

Sublimation theories in art therapy: Kevin Jones

‘The art therapist’s attitude toward the concept of sublimation must fundamentally influence both practice and theoretical outlook’ (Kramer, 1987, p. 40).

Art therapists have taken up and reworked sublimation and emphasised the creation of the new in relation to the dynamics of the past and in a way which is critical of reductive applications of the concept. Art therapists have theorised on sublimation as a transformation of instinctual energy or in relation to the mother as lost object and explored the links between sublimation and symbolism in the development of the ego. The focus on the different qualities of the art object in art therapy in relation to sublimation emphasises sublimation as a process of transformation that links clinical practice and the social.

The American art therapist Kramer worked with a model of sublimation derived from Kris and American ego psychology and through her concept of the ‘third hand’ emphasised the relationship between the self, others and society (Kramer, 1987 and Kramer 2000; Edwards 2004). Kramer thought that successful sublimation contributed to the qualitative value of the work of art. A mature sublimation showing both the struggle of id and ego and a synthesis of form and content would be both aesthetically satisfying and an indicator of ego development. Wadeson criticised thought that the emphasis on sublimation in Kramer’s work downplayed the role of relationship in the production of art in therapy (Wadeson, 1980). In her later work Kramer saw Winnicott’s transitional objects as precursors of sublimated art objects, providing a necessary stage before the mature defence of sublimation could become operative (Kramer, 1979). She saw art as an aspect of reparation toward the mother as a lost object and emphasised the important role of the mother in super-ego development, laying the foundations for later sublimation.

In Britain, Greenwood used the idea of sublimation as a mature defence in the context of working with psychosis (Greenwood, 1997). Weir (1987) and Levens (1989) took up the Kleinian notion of mourning the lost object. Levens develops the example of scribble and smearing pictures in art therapy to suggest the deterioration in the quality of the art object that can occur when sublimation breaks down. Dalley and Case outlined the development of sublimation within a critical framework that highlighted the ambivalence toward art arising from the links made by Freud between art and symptom (Dalley and Case, 1992). Hogan also criticised the relationship between art and psychopathology in psychoanalytic theory and highlighted the inferior status assigned to women in cultural production in theories of sublimation. She further criticised the limitations of an emphasis on the determinant role of internal mental states in the production of art, to the exclusion of historical and social processes (Hogan, 2001)

Kramer thought that the art therapist's role was to function as a benign super-ego, encouraging sublimation but warned that we must beware of sublimation as salvation (Kramer, 1987).

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See also: Sublimation, Psychoanalysis and Art