

**SPECIAL ISSUE**

Guided Imagery and Music: Contemporary European perspectives and developments

## Article

## Fairy tale composing as an alternative creative processing in group GIM

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**ABSTRACT**

Fairy tales have universal themes and can be viewed as dramatic representations of basic psychological processes. They encourage creative thinking, universalise human problems and establish hope for the future. In Guided Imagery and Music (GIM) practice, self-understanding and personal growth is approached through imagery evoked by music-listening; however, the emerging imagery may be fragmented, unclear or incoherent. Writing a fairy tale may be used to integrate the GIM experience into a coherent narrative, to promote meaning-reconstruction and re-scripting of one's life. Furthermore, the enactment of fairy tales, as well as the interactive group process, may enhance personal insight and group functioning. This article describes the process in which Group Guided Imagery and Music (grpGIM) material is transformed into a fairy tale which is then narrated. In grpGIM, verbal interaction occurs between group members, or group members and the guide (group co-coordinator), while listening to the music. The project presented in this article has evolved through the authors' personal experience of a musical and creative analysis of Helen Bonny's Quiet Music Program (HBQMP). It is suggested that the writing of fairy tales could be an alternative, creative post-session analysis of the emerging grpGIM material.

**KEYWORDS**

group GIM (grpGIM), fairy tales, groups, narration

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## INTRODUCTION

“The lesson of a fairy tale is that a struggle against severe difficulties in life is unavoidable but that if one does not shy away, but steadfastly meets unexpected and often unjust hardships, one masters all obstacles and at the end emerges victorious” (Bettelheim 1976: 8).

The process presented in this article describes how the material from a Group Guided Imagery and Music (grpGIM) session is transformed into a fairy tale which is then narrated. This project has evolved through the authors' personal experience of a musical and creative analysis of Helen Bonny's Quiet Music Program (HBQMP). The creative analysis consisted of producing and presenting a piece of art inspired by the HBQMP. The material from the grpGIM session was used to form a fairy tale which integrated musical elements, imagery material and understanding the group's dynamics. Through processing the imagery material and collaborating in writing the fairy tale, members' self-understanding and group relationships improved mainly through projection, mirroring and story development.

Working with fairy tales can be seen as a less invasive intervention; bridging the person's inner and outer experiences, thoughts and emotions (Brink-Jensen 2015), and giving the client and the therapist more insight into the identity of the client (Biechonski 2005). During grpGIM, the group's dynamics surface and self-observation is enhanced; members recognise group stressors, show better acceptance of individual differences and are given a safe space to release stress (Pehk 2015). Furthermore, the group travel and group processing stimulates self-expression, resulting in the development of self-confidence in a creative and spontaneous way (Pehk 2015). Positive personal experience of the combination of grpGIM and fairy-tale writing and narrating prompted the authors to further explore this process.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the psychotherapeutic context, imagery experiences can be interpreted in various ways; the imagery is symbolic, has layers of meaning and includes both conscious and unconscious material. Using imagery is an effective way to bypass the critical factor of the conscious mind (Biechonski 2005). Nevertheless, the imagery may often be quite hazy, semi-transparent, impressionistic and fleeting, lacking in continuity, or appear fragmented (Summer 2002; Young 2006). It is suggested that when the imagery material is integrated into structured and coherent stories, therapeutic results may be attained (Perilli 2016).

Due to its symbolic character, the fairy tale creates a safe space allowing sensitive issues to be addressed. Without uncomfortable self-disclosure (Bettelheim 1976; Ucko 1991), but through projection and identification with the tale's heroes and predicaments, the person has a chance to gain distance from personal issues and relate to them in a new, creative way (Bettelheim 1976; Brink-Jensen 2015; Bunt & Wärja 2016; Gagnon 2003; Hill 1992; Mitchell 2010; White & Epston 1990). Writing a fairy tale provides a space for self-expression and externalisation; eventually integrating experiences in a meaningful way and providing a sense of control and agency over life issues (Brink-Jensen 2016; White & Epston 1990).

In group settings, co-authoring a story is a way for group members to connect and get to know each other (Neuner, Schauer, Klaschik, Karunakara, & Elbert 2004; Pehk 2015), to create mutual experiences on a deeper, symbolic or metaphorical level (Ruini, Masoni, Ottolini & Ferrari 2014). Treadwell, Reisch, Travaglini and Kumar (2011) observed that the interactive and active parts of collaborative story-writing increased group cohesion.

Narratives and fairy tales have been extensively used in psychotherapy both as diagnostic tools (viz. T.A.T., Rorschach and Duss Fables) – as they

employ defence mechanisms such as denial, projection and identification (Cramer 1991) - and as therapeutic interventions. Elements of narrative therapy have been incorporated into work with families (Kiser, Baumgardner & Dorado 2010), with patients suffering from dementia or other neuro-degenerative illnesses (Broadhead 2012), as well as with patients with chronic illnesses such as cancer (Carpenter, Brockopp & Andrykowski 1999) and HIV (Ezzy 2000). Narrative psychotherapy has also been applied when working with trauma and PTSD (Soroko 2012), including children, adolescents and adults in crisis and post-conflict regions, and survivors of political violence, war and torture (Gwozdziwycz & Mehl-Madrona 2013; Neuner et al. 2008; Neuner et al. 2004; Onyut et al. 2005; Schaal, Elbert & Neuner 2009).

It is suggested in the literature (Brink-Jensen 2015; Pehk 2015; Summer 1990) that grpGIM, as well as the combination of GIM and fairy tales, is beneficial for the individual. Pehk (2015) proposed a model for institutions and organisations (TEAM-GIM) aiming at group development, change and the integration of new members or leaders. According to Pehk's method, group members are provided with a creative and safe framework in which group patterns and dynamics are understood and individual differences are addressed, promoting self-reflection and development through grpGIM. Brink-Jensen (2015), working with fairy-tale composition as part of a GIM intervention, provides a structured frame enabling clients suffering from trauma or schizophrenic-spectrum and psychotic disorders to work with intense and chaotic perceptions and experiences. Perilli (2016: 9) also advocates that writing narratives based on a GIM experience assists clients "to re-define or re-construct the self in a coherent, integrative way, thereby leading to appropriate changes in emotions, thoughts, and behavior".

## CREATING A FAIRY TALE

This project originated from the authors' personal experience as members of a study group in GIM training. Upon completion of the musical analysis of the HBQMP, tension and withdrawal between group members were observed, and it was communicated within the group that all members experienced stress and fatigue. The group had to take part in a creative analysis of the same programme, presenting a final piece of art to a group of colleagues. In anticipation of further work,

tension in group relations and indecision increased. However, members agreed upon the following creative process: to re-experience the programme (HBQM) in a grpGIM session, draw a group mandala and decide which art form to use based on the emerging material. Musical elements, together with the group's imagery and mandala, allowed members' personal and relational issues to surface whilst inspiring the group to compose a fairy tale as the final art product. The fairy tale provided a common, symbolic language and a safe space to elaborate on member and group issues.

Group discussions and reflections on the music and the grpGIM material took place over a period of six months. Music, elements and symbols such as colours, animals and objects, as well as group dynamics, transference issues and personal interpretations of the experience and the processing, were elaborated. This processing alternated between individual and group work and, over time, insight on the material deepened. We described this process as a *post session meta-analysis*.

The musical programme included two pieces by Debussy (*Danse sacrée et danse profane, Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*), Holst's *Venus (The Planets)* and *Fantasia on Greensleeves* by Vaughan Williams. Debussy's impressionistic style creates a vague sense of rhythm through subtle, complex and irregular rhythmic alternations; frequent modulations, transpositions, deceptive cadences and transitions allude to a "dreamy, longing, sentimental, playful, whimsical" (Hevner 1936 as cited in Bonny & Savary 1973: 161) and exploratory atmosphere. In general, Debussy is revolting against form and harmony in composition, whereas Holst and Vaughan Williams rely on form and harmony. *Venus* gently adds a rhythmic, pulsating stability, concrete melodies and form; the programme concludes with the pastoral and familiar tunes of *Greensleeves*, subtly suggesting an ending.

The grpGIM's script was enriched with new elements in order to take a fairy-tale form. The initial image was 'a picnic in the forest': the four group members wandered a while and eventually came to a lake which appeared dark and frightening to everybody. One of the members saw little spiders, another frogs, and a third suggested throwing pebbles in the lake, which all members eagerly did. In the fairy tale, the four members became four sister princesses who, disobeying

their parents, ventured to their kingdom's forbidden lake. Throwing pebbles in the lake, they woke up the lake's evil spirit, who cursed them. The princesses only had until sunset to break the spell. Coming to their aid, little spiders and frogs showed them the way. The princesses embarked on an adventure, overcoming obstacles and solving riddles, which promoted individuation and growth. They returned to their palace victorious.

In both the imagery and the fairy tale, the group members and heroines start and finish their journey at the same place; the picnic site and the castle respectively. The final piece of music has a circular and grounding quality which perhaps enhanced the sense of returning to a familiar place. The element of fear experienced by the group members whilst by the lake was transformed into the evil spirit who placed the curse. The time limit for breaking the spell worked as a symbol, reflecting issues within our group; in terms of meeting the project's deadline, growth and the passing of time. The harp's timbre and pizzicati brought the animals into the imagery. Further serving the function and form of the fairy tale, the animals were transformed into helpers giving advice on how to break the spell. Along these lines, the final fairy-tale plot was created.

Part of our project was to present the process and the artwork. The fairy tale, including text and poetry, was recited by the group while excerpts of the HBQMP programme were used as background music. This externalisation of their experience was felt to be cathartic by the group members, who reported a sense of belonging and accomplishment. The emerging narrative of the grpGIM became a fairy tale which was then narrated; this entire process enhanced members' understanding of themselves and others, communication and relationships. Consequently, group cohesion and resilience improved.

## DISCUSSION

The process as a whole offers a combination of GIM with group interaction and the use of fairy tales. It is hypothesised that the process of grpGIM and story-composing and -telling may further promote the therapeutic group factors, as presented by Yalom (2006). Both the grpGIM and the processing needed for writing and presenting the fairy tale enhance interactive learning and self-understanding. By using fairy tales, existential issues are addressed, the universality of human

conditions is emphasised and hope is instilled. The group members may experience catharsis through reciting or enacting the story. This processing could also enhance cohesion and facilitate crisis-resolution in groups.

Reflecting on our personal experience, we decided to further explore the process we followed in terms of its effects and potential benefits in group work with different client groups and within a variety of settings. These could include non-clinical groups such as student, teacher or parent groups, organisations or institutions for employees, and clinical groups ranging from patients with autoimmune diseases to refugees and deprived populations. Moreover, it could be applied both in group and in dyadic psychotherapy to assist therapists and clients to gain insight into the clients' issues. Although we speculate that it could be a tool to facilitate meaning-integration in conditions where there is fragmentation or disorganisation of the psyche, caution is required in the application of such projective processing with patients suffering from severe psychopathology.

We are currently in the process of developing a more structured procedure for groups in order to evaluate whether this could be a viable and useful model for psychotherapeutic practice. We are trying out modifications of the initial process with typically developed adults familiar with GIM. Several components have been modified in order to delineate a framework for further research. Specifically, the guidelines, the induction and the music selection are being further examined for their duration, content and qualitative characteristics in subsequent trials. The number of sessions and their duration are being considered to allow space for elaborating and reflecting on the material as well as for writing and presenting the story. In view of combining GIM with other psychotherapeutic practices, we hope that this project will be continued and the authors may be able to develop a more structured and practically applicable process.

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