

## **Experiential Collage Work: Exploring Meaning in Collage from a Focusing-Oriented Perspective**

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The full text appears in the *Journal of Japanese Clinical Psychology* 25(4):464-475

### **ABSTRACT**

Although collage has been used occasionally in psychotherapy, Collage Therapy, as such, is a Japanese development. Clinical and research studies on many forms of Collage Therapy have been published in the Japanese Journal of Clinical Psychology, however, no research studies have been published from a Client-centered/ Focusing-oriented perspective. This paper presents the method and vignettes of a Focusing-oriented approach to collage work termed Experiential Collage Work (ECW). A hermeneutic inquiry of how the meaning of the collage is created by the client together with the therapist is discussed. The discussion utilizes Eugene Gendlin's theory of experiencing and its relations to concepts and symbols. The implicit and explicit dimensions of experience, crossing and dipping, the function of symbols and metaphors, modes of being-in-the-world or the 'situatedness' of experience, are discussed. Finally, the role of the therapist is discussed in terms of the reflexivity of experience and the crossing that occur between the therapist and client.

*Keywords:* Theory of Experiencing, Focusing-Oriented Therapy, Collage Therapy, Focusing

### **INTRODUCTION**

Collage is a popular form of art where clippings of pictures and words are cut out from magazines and pasted onto drawing paper. Collage is also familiar in homes as family albums where photos of the loved ones are assembled and posted in a frame. Collage has been used occasionally in therapy, but in Japan, collage has taken roots to develop as a method of psychotherapy. "Collage Therapy" came into being through the works of Moritani (1988) who saw that clippings from magazines, could be used as toys in sand play therapy. Moritani (2005) wrote that his first presentation on this subject was given in 1987, and that Sugiura and Irie soon followed with their Collage Therapy debut at the

Japanese Society of Psychopathology of Expression and Art Therapy. Since then, Moritani, Sugiura and Irie have been recognized as pioneers in the development of Collage Therapy.

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Despite the growing literature in Collage Therapy, no article is published from a client-centered or focusing-oriented perspective. Consequently, three aspects that are crucial to the client-centered/experiential understanding of collage work remains unarticulated.

Firstly, the works published hitherto rarely addressed the issue of how clients themselves, explore the meaning of their own collages. Fujikake (2004) explicitly emphasized the importance of metaphors in collage work with an

adolescent population. Others, such as Konjiki & Sugiura (1993), Hattori (2003), and Moritani (1999) did mention that client's verbalizations about the collage can be helpful for stimulating associations or for gaining insight. But for much of the works published, the client's own sense of meaning, not even the client's verbalization process, were the focus of research. This may be understandable with patients with severe cognitive impairment, however, there seems to be a tendency away from the client's own meaning towards the therapists' understanding of the collage, as witnessed in the development of scoring systems, 'form and content analysis', and the use of collage as methods of psychological assessment (Sugiura, 1994; Sato, 2002; Miyazawa, 2004).

Secondly, the process of change in Collage Therapy is insufficiently described. This is particularly true with regards to how the client, or the client in interaction with the therapist, comes to find meaning in collage. There seems to be a theoretical reliance on the change process in Sand Play Therapy, because Moritani (1988) conceived of Collage Therapy as a derivative form of Sand Play. However, the process of understanding meaning in a particular form of expression, *the collage*, need to be studied carefully, before equating the theory of Sand Play Therapy and Collage Therapy. There is a common assumption that "somehow, expressing changes something". A theoretical investigation of expression, or explication of meaning, will contribute to understanding of the process at work in Collage Therapy.

Thirdly, the subjective emotional quality accompanying collage making must be accounted for. A unique *felt sense* accompanies the collage made. Often, a sense of wonder and joy comes when the collage is completed. These observations are as important as the contents that make up the collage.

In this paper, an *Experiential Collage Work* [ECW] is presented. Coming from a client-centered/focusing-oriented perspective, ECW emphasizes the client's own sense of meaning, and how the client and therapist explore and understand the meaning of the client's collage. The collage making process is also modified to maximize this emphasis.

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## METHOD

ECW requires a two-part session. Part One is collage-making, where the collage is created. In Part Two, the collage maker explores and focuses on the meaning of the collage. Both parts require approximately an hour, thus ECW requires more than 2 hours with a short break between the two parts. ECW can be conducted either on an individual basis with a therapist, or with a listener, or it can be conducted in a group, if group members value listening and have some listening skills.

### **Part One**

Part one begins by bringing the collage makers' attention into their bodily felt senses. A focusing session is not necessary. It is only recommended that the collage maker attunes inwardly. Warm-up exercises using relaxation techniques or meditation may be helpful for this inner attunement, but they are not essential.

In contrast to much of the Collage Therapy techniques reported in previous studies, ECW uses drawing papers of different colors, instead of only white papers. The collage maker is asked to check with the bodily felt sense at the moment to see which color feels right for him/her today. The choice of colors is already an experiential process, where colors make 'direct reference' (Gendlin, 1997a) to sensed experiencing.

Magazines are stacked in a pool where the collage maker can browse and choose magazines to bring back to their seats. Scissors and glue are needed to cut and paste any pictures or words that appeals to the collage maker. It is emphasized that the collage maker will not try to make a story with the collage. Rather, the collage maker cuts and pastes any clippings that have an appeal to them, even though they may not know the meaning or significance of these clippings. Like a dream, impressive photos and words are cut and pasted without cognitive controls.

### **Part Two**

In Part Two of ECW, the collage maker reflects on the meaning of his/her own collage with a partner or therapist. Client-centered respondings are recommended, however, impressions and interpretations on the part of the therapist (partner) can be suggested to the client in the form of questions, to be validated by the

client's own experiencing. This way of presenting interpretations in the form of questions to be validated by the client's experience is central in Focusing and is shown in detail in Gendlin's work on dreams (1986). In group sessions, the collage makers can be paired up and time is shared among the two, so that each collage maker has 20 or 30 minutes to explore the meaning of his/her own collage. It is recommended that the participants have minimal knowledge of client-centered or experiential listening (see "The Listening Manual" in Gendlin, 1981). Ikemi (1997) reported, through his work in an out-patient psychiatric clinic, that experiential attitudes and listening skills could be taught to patients, and that neurotic patients tended to show marked improvement in their conditions from participating in these self-help type groups in the clinic. In non-clinical settings, Part Two may function as an encounter group session, as self-help groups, or as part of (clinical) training programs.

## COLLAGES AND EXPLICATIONS

### *Collage A*

A graduate student made this collage in a group, as part of a training program. Part One took approximately an hour. In Part Two, she and her partner (a man) explored what meaning this collage might have. It was fascinating to her because, although she had been making collages for some years now, it was the first time that she had used cosmetics as clippings in collage. She called the cosmetic area of the collage, the "real world" and the periphery depicting scenes of nature, the "unreal world". In her previous collages, the scenes of nature depicting the timeless world stretching back to eternity, was sensed as an important part of her. But in this collage, the timeless nature scenes were of the "unreal world", while the cosmetics in the center seemed real. She was about to finish her explication, wondering about a possible change occurring in her, when her partner spoke. "I sense a feminine-ness from these cosmetics, like, as a man, I could not have made this." All of a sudden, the words "feminine" resonated with her felt sense. Immediately, a particular relationship came to her mind. It was a relationship with a man, not a "man-woman relationship", but still, the relationship existed because she was a woman. She was flooded with cherishing feelings about this relationship,

when his partner continued, "and look here, the bottle in the center, it says THE COLOURS OF LOVE". A smile came on her face and happy tears filled her eyes. That was exactly the feeling she had about the relationship. She also noticed that the word "colours" was plural. It was about her love and caring, not only in this particular relationship, but to others as well, located right in the center. She was astonished that she never recognized the words on the bottle. But the words were there, right in the mid-



dle, was where all her love and caring were.

### *Collage B*

A graduate student in a training program made this collage. Part One took an hour and he paired with another graduate student (a woman) for half an hour in Part Two. During Part One, he was aware of the fact that he always pastes magazine articles on the drawing paper completely, before putting any clippings onto it. But this time, he felt he could begin collage making without covering up the drawing paper with magazine articles. As he began, however, he felt the need to cover up the drawing paper. So he did this and then made and pasted clipping of whatever appealed to him. In the middle of collage making, he felt he could not continue. He gave up using scissors and started to rip the magazines. Doing so, he had a "wow!" experience and something happened inside. Suddenly he could work on the collage and he was flooded with energy to continue. In Part Two, he was sensing, from the whole of the collage, an uneasy felt sense. As he shared this with the listener who reflected carefully, he could sense that the uneasiness was like a storm and that he often has this feeling in life. Interestingly, there is one arrow-like clip-

ping pointed the other way. Looking at that made his uneasy felt sense settle down. There's something to that, he said, sensing inside silently for a minute. Nothing came. He ended the session, sure that there was something about this collage that was related to his way of living, a stormy and uneasy feeling, but he couldn't specify what it was.

### Collage C

The collage maker is a professional man in his forties. The collage was made in the middle



of a weeklong professional workshop. A 1-hour time slot was allocated for Part One. In Part Two, the collage maker paired with a partner for half an hour to explicate the meaning of his collage. During Part Two, the collage maker experienced a "murky" felt sense that had something to do with "underwater". He also sensed that he somehow liked this murky underwater feel, but no more came. His partner helped explication with experiential listening, but no more could come that day. The murky felt sense about "underwater" remained until the following day, so the collage maker found time to pair with his partner on the following day to explicate more from the collage. He suddenly noticed that the sea lion in the center felt like himself. Then the word "timid animal" came. The animal was timid and yet curious about humans. He then noticed that the "smooth car" in the lower left was "out of gas" and needed a refill at a gas pump (left center) which seemed to be empty. The collage maker found immediately what this collage was all about. The "smooth car" part of him, participat-

ing in this professional workshop, was now out of gas. Now another part of him, "the timid but curious animal" was coming to the fore. It felt better if he could be underwater and yet curious about the other participants in the workshop. He was thrilled about this discovery. He now knew explicitly, that his way of participating in this workshop was changing after the middle of the week, and he could now comfortably pull back a little, without running around like a smooth car.

### DISCUSSION

#### *Crossing and the Implicit*

When one embarks on the process of collage-making, one attunes into his/her own felt sense. In Experiential Collage Work, several leads are provided to encourage this inner attunement. First, the collage maker is straight forwardly invited to attune inwardly. Secondly, the emphasis on "not making a story" and "cutting out and pasting whatever appeals to you, even though they may not seem to make sense" serves as invitations to *directly refer* to experiencing (for *direct reference*, see Gendlin 1997a). Thirdly, choosing the color of the draw-



ing paper is another invitation for *direct reference*, where the collage maker checks or refers to his/her own experiencing of the moment to see which color fits with his/her present mood. In direct reference, one checks with the felt sense directly, or *immediately*, where cognitive processes do not *mediate* in the choice of colors or clippings.

In the felt sense, many aspects of experience

and many situations *cross*. However, the crossing, at this stage, is *implicit*<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, these crossings are *felt* but are not formulated into explicit cognitive language. The collage maker's experience crosses with the color of the drawing paper, the photos in magazines, with clippings, the captions and so on. Therefore, certain items in magazines appeal to the felt sense of the collage maker, and the felt sense determines what is to be selected for the collage. The felt sense also determines the layout of the clippings on drawing paper. There is an "*implicit governing*" (Gendlin 1995, 1997b) that governs the whole collage-making process.

The implicit governing in collage-making is seen abundantly in Collage B. The collage maker doesn't know why, but he feels the need to cover up the drawing paper with magazine articles. He doesn't know why, but at times, he felt he could not continue, or that ripping the clippings, instead of cutting them, felt right and gave him energy to go on. The arrow like object gave him some relief, but again, why this was so, is not explicitly formulated. In the process of collage making, a continuous direct reference between the clippings and felt experience takes place.

There is often, a *felt completion* of collage-making. Collage makers often feel relief, excitement, thrill and joy when their collage is completed. Without the felt completion, collage makers may request for more time to complete their collage or feel that their collage is still incomplete as it is. Felt completion is brought about by the implicit process. Since the process is implicit, one cannot say exactly, what is being completed during collage making. Yet there is an unmistakable sense that the collage is complete or incomplete.

Much of our living involves such *implicitly ongoing process*. For instance, we may be excited and vitalized after a conversation with a friend, even though we may not know explicitly why or what, in the conversation, produced this effect. Yet, there is a distinct *felt sense* that

something has changed after the conversation. In collage making, implicit processes go on, as the collage maker refers to his/her felt sense in every move of collage making.

### ***Dipping, Felt Meaning, the Function of Symbols and Recognition***

In Gendlin's theory (1997a), the terms *felt meaning* and *felt sense* are used interchangeably. Each collage gives us a unique felt sense, which is a sense of its meaningfulness. In Part One of ECW, the clippings (or the whole collage) functioned to 'call forth' in us the felt meaning. The function of symbols is the referring to, or the 'calling forth of' the felt meaning. As the collage making proceeds, the felt sense begins to choose the symbols, as certain clippings fit with the felt sense and others do not. These two different functional relationships between felt experience and symbols occur during collage making.

In Part Two of ECW, the collage maker *dips* into the felt meaning with a partner or therapist. The term *dipping* (Gendlin 1995) is equivalent to *focusing*. There is yet another different functional relationship between felt sense and symbol in Part Two. As the collage maker dips into the felt sense, he/she is referring to the felt meaning to explore the meaning of symbols. In order for us to *recognize* what the symbols *mean*, the collage maker needs to dip into the felt sense. In Collage C, for example, symbols of the sea lion and the underwater world function as symbols, as they called forth in the collage maker a "murky felt sense". In Part Two, the collage maker dips into the "murky felt sense" and refers this to the clipping to see if he can *recognize* its meaning.

In fact, without felt meaning, the collage maker may not even recognize particular features of the clippings. *Recognition* does not occur when there is no felt meaning. In Collage A for example, the collage maker does not recognize the words "THE COLOURS OF LOVE" that

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<sup>1</sup> This paper chooses to use the terms "implicit" and "explicit" rather than the traditional terms "unconscious" and "conscious". As Gendlin (1964) suggests, the term "unconscious" signifies the "repression paradigm". These traditional concepts, as shown in other parts of this paper, will be bracketed in our examination of the process in collage work.

appear on the cosmetic bottle. Only when there is a felt meaning of “feminine-ness” does she recognize these words. Otherwise, the words are just designs in a bunch of cosmetic bottles and go unrecognized.<sup>2</sup>

### **Carrying Forward and Metaphor**

In the explication of collage, words such as “feminine-ness”, “colours of love” (Collage A), “curious but timid animal”, “smooth car”, “underwater” (Collage B) come out of the felt sense. These are *metaphors*, which are defined as “understanding or experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (Lakeoff & Johnson, 1980). In these collages, one kind of thing, oneself, is understood in terms of another kind of thing, the collage. Cognitive linguistics (Lakeoff & Johnson, 1980) has shown that meaning is *freshly created* in metaphors and that cognition and reality is altered by it. Although “a friendly discussion” goes on concerning the differences between cognitive linguistics and Gendlin’s metaphor theory (Johnson 1997, Gendlin 1997c), both cognitive linguistics and Gendlin’s theory (Gendlin, 1995) show that metaphor depends on embodied experience, not on pre-existing similarities, as in classical linguistics. To live like a “curious but timid animal” (Collage C) for example, is a creation of a fresh new reality, and cannot be reduced to pre-existing categorical similarities.

These fresh new metaphors are “lifted out” of the felt sense and carried over from the implicit domain to the explicit domain. Such a move is called *carrying forward* in Gendlin’s theory (1997a). Not just any articulation can carry forward experiencing. Only specific explications have the power to resonate and change felt experiencing. Now, there is no “murky feeling” about the collage (Collage C), the collage now has a different feel. Usually, there is a sense of excitement at the discovery when car-

rying forward occurs (as in Collages A and C), while no such affective change occurs when articulations do not carry forward experiencing (as in Collage B).

As implicit experiencing is carried forward, there is a change in the *living* (existence) of the person, along with the change in felt experiencing.<sup>3</sup> The felt sense *is* existence (Ikemi, 2000). Now, the collage maker is not living like a “smooth car” as he did in the first few days of the workshop, he is living the situation differently, like a “curious but timid animal”.

It must be pointed out that carrying forward does not mean that ‘covert’ meaning depletes itself, or is replaced by ‘overt’ formulations. With carrying forward, the implicit intricacy is affected and felt differently. However, there is always *more* to be explicated. More can be felt and said about the “unreal world” and “feminine-ness” in light of the relationship in Collage A. More can be said about the “animal” and “underwater world” in Collage C. Explication lifts out something new and leaves something more, and it also affects the more that is left.

### **The ‘Situatedness’ of Experience**

A line of philosophers from Husserl, Dilthey, Heidegger to Gendlin have emphasized that experience is *situated*. Husserl’s *intentionality* refers to how consciousness is always *of* something, how experience is always *of* the *life-world*. Heidegger, in his analysis of *dasein*, used the term *Being-in-the-World*, to say how *dasein* is always “in” situations. Gendlin repeatedly emphasizes the *situatedness* of experiencing. For him, felt experience is a *Befindlichkeit* (Heidegger, 1962; Gendlin 1978/1979), a “how-one-finds-oneself” in situations. By examining the collages shown in this paper, it is clear that the collages are “moody”<sup>4</sup> *befindlichkeit* of the

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<sup>2</sup> It is not as if these words were first perceived and then “repressed” or “denied from awareness” (Rogers, 1951). The issue of repression or denial from awareness is a particularly problematic theoretical issue (see for instance, Sartre, 1943, pp.87-90) and will be bracketed in this paper, along with the “conscious/unconscious” paradigm.

<sup>3</sup> Carrying forward of experiencing is sometimes depicted as “insight”, of “Ah-ha experience” (insight accompanied by affect), but not only is there conceptual and affective change, there is a change, a carrying forward, of the person’s existence (living).

<sup>4</sup> Heidegger (1962) used the word “moods” to articulate how understanding is always beyond the reach of cognitions. For example, he writes “...cognition reach far too short a way compared with the primordial disclosure belonging to moods ...” (p.173)

collage makers' existence. Collage A discloses how the graduate student finds herself in her relationships; Collage B is a moody understanding of the graduate student's daily life; Collage C shows changes in how the workshop situation is lived by the collage maker. When one understands the collage and says, "this collage is really me", it is equivalent to saying, "this collage is my situation". In short, collages show the modes of being-in-the-world, the *be-findlichkeit* of the collage makers.

But situations are not stationary. With carrying forward of experiencing, the situation also changes. Now the relationship in Collage A, is one in which she is feminine. Now the man in Collage C is no longer running around like a smooth car. With these changes in the modes of being-in-the-world, situations change. The collages show, not only the situation as it is, but the *developing of situations*.

The Client-centered formulation of the "unconscious" has evolved since Rogers' early conception in 1951 (Rogers, 1951). Though a study of the 'bodily felt sense', or the 'sensory and visceral experiences' in Rogers' theory, Ikemi (2005) showed how Rogers' thinking changed over time, where Rogers gave up the early 'repression paradigm' to 'concur' with Gendlin on the ongoing bodily felt experiencing to which one could refer to as a source of conceptualizations. ECW does not adhere to Rogers' early 'repression paradigm' where the collage can be seen as hidden or disguised symbolization for those aspects of experience 'not adequately symbolized in experience'. In fact, it does not agree with any representationalist scheme, where symbols in the collage represent something from another level, hidden from awareness. The collage is not a symbolization of what it hides, it is a functioning of symbols for what it shows --- the specific manner of the person's living in situations.

## **The Other**

### **I. Reflexivity**

When one articulates from the felt sense, words capture the sense of what is meant. When these words are reflected back in listening, the words are checked against the felt

meaning. Often, the speaker feels that the words are not exactly right, or that the words do not fully capture the felt meaning. Then articulations are refined, and new words are used. A "zig-zagging"<sup>5</sup> process is set in motion: One speaks from the felt sense, then, he/she checks the reflected words against the felt sense; one then refines and says in new words, which is then again, checked with the felt sense and refined. In this experiential process, the other (the listener) is needed to reflect back exactly, the words used in explication. Therefore, client-centered listening is essential in Part Two of ECW.

Client-centered listening is essential because human experience is *reflexive*. It is the nature of human experience to refine and further itself when symbols are reflected back to it. Thus, the [first] author asserts that client-centered listening functions to further experience *because it fits the nature of human experience*. Not only client-centered listening, but any symbols or objectifications are used to function in the reflexive nature of experience. Only human beings, for instance, use mirrors. A reflected image in a mirror functions in reflexive experience to further the experience itself. For instance, looking at the reflected image, one senses that the color of his shirt doesn't match his jacket exactly, and tries on another and uses the mirror to reflect that image to see if the new shirt matches. This reflective process in front of the mirror functions in experience in the same way that client-centered listening functions. Recently, within client-centered therapy, Rennie (1998) articulated his approach to person-centered counseling around the concept of reflexivity, rather than around traditional Rogerian theory. Although his approach is in many ways similar to the present [first] author, Rennie describes "reflexivity" in the following ways: "to think about our thinking, to feel about our feelings, to treat ourselves as objects of our attention...This is reflexivity as I understand it". He also uses the term "self-monitoring" to articulate reflexivity. From these descriptions, it seems as if Rennie is using the term "reflexivity" to refer to the *act of reflecting upon experience*. In contrast, the present author uses the term "reflexivity" to mean a *basic property* or a *na-*

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<sup>5</sup> Gendlin uses the term "zig-zag" to articulate the ongoing movement between the implicit and explicit domains, and refers to the function of the zig-zag in psychotherapy (Gendlin, 1973) and in philosophy (Gendlin, 1997d).

ture of human experience, which makes such an act possible.

## II. Crossing

A listener, therapist or partner in ECW functions not only to reflect the articulations of the collage maker in a client-centered way. What one feels about the collage maker's collage can *reconstitute* (Gendlin 1964) aspects of experience that were not in the collage makers' awareness before. The listener's impressions of the collage create new crossings, and may resonate with aspects of the implicit intricacy. In Collage A, for example, the word "feminineness" came up from the listener's felt sense of the collage, which then resonated with the collage makers felt sense. Suddenly, the whole situation regarding a particular relationship was *reconstituted*. Therefore, in addition to client-centered listening, the therapist or partner can help in explicating meaning from the collage, by expressing his/her felt sense of the collage maker's collage.

With therapists, the reconstituting capacity is even more powerful, since the therapist's sense of the [collage makers'] collage may cross with concepts in psychotherapy and personality theories. For example, in Collage C, the process in Part Two may have been facilitated with the Jungian concepts of *persona* and *shadow*. Notice that right above the "smooth car" is a mask, literally a *persona*! And the "underwater world" is the *shadow*, of course, of all that is happening on the land. Concepts can resonate in the therapists' experience, which can then be turned into questions to see if they resonate with the collage makers' experience. When concepts resonate with the collage maker's experience, concepts themselves may be enriched. Both the experience and the concept can be carried forward.

Eugene Gendlin (1997b) writes that the "most radical impact of my philosophy stems from Wilhelm Dilthey". For Dilthey, experience, expression and understanding were inherent in one another. "Dilthey said that experience is always also an understanding and an expression (explication), and conversely, that they are always each a further experiencing." (Gendlin 1997d) This is particularly relevant to collage, where the experience of the collage is the expression and is the understanding, at once. The expression and the understanding further the experience and each other. Moreover, Gendlin

carries forward Dilthey's works in showing how the understanding of the "others cross, so that each becomes implicit in the other" (Gendlin 1997b). When this happens, our understanding [of the collage, in this case] is "implicitly governed by a richer crossing, and so there will be a better understanding than the author [collage maker] could have managed".

Being client-centered does not deter the therapist from explicating the therapists' own sense of the client's collage. The therapist, with her whole implicit intricacy, which includes her existence and professional concepts, crosses with the client. It is from this *crossed implicit intricacy* that the collage begins to speak its meaning.

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