

The Role of Painting Art Therapy in Enhancing Self-Identity and Emotional Regulation in Perfectionists

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Abstract: Perfectionism, particularly negative perfectionism, is often linked to psychological distress, including self-criticism, emotional suppression, and difficulties with self-acceptance. By offering a safe and creative space for expression through color, lines, and brushstrokes, painting therapy allows individuals to externalize repressed emotions and challenge rigid self-expectations. This study investigates how painting art therapy can serve as a non-verbal intervention to improve self-identity and emotional regulation among perfectionists. Through theoretical and case analysis approach, the research analyses the transformation of perfectionists' artworks, focusing on shifts from rigid, symmetrical designs to more fluid and expressive forms. These changes in artistic creation reflect emotional release and evolving self-acceptance. The findings suggest that painting art therapy facilitates emotional regulation by providing a channel for emotional release and supporting the development of a more authentic and stable self-identity. The study highlights the potential of this therapeutic method in clinical and educational settings, though it acknowledges limitations such as a small sample size and short intervention duration. Future research should explore the long-term effects of art therapy and investigate the integration of other therapeutic modalities to further enhance emotional well-being in perfectionists.

Keywords: Perfectionism, Painting Art Therapy, Emotional Regulation, Psychological Intervention, Mental Health

1. Introduction

Perfectionism is a personality tendency prevalent in individuals' psychological structure, often manifesting itself in the form of setting excessively high standards for oneself or others and overreacting to the results of failing to meet those standards [1]. According to the prevailing view in psychology, perfectionism can be categorized into positive perfectionism and negative perfectionism. While the former helps to motivate individuals to achieve goal-oriented behaviour, the latter is often accompanied by severe self-criticism, low self-esteem, anxiety, and emotional suppression and is a source of psychological distress and disorders [1]. Negative perfectionists, in particular, often find themselves in a predicament at the level of self-identity and have difficulty in accepting their "imperfect selves", leading to a decrease in their ability to regulate their emotions and even the risk of developing psychological disorders.

In recent years, drawing therapy, as a non-verbal psychological intervention, has attracted a lot of attention in the fields of clinical psychology and educational psychology [2]. Compared with traditional talk therapy, painting therapy provides individuals with a free and safe channel of

expression through the medium of colors, lines, and images so that they can release their inner repressed emotions, project subconscious contents, and gradually construct a new self-identity in their artistic creations without the restriction of language. The image structure, color choices and brushstrokes in the painting process often reflect the individual's psychological state and emotional reactions and have essential diagnostic and intervention significance. This Paper will explore how painting art therapy can improve the self-identity of perfectionists and play a positive role in emotion regulation from the perspective of both theoretical analysis and case analysis. Through in-depth analysis of the painting process, color selection, brushstroke characteristics and other dimensions, this study aim to reveal the mechanism of art therapy's intervention in psychological regulation and further explore its potential application value in the fields of psychotherapy and educational intervention.

2. Development and application of art therapy through painting

2.1. Key theoretical foundations on perfectionism, identity and emotional regulation

Perfectionism is a common personality tendency in which individuals often set extremely high standards for themselves and experience excessive self-blame and guilt when they fail to achieve their goals [1]. This tendency often affects the individual's self-identity construction. Negative perfectionists, in particular, are more likely to fall into a constant state of self-denial and low self-esteem, and to develop a cognitive model that says "you have to be perfect to be worthwhile". This internal conflict makes it difficult for them to form a stable and positive self-concept. In the process of self-identity development, individuals gradually build up a sense of "who I am" through understanding self-characteristics, abilities and social roles. However, perfectionists often feel lost and anxious because they rely heavily on external evaluations to confirm their own value. They are accustomed to defining themselves by their standards and achievements. Once their performance is not in line with them, they feel that their identity collapses and their emotions fluctuate as a result.

In terms of emotional regulation, perfectionists tend to suppress or deny emotions. They are afraid of showing vulnerability and failure, and are unwilling to express their true feelings, which causes negative emotions to build up inside, and in the long run, may lead to anxiety, depression and other problems [3]. Therefore, understanding the relationship between perfectionism and self-identity and emotion regulation is key to psychological support and intervention. Finding a method that promotes self-expression and aids in emotional release has become a meaningful way to help this group improve their psychological state.

2.2. Application of painting art therapy in psychological intervention

Painting art therapy combines artistic expression and psychological intervention, emphasizing the use of painting and other creative activities to stimulate individuals' inner feelings and self-exploration[4]. Compared with traditional verbal communication, painting is more capable of passing through the defence of rationality, enabling individuals to express themselves intuitively and emotionally and effectively relieving psychological stress. In practice, drawing art therapy has been widely used in the intervention of a variety of psychological disturbances, such as mood disorders, post-traumatic reactions, interpersonal disturbances and soon. Through the act of drawing, individuals are able to express themselves in an intuitive and emotional way. This creative process offers a judgment-free environment, providing a "safe space" where they can freely explore and connect with their true emotions and inner conflicts. At the same time, as a processing activity, drawing allows individuals to experience a sense of control and release through repeated composition, coloring, and revision and gradually stabilize their emotional state.

Artistic creation also provides a means of emotional feedback. Elements such as color, line, and composition are not only meant of expression but can also react to the individual's emotional state, making people aware of their own psychological changes in the creation process [5]. This integrated experience, constituted through physical participation, visual feedback and emotional resonance, makes painting therapy a unique and effective form of psychological intervention, especially suitable for groups with difficulty expressing their emotions in words.

2.3. Characteristics of perfectionists' artistic expression

In painting art therapy, perfectionists often demonstrate distinct artistic expressions compared to others [6]. They typically exhibit a strong desire for control over their artwork, favoring symmetrical compositions, clear boundaries, and intricate lines. They are prone to revising their paintings multiple times, seeking perfection, and may even erase and redo sections if they feel dissatisfied with the result. This way of creating reflects their psychological patterns in daily life - zero tolerance for mistakes, strong self-requirement, and an uneasy sense of being out of control. Regarding color choices, perfectionists prefer cool or neutral colors, such as grey, blue, black, etc., and use bright, free colors less often. These choices tend to map out their inner tendency to suppress, tension and avoid emotional release. In terms of line work, many perfectionists tend to use rigid, controlled strokes that lack fluidity, reflecting a state of emotional tension. However, as the art therapy process progresses, these individuals often begin to loosen their grip, gradually incorporating more vibrant colors and adopting freer, more expressive styles. This shift in artistic expression mirrors an internal psychological transformation — indicating a growing acceptance of imperfection, and a willingness to release suppressed emotions and engage in self-exploration through art. This process not only supports emotional regulation but also contributes to the development of a more stable and self-accepting identity.

3. Case analysis

3.1. Case selection and background description

Three case participants with obvious perfectionist tendencies were selected for this study: college student L (female, 21 years old), company employee Z (male, 28 years old) and freelancer M (female, 30 years old). All three exhibited characteristics of high self-demand, emotional suppression, and failure avoidance in their daily lives, and subjectively reported strong self-denial and emotional distress. In the preliminary interviews, all three participants indicated that they were "afraid of not doing well", "often blamed themselves", and "didn't dare to relax themselves", which was a clear manifestation of negative perfectionism.

Before formalizing the painting art therapy, the cases completed personality and mood assessments to understand their psychological states. The treatment was set up as a 90-minute drawing activity once a week for eight weeks. During the therapy, cases were encouraged to express themselves freely without regard to drawing skills and judgmental criteria. After each painting session, the therapist will have a short discussion with the case, guiding them to perceive their emotional state and thinking pattern in the painting. The purpose of choosing these three cases with different identities and backgrounds is to observe the common changes and individual differences of painting art therapy among perfectionists in various life situations. By comparing the changes in their painting processes and styles, it is possible to understand more concretely how painting expression reflects psychological states and its potential mechanisms in improving self-identity and regulating emotions.

3.2. Comparison of changes in the painting process

At the beginning of the drawing art therapy, all three cases showed an extreme concern for "results". College student L used a pencil to outline complex line structures, repeatedly modified the edges of the shapes, and drew in a constrained manner with very little white space. Z, a company employee, initially attempted to create a highly symbolic image but repeatedly rejected his own work, often erasing and redrawing sections. This reflected an inner struggle with self-expression and control. Similarly, freelancer M showed noticeable hesitation when beginning her drawing. Her artwork featured minimal free strokes, large blank spaces, and a strong sense of symmetry—revealing a reserved and restrained approach to expression.

As the drawing sessions progressed, all three cases were encouraged by the therapist to experiment with more forms and modes of expression; L began to loosen his control over lines and tried to use different colors to express his emotions, with more curves and abstract patterns appearing in his works; Z shifted from black and white pencils to watercolors, stating that he was "finally able to paint whatever I want", and that his compositions were "straightforward", and that he "could finally paint whatever I wanted". "M has gradually moved away from symmetrical layouts and tries to put his suppressed emotions on paper with strong colors, and is able to tell the emotional stories behind the images actively. This process reflects the perfectionists' shift from "controlling the picture" to "experiencing the painting", and also reflects their gradual relaxation in emotional expression and self-acceptance. This change is not only reflected in the surface form of their works, but also in the gradual establishment of their attitude towards "allowing themselves to be imperfect".

3.3. Analysis of relationship between color, line and emotion

In painting art therapy, color and line are key elements that reflect an individual's emotional state. In this study, the works of the three perfectionists in the early stage were generally in cold tones, with common colors such as grey, blue and black. These colors often symbolize repression, anxiety and withdrawal, showing their caution and restraint in emotional expression. The lines in their paintings are mostly hard, straight, dense and repetitive, revealing their inner tension and high reliance on order. As the painting process progresses, there are obvious changes in the use of colors: L begins to experiment with warm colors such as red and orange, representing her active expression of anxiety, while Z's paintings are gradually filled with natural colors such as green and blue-green, symbolizing the soothing and inward integration of her emotions, and M uses contrasting colors in her later works, such as a large area of red and yellow, which expresses the catharsis of her inner conflicts and her courage to release her emotions. M uses contrasting colors, such as red and yellow, in his later works, expressing the catharsis of his inner conflict and the courage to release his emotions.

The changes in linework are equally noticeable, from the initial tension and rigidity to the smooth, curved, and even fractured strokes. This change in strokes reflects the process of individuals gradually relaxing their psychological defences and trying to express themselves truly. At the same time, the compositions have shifted from the regular symmetry of the early period to a more free and open one, showing a shift in expression from "structure to emotion" [7]. These details show that the colors and lines in the paintings are not only the output of emotions but also the mapping of the individual's psychological transformation. In treating perfectionists, the changes in these visual elements can be used as an essential reference for assessing emotional regulation and identity improvement.

4. The therapeutic impact of painting art therapy on perfectionists

4.1. Enhancing self-identity through creative expression

Painting art therapy plays a key role in improving the self-identity of perfectionists. Perfectionists often base their self-worth on external standards and others' evaluations [3]. They are prone to self-negation once they cannot achieve their expected goals. Under this cognitive structure, it is difficult for them to form a stable and positive self-concept. As a way of free expression, painting breaks this limitation of "must be perfect", allowing individuals to re-explore the heart in a non-judgmental environment. In the process of painting, perfectionists concretize and visualize hidden self-images and internal needs through images, symbols, colors and other forms in their works. This process is essentially a "self-dialogue" that allows individuals to see their true selves in the image and gradually realize the gap between inner and external expectations. As the understanding of paintings deepens, individuals begin to accept the complexity of their own emotions and realize that "imperfection is also part of the self."

Painting allows individuals to allow mistakes and changes to happen, which is a strong challenge to "must be perfect". Perfectionists slowly establish a sense of acceptance of their true self, current emotions and uncertain states. This acceptance is the core of self-identity reconstruction, which frees individuals from dependence on external evaluation and instead looks at themselves with a more tolerant and authentic attitude, thereby gradually establishing a stable and autonomous self-awareness.

4.2. Mechanisms of emotional regulation

Emotional regulation is another crucial component in painting art therapy. Perfectionists often suppress their emotions and avoid outward expression, which can lead to an internal buildup of negative feelings. Over time, this emotional accumulation may result in chronic tension, psychological fatigue, and difficulty coping with stress. The painting process itself is a safe and natural way of emotional release. It allows individuals not to have to explain their feelings through language or logic but to use image expression to "speak out" emotional experiences in the subconscious. In actual painting, the choice of color, strokes and composition is not entirely determined by consciousness but is influenced by the current emotional state. For example, when an individual feels anger or anxiety, they may instinctively use bold, contrasting colors or employ heavy, aggressive strokes [5]. Conversely, when their mood stabilizes or emotions are released, they are more likely to select softer hues and create smoother, more flowing lines. This "emotion-expression-feedback" process helps individuals identify and regulate their emotions, thus breaking the vicious cycle of previous suppression or escape. More importantly, painting provides a nonverbal psychological buffer space. Individuals can observe their emotions in a "distance-based" manner in creation, thereby gaining more space for thinking and integration. This sense of distance helps perfectionists no longer be engulfed by emotions, but gradually learn to respond to emotions constructively and establish new regulatory strategies. With the improvement of emotional regulation ability, individuals not only become more psychologically stable, but also more capable of facing setbacks and uncertainties. This provides positive support for their interpersonal communication and study in daily life and also further improves their emotional attitude towards themselves and the world.

5. Discussion

The painting process itself does not rely on language, allowing individuals to express their inner experiences in an environment without explanation freely or being judged, which provides a safe and effective way to release and rebuild for highly self-critical and emotionally repressed perfectionists. In addition to traditional painting forms, the integration of emerging technologies such as Virtual

Reality(VR) can provide perfectionists with new ways of artistic expression. VR provides an immersive and interactive environment where perfectionists can explore smooth, unconstrained creative approaches, fostering spontaneity and facilitating emotional release [8]. The sense of presence and immersion in the VR environment can also help reduce anxiety or self-awareness, and provide a non-judgmental space where people can experiment and explore more freely. Combining VR with painting art therapy, people can participate in therapeutic art creation in a whole new way, enhancing emotional release and self-expression. VR can provide real-time guidance and feedback, providing users with gentle prompts to help them step out of their comfort zone and embrace the state of "imperfection".

6. Conclusion

This study explored the role of painting art therapy in improving the self-identity and emotional regulation of perfectionists. The study demonstrated that painting art therapy serves as an effective tool in helping perfectionists express repressed emotions, challenge rigid self-expectations, and enhance self-acceptance. Through the therapeutic process of artistic creation, perfectionists were able to gradually loosen their tight control over their artworks, moving from rigid, symmetrical designs to more fluid, expressive representations. This shift not only reflected changes in their emotional expression but also signified an evolving sense of self-identity. As participants engaged with colors and lines that symbolized their inner states, they exhibited significant emotional release, illustrating the potential of painting to facilitate emotional regulation. Over time, they embraced imperfection, understanding that emotional release and self-exploration could lead to more stable and authentic self-awareness.

Despite these promising findings, the study has some limitations. The sample size was small, with only three case participants, which may not fully represent the diverse experiences of perfectionists across different contexts. Additionally, the study relied on self-reports and subjective assessments of emotional changes, which can be influenced by personal biases and limitations in self-awareness. The relatively short duration of the intervention (eight weeks) also raises questions about the long-term effectiveness of painting art therapy in sustaining emotional regulation and self-identity development. Future research could address these limitations by expanding the sample size and incorporating longitudinal designs to examine the long-term effects of painting art therapy. Additionally, future studies could explore the integration of other therapeutic modalities alongside art therapy to further enhance emotional regulation and self-identity in perfectionists.

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