, side shows and freak shows. I would like you to choose a circus performer which appeals to you most or a performer that comes to mind when you think of the circus. Draw a picture of this performer doing something. Try to draw a whole figure and avoid stick figures. Remember to include action in your picture."

The preceding instructions may elicit a number of questions concerning the suggestion of a circus character or the request for action. I assure clients that there is no right or wrong method of proceeding and that the task may be completed in any manner they wish.

My clinical experience has shown me that some clients are hesitant to draw a human figure due to artistic insecurities and fear of failure. In addition, others may experience the added component of action as overwhelming; however, a vast majority of people are able to complete the task with relative ease.

Clients are provided 12" x 18" white paper. A larger paper can be experienced as overwhelming to clients who feel compelled to fill the entire space, whereas a smaller paper may be seen as incapable of containing the image. I limit clients to a variety of dry media, which include a 2B pencil, crayons, cray-pas, chalks and colored pencils. These materials allow for greater detail, shading and permit variance of color intensity—qualities that may furnish significant information and draw attention to areas of conflict or importance (Furth, 1988). Some clients may find that controlled materials bind and limit their ability to respond to the task. Whenever possible the therapist should respond to the clients' media needs and accommodate accordingly.

Case Examples

I have administered circus drawings to approximately 250 individuals since developing the task in February 1986. The vast majority of participants came from inpatient psychiatric hospitals; however, I have used the task in other levels of psychiatric care with similar results. The participants were diagnosed with an array of psychiatric illnesses. The task has been primarily administered to adults and adolescents; nevertheless I have used the technique with children as young as seven years old. The drawing task is less

effective with younger children because they have not yet developed the cognitive faculties to think metaphorically, as well as the technical skills to depict a human figure in action.

The following examples were drawn by patients hospitalized in acute inpatient psychiatric hospitals. The task was administered individually; however, I have used the directive in a group setting with favorable results. The ensuing examples were selected to provide the reader with an assortment of illustrative examples that include both primary circus performers as well as side shows. Comprehensive social histories are not provided; rather, discussion will be limited to life events that were pertinent to gaining insight into the clients' preference of circus performers.

After obtaining a circus drawing, I began my analysis by viewing the drawing in its totality. I then began a detailed examination of specific elements in the drawing. As with any drawing, circus drawings must be viewed on the basis of age, maturation, emotional status, social and cultural background and other pertinent history of the individual.

I have simplified a number of circus performances and associated these acts with specific meanings. Symbolic significance of circus performances have been deduced from our culture, idioms of speech, folklore and psychoanalytic, anthropological and psychological research. These generalizations are not intended to be used as absolutes, rather as indications and possibilities. With a text as complex as a circus performance, several levels of meaning are possible. Nevertheless, it has been my clinical experience that a circus character's costume, performance and equipment often combine to communicate a relatively consistent and prevalent meaning.

Lastly, each circus drawing is unique; therefore its personal meaning must not be overlooked. Only the client ultimately understands the full significance of his or her circus drawing; thus premature interpretations can easily impede the natural unfolding of the drawing's meaning.

The Tightrope Walker

Mark, a 43-year-old single male, was hospitalized for alcohol dependency. He reported an extensive history of treatment for alcoholism, none of which had yielded much success. Shortly after completing a treatment program, Mark would immediately return to his habitual patterns of alcohol consumption. The client was reluctant to acknowledge his ad-

diction and came to the hospital only by reason of a court mandate.

Once given the instruction to draw a circus character, Mark was hesitant to approach the drawing task. He expressed intense artistic insecurities, yet, with reassurance, Mark was able to complete a circus drawing.

Using only a 2B pencil, Mark produced the simplistic image in Figure 1. His minimal response may have been the result of his intense artistic insecurities and self-doubt. It is, as well, conceivable that Mark's heightened state of defensiveness and resistance to treatment contributed to his minimal and stereotypic image.

Mark drew the tightrope walker. This particular circus act has been involved with some of the most famous fatal mishaps in circus history, thus deserving of its reputation as the "death-defying act" (Myers, 1980). The hidden text of this performance mirrors our everyday struggle with survival, stability and equilibrium; hence, successful completion of this performance demonstrates biological superiority (Bouisac, 1976). The basic structure of the wire act includes a taut wire upon which the tightrope artist performs a series of compensations for any loss of control that may present itself as the individual attempts to reach the platform at the opposite end.

The client's choice of circus characters was not surprising considering Mark's present struggle to control his habitual drinking patterns. The tightrope walker amplifies his struggle to gain control of his drinking, which has literally become a life-and-death situation. Mark would often boast to the group about his numerous near-death experiences while under the

influence of alcohol. Koppitz (1968) alleged that a tightrope walker's uncertain footing places him or her in a perilous position; consequently, this type of figure is usually drawn by very insecure individuals who are trying to maintain their balance or to gain control over themselves.

Mark drew a succession of stick figures descending to earth and stated, "I'm falling . . . splat!" Furth (1988) stated that it is advantageous to count the number of objects when they are repeated within a drawing, in that frequently it can be related to units of time or events of importance. Upon my request, Mark counted the succession of stick figures and stated, "There are nine . . . I only got nine lives and it looks like I just ran out [laughing]." The falling stick figures echo the word "OK," suggesting he is trying to reassure himself or deny his perilous situation.

The tightrope walker plunging to his death illustrated Mark's inability to survive and complete a series of compensations for loss of balance and self-control, whereupon he inadvertently "falls" back into his habitual drinking patterns. The succession of stick figures may represent his repeated patterns of alcohol consumption, which will undoubtedly lead him to his demise. His image may as well illustrate his need to "hit bottom" before he can truly recognize the consequences of his addiction.

Mark's circus drawing was ultimately useful in helping him to begin recognizing his inability to master his addictive behaviors. Without the necessary coping skills, he would surely lose self-control and fall back into his addictive patterns. I pointed out to Mark that a balancing pole could help him compensate for any loss of self-control and equilibrium. I related the balancing pole to AA meetings and relapse prevention skills. The absence of a net suggested that he felt there was nothing to break his fall. I reminded Mark that AA groups could provide him the support he lacked and ultimately help him to master his struggle with alcoholism. Unfortunately, Mark was eventually discharged from the hospital with little insight into his addictive processes.

The Trapeze Artists

Mary, a 37-year-old single female, was hospitalized for a depressive episode that was compounded by unresolved anger toward her father. As a child, Mary's younger brother became ill and was hospitalized for several months. During his prolonged illness the mother remained at the hospital; consequently,

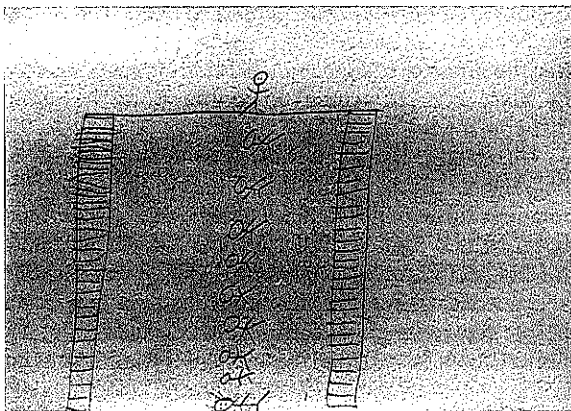


Figure 1.

Mary was coerced by her father into occupying the now vacant role of wife and lover. The client reported that she never revealed her "secret" to her mother, nor had she ever confronted her father regarding the victimization. Mary was timid and unsure of herself; consequently, she often found it difficult to voice her feelings and needs.

When requested to draw a circus character, Mary used a 2B pencil and cray-pas to create the image in Figure 2. She rendered the trapeze artists, which counts as the "most romantic act" in the circus (Coxe, 1980). Its passionate allure has inspired a number of writers and film producers, as is evident in the 1956 movie *Trapeze*, in which Tony Curtis "falls" for Gina Lollobrigida. The underlying text of this performance mirrors our everyday struggle with partnerships, alliances and unions. The poetic expression "love is in the air" eloquently describes this romantic act of the circus.

The basic structure of the flying trapeze includes a performer flying through the air from a swinging trapeze where he or she is caught by another member of the troupe hanging by the knees from another trapeze at the opposite end of the rigging. This latter member is known as the "catcher," who must time their own trapeze moving through the air to meet the oncoming flier (Ballantine, 1953).

The system of names given to the various elements of the trapeze act makes reference to relationships. For instance, the "bar-to-catcher" aerial act requires the flyer to leave the bar of their own trapeze, whereupon the flier is "caught" by the "partner" (Wil-meth, 1981). The flier's starting and returning point is referred to as the "perch," whereas the catcher

swings from the other end of the rigging called the "catch trap." The perch can be interpreted as the nest, lair or den. The term "catch" can imply a desirable person much sought after as a matrimonial prospect (e.g., "With her success and her great personality she is considered a great catch").

Mary's circus drawing revealed her struggle to master the relationship with her father. When asked to identify the figures in her drawing, she recognized the catcher (left) as her father and the flier (right) as herself. The father is suspended and motionless, possibly illustrating his attempt to impede the relationship. The absence of hands possibly illustrates the father's need to "hold off" the union, as well as Mary's need to render him powerless. Groth-Marnat (1990) stated that often details are sacrificed when drawing a human figure in action; however, the hands are extremely important for this performance to be successful; thus, I believe their omission is significant.

Upon reviewing her drawing, Mary remarked, "Look . . . My father is just hanging there . . . he isn't even trying to reach out to me." Mary is attempting to advance toward her father; however, her reluctance is revealed in her trapeze rigging, which is "halfheartedly" swaying in the direction of her father. Both figures lack facial features, possibly alluding to their indifference and detachment within their relationship. "We just can't 'face' each other and what happened in the past," said Mary.

Renderings of the flying trapeze and its various elements often combine to form a visage that reveals the individual's emotional state. For instance, when I suggested that Mary step back from her image to gain perspective, she immediately recognized a face described as "angry." The figures, coupled with the trapeze rigging, form the scowling eyes. The safety net becomes an orifice of clenching teeth. The portrait may be a mirror image and is a faithful representation of Mary's anger, which up to this point has been difficult for her to "face."

Ultimately, Mary's circus drawing was useful in helping her to recognize her struggle to master the relationship with her father. Her drawing inadvertently brought to light her intense anger toward her father for his past sexual transgressions. Mary realized that she needed to resolve her anger toward her father before reconciling the relationship. "I need to let my father know how I feel before this [relationship] is going to work," she said. She was ambivalent due to her father's past transgressions and his current unwillingness to move forward in their relationship. I re-

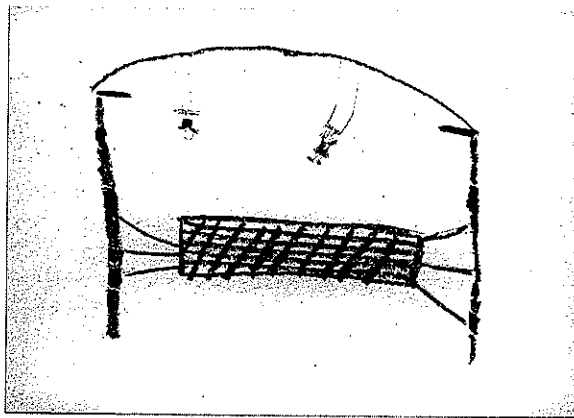


Figure 2.

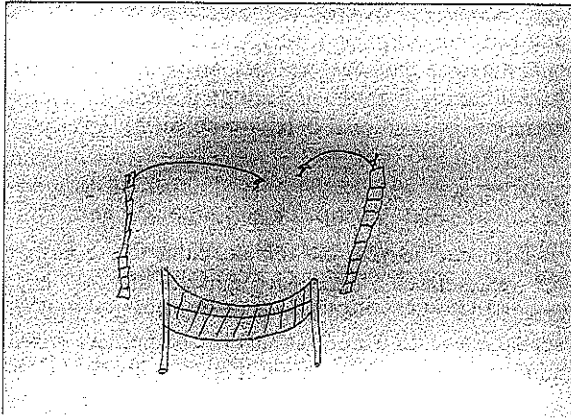


Figure 3.

mind Mary that this act requires both partners to commit in order to be successful. Sadly, Mary's father refused to attend any treatment sessions during her hospitalization; hence she was discharged from the hospital with little hope for resolution.

Figure 3 is another example of the visage phenomenon. John, a 22-year-old male, was admitted to the hospital due to schizophrenic processes. During his second day of hospitalization he was instructed to draw a circus character. John was still in an acute psychotic state and had only just begun taking psychotropic medication. He approached the task without hesitation and used only a 2B pencil. Here, too, the components of the trapeze act combine to give shape to a visage that illustrates his current state of derangement and delirium. The trapeze rigging creates the illusion of squinting eyes, while the net forms a broad grin. The strained and demented face depicts John's tenuous connection with reality as well as his incongruent affect. The trapeze rigging is emphasized while the human figures are minimized, possibly illustrating his current inability to relate to people. In addition, the ladders and poles appear more like blocks that are precariously arranged, giving the impression that his world could topple at any moment.

The Clown

Amy, a 14-year-old female, was brought to the hospital by her caseworker and foster parents, who reported that the child had recently become oppositional and physically aggressive. Amy was removed from her biological family at age two when an inves-

tigation revealed that her parents were unfit caretakers and that her grandfather had been sexually molesting her. She was currently residing with her foster parents and their two adopted children. The foster parents reported that Amy's behavior deteriorated and became increasingly violent after they announced their plans to adopt her. The foster parents requested that if adopted, Amy forsake any connections with her biological family.

Once instructed to draw a circus character, Amy requested colored markers and a 2B pencil. She approached the task without hesitation and brought forth the clown image in Figure 4. The clown is the most complex of the circus characters in view of the various subtypes within the clown family. When understanding the significance of the clown, it is important to take into consideration the species of clown. There are basically three types of clowns, all of which have distinct appearances and personalities: the "Joey," "Auguste" and "Tramp" (Rogers, 1979).

Amy drew the Auguste with its brightly colored wig, multi-colored costume and oversized shoes (Rogers, 1979). The personality of the Auguste is that of inferiority and inadequacy. Often, the Auguste will go to extremes to prove its mental and physical superiority only to fail miserably and fall flat on its face (Rogers, 1979). Rappaport (1972) stated the Auguste does everything wrong and certain exaggerated characteristics unmask its inferior personality. The clown lacks the mental and physical agility required to be able to follow through on any of its plans. It is anything but master of the situation.

Amy's clown is portrayed juggling a shower of colorful balls. The basic structure of juggling consists

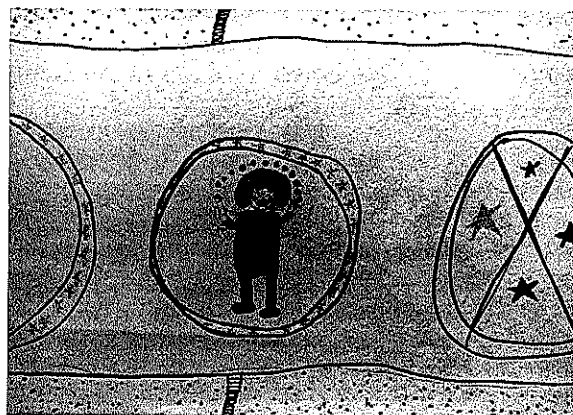


Figure 4.

of passing moving objects between hands without permitting them to fall to the ground (Bouissac, 1976). The activity demonstrates proficiency in manipulating objects in the person's environment. Its hidden text signifies our everyday struggle with competence, mastery and adequacy (Bouissac, 1972; Coxe, 1980). The combination of the clown and juggler are brought into an exact relationship to illustrate Amy's concerns regarding her ability to manipulate and handle events transpiring in her life. "Sometimes I think I can't handle it anymore . . . I feel like I'm juggling too many things right now," Amy said. It is interesting to note that Amy's clown is juggling 12 balls. Amy was molested approximately 12 years ago.

The Auguste's facial expression is incongruent. There are tears streaming down its face; yet the mouth simultaneously portrays a smile and a frown. "I put on a happy face, but behind my smile I'm really sad," Amy said. She may masquerade as the clown in an attempt to divorce herself from her emotional wounds. Her pain and sadness remain defended against, concealed behind a mask.

Amy portrayed a "three ring circus," possibly signifying past, present and future (Cooper, 1978). Her past ring (left) is vacant and is drawn partially off the paper. Furth (1988) asserted that figures or objects portrayed as going off the paper is a method of getting partially involved, but not completely committed; consequently, Amy may still feel partially obligated to her past or origins. Amy identified the left ring as her biological family, which appears to be all but out of the picture. The Auguste resides in the present or "center ring," possibly attesting to her present circumstances. In the future ring (right), Amy drew four stars, whereupon she marked an "X" through them. She identified the four stars as her foster parents and their two adopted children, whom Amy has clearly renounced. "I don't want to be a part of this family because I already have a family," she said.

Amy's circus drawing was instrumental in helping her to begin recognizing her struggle to master events transpiring in her life. She relayed to me that she was unable to forsake her biological origins in order to be adopted by her foster parents. Her circus drawing portrayed her divided loyalties and sense of ambivalence toward being adopted. I pointed out to her that the clown was successfully juggling all 12 balls, suggesting that she does have the skills to handle events taking place in her life. Lastly, Amy's circus drawing revealed her struggle to master her emotions. I encouraged her to remove her mask and allow herself

and others to experience her true feelings. She smiled and nodded in agreement. Ultimately, the foster parents recanted their request that Amy forsake her biological family before being adopted; hence her belligerent and oppositional behavior subsided.

Side Show

Denise, a 38-year-old female, came to the hospital for treatment of a depressive episode that was exacerbated by unresolved issues connected to childhood sexual abuse. She reported that her perpetrator was an adult male who lived down the street from her parents' house. Denise stated that her perpetrator was a toy-maker who often used toys as a means of enticement, as well as assurance of her secrecy. She neglected her physical appearance, allowing herself to become obese and unkempt. Her low self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy paralyzed her; consequently, she was unable to shoulder the simplest of daily responsibilities.

Once given the instruction to draw a circus character, Denise was hesitant to engage the drawing task. She expressed strong misgivings toward the art process, yet ultimately used a 2B pencil to create the image in Figure 5. Denise described her image as, "The fat lady who guesses your weight." She combined obesity with a traditional carnival game. The basic structure of this particular side show consists of a showman who attempts to guess another person's weight. If the showman's estimation is incorrect, the participant is rewarded with a toy or prize.

Denise's circus drawing reveals much about her

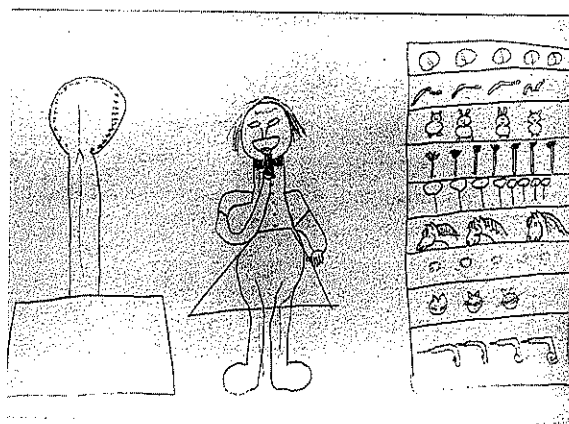


Figure 5.

self-concept and sexual issues. The combination of the fat lady with the weight guesser illustrated her struggle with obesity as well as her negative body image. I questioned Denise about her choice of circus characters and she replied, "I want to be fat; that way men will leave me alone." Her statement implies that she may deliberately feed her obesity as a means of protecting, defending and insulating herself from the sexual approach of men. Denise's weight problem may also be the result of intense needs for nurturance, which has manifested itself in the form of oral fixation. Her compulsive eating is possibly an attempt to soothe her intense craving for nurturance, thus inadvertently becoming a contributing factor to her weight problem.

Denise's circus drawing is laden with sexual symbolism. Both the weight scale and her human figure are shaped like immense male organs. The figure's right arm is elongated and sensual; moreover it holds a phallic-shaped microphone up to the figure's mouth (Figure 6). The figure appears to be performing fellatio. When I drew Denise's attention to the microphone, she immediately recognized its significance and disclosed that her sexual perpetrator often requested oral sex.

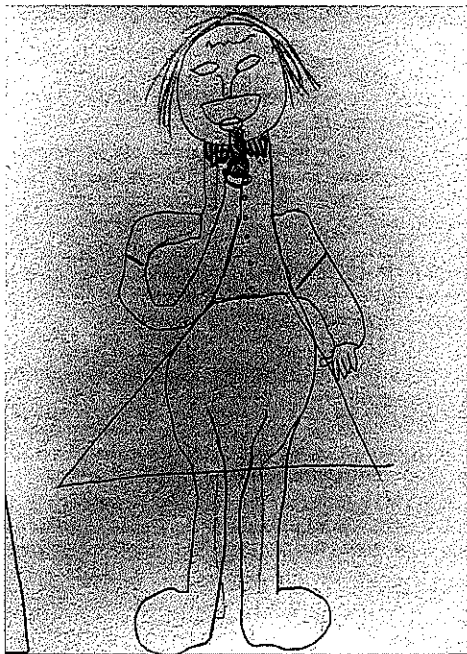


Figure 6.

To the right of her human figure are a variety of toys containing both male and female elements. These may represent the toys her sexual perpetrator frequently employed to entice sexual favors and assure her secrecy. Within the basic structure of this particular act, the weight guesser uses toys to reward his or her participants; likewise, Denise's perpetrator employed toys as a means of compensation for sexual acts.

Denise's circus drawing was useful in helping her to acknowledge her struggle to master her sexual issues and negative body image. The union of the weight guesser and the fat lady are brought into an exact relationship to illustrate her conflict with compulsive eating and her need to insulate herself from the sexual approach of males. The act of providing toys as a reward brought to light unresolved issues related to her childhood sexual abuse. Denise expressed intense feelings of guilt regarding her past willingness to accept compensation for her cooperation and secrecy. I reminded Denise that she was a child at the time of her abuse and she should not hold herself responsible for her abuser's transgressions. Before being discharged from the hospital, Denise was able to begin confronting her past and take steps toward resolving her intense feelings of shame and guilt.

Discussion and Summary

The intent of this paper was to acquaint the reader with a drawing directive that utilized the circus phenomenon as a theme in art therapy. The preceding examples demonstrate that the circus phenomenon is capable of eliciting conscious and unconscious processes, which are viewed by the client as disturbing, unusual, eccentric or challenging. The circus phenomenon offered a non-threatening avenue for accessing portions of the inner self that the clients were reluctant to acknowledge. The clients were able to easily engage the circus drawing technique and it was able to quickly gather a wealth of information—even from a single drawing.

The examples demonstrate that there is the potential for clients to identify with specific circus performers or oddities because they mirror components of the self that are viewed in a similar manner. The circus character's costume, performance and equipment combined to communicate a text that mirrored the clients' conscious and unconscious processes that were viewed as disturbing, unusual or challenging.

Clients were able to use the drawing task to depict their struggles with unpredictability, irrationality, unconventionality and loss of control.

The circus performers' strive for mastery served as a metaphor for the clients' capacity to persevere life's mishaps and the will to master the struggles of everyday life. Clients were encouraged to perfect their "skills" so that they might master that which they found to be disturbing, unusual, eccentric and challenging in their lives. Annenkuv (1975) stated, "The art of the circus actor is always perfect mastery" (p. 111). Lastly, the circus adage, "the show must go on" characterizes our determination to overcome life's misfortunes as well as the will to move forward in our lives.

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