



Observing the relationship: Couple patterns reflected in joint paintings[☆]

Sharon Snir^{a,*}, Tamar Hazut^{b,1}

^a Department of Education, Tel Hai Academic College, Upper Galilee, Israel

^b Art Therapy Training Program, Haifa University, Haifa, Israel

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Joint painting
Couple relationships
Phenomenological analysis

ABSTRACT

This study documents the main pictorial phenomena expressed in joint paintings by romantically involved couples, and attempts to define the principal elements of the “pictorial language” that individuals use to express their relationship. The study applies methods of inquiry that were developed for the purpose of therapy and evaluation, based on the phenomenological approach to nonclinical populations.

In a qualitative examination of the paintings, 13 thematic categories were identified and used to examine expressions of the couple relationship in their joint paintings: suggestions for cooperation/non-cooperation, reactions to suggested cooperation/non-cooperation, relating to images made by the partner, distance between the partners in the painting, contact between the marks of the two partners, occupation of areas, similarity/difference between the painting styles of the participants, connection/separation between images, coherence of the resulting product, symbolism of style, images in the painting that are significant to understanding the relationship, behavior in the course of the painting process, and transitions between the paintings.

Two case studies are presented to demonstrate how such analysis may help art therapists, marriage counselors, and family therapists evaluate and understand couple relationships by effectively revealing their conflicts and significant needs as expressed in their joint paintings.

© 2011 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Introduction

In the joint painting technique, two or more participants create a painting on a shared sheet of paper. As a form of nonverbal communication that takes place within the space of the sheet of paper, the act of painting facilitates the representation and processing of interpersonal themes, and the pictorial space represents the couple's life (Wadeson, 1980). The spatial dimension of the picture illuminates perceptions of the self, the other, and their interrelationship, as well as communication patterns (Kwiatkowska, 1978). The joint painting technique is used for evaluation and intervention of interpersonal relationships in individual, couple, family, and group art therapy. Quite naturally, it focuses on interpersonal relationships as an essential element in the functioning of the system (Barth & Kinder, 1985). Since the themes expressed through art are nonverbal and partially unconscious, it is more difficult for participants to control them (Kris, 1952), and therefore the overall picture

revealed is more comprehensive, complex, and profound than that depicted using verbal diagnostic tools.

The technique of joint painting is well known and widely used by art therapists but it has not been adequately studied as an evaluative tool. Moreover, to date, no research has been done to demonstrate that documents and defines the pictorial phenomena with which the two participants working on a joint painting describe the relationship between them.

According to the phenomenological approach to art therapy (Betensky, 1995), the identification and definition of pictorial phenomena constitutes an integral part of the assessment and therapy process. The study of pictorial phenomena includes the observation of behavioral and visual phenomena that emerge during the painting process. It serves as a tool for understanding themes that are overt or hidden, conscious or unconscious, making them accessible to the conscious mind and enabling their processing.

Comprehension of the themes expressed in the painting process is achieved through observation of the different stages of the process, the accompanying behavior, and the final product. Phenomenological observation relates to the type and size of the painting page, the chosen materials and implements, the manner in which they are used and in which the painting is executed, the choice of colors, the characteristics of the colors and shapes that form the painting, as well as the chronological order in which they are chosen, their meaning, and their interaction. It

[☆] This study is part of a doctoral thesis under the supervision of Professor Hadas Wiseman.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +972 77 4110060; fax: +972 54 6504666.
E-mail address: sharonsnir@gmail.com (S. Snir).

¹ Tamar Hazut is now in private practice.

also relates to the issues that the patient is working on, the efficiency of the work, the modes of organization and planning, and other aspects. Phenomenological observation may enlighten the therapist's understanding of the patient's emotional, physical, and functional state. After conducting an in-depth observation, the therapist may then choose to intervene in the painting process. In addition, identification of changes in the pictorial and behavioral phenomena over time may serve the therapist's overall examination of the patient's development within the therapeutic process (Betensky, 1995).

Despite the accumulation of a great deal of clinical knowledge and skills through phenomenological observation, only a few research efforts have been made to systematically document pictorial phenomena (among them, Lev-Wiesel & Yosipov-Kaziav, 2005; Molad, 1991; Reves-Shenhav, 1999). It is essential to develop a body of empirical knowledge in art therapy (Reves-Shenhav, 1999), in order to scientifically evaluate the efficacy of this therapeutic tool and to assess its use by practitioners (Feder & Feder, 1998).

To this end, it is necessary to develop terminology that suitably expresses the main themes and important elements in therapy, and to develop a reliable scale that describes all the aspects of the final product and the behavior of the patient during the creative process.

It appears that the lack of research based on a phenomenological approach stems from the inherent difficulty of processing emotional themes, which express themselves in rich nonverbal language, as in art and expressive therapy (McNiff, 1998; Wadeson, 1980). Many art therapists refrain from using systematic evaluation and research tools due to concern that the objectification and categorization of themes will result in a loss of the uniqueness, complexity, and richness of the artistic creation (Feder & Feder, 1998; Wadeson, 1980). In addition, some believe that art therapists' understanding of patients' creations is at least partly determined by the subjective perceptions of the therapists (Goren-Bar, 1993; Robbins, 1987).

The professional literature documents the richness and variety of meanings that characterize creative language as a primary language, as opposed to the limitations of the common symbols and signs that form the basis of a secondary verbal language (Noy, 1999). Moreover, categorical approaches and knowledge clash with the humanistic approach (Garai, 1987; Rogers, 1963), which regards each and every patient, creation, and therapy session as exclusive and unique, and is cautious about relying on preconceived and structured measures. Taking these challenges into consideration, in the present study we adopted research methods that were developed for the purpose of treatment and assessment with non-clinical populations, utilizing a phenomenological approach for the identification, definition, and systematic documentation. The purpose is to contribute to an understanding of the joint painting technique as an assessment tool, with specific focus on contributing to the theory and practice of art therapy. The study focuses on joint painting by romantic couples.

In documenting their use of the joint painting technique as a tool for enhancing the understanding of interpersonal relationships, clinicians typically report their observations of how the participants relate to each other's painting, their willingness to be attentive to each other's actions and needs, and the extent to which they are prepared to accept suggestions. They may also make note of whether and how the partners sabotage each other's work by erasing or painting over, and to what extent they try to make visual or verbal contact. According to clinicians' reports, other behavioral phenomena, such as willingness to take initiative, the ability to express personal style within a joint context, and the ability to participate in joint decision making, also provide significant information about the couple relationship.

With regard to the painting itself, various authors suggest that the distance between the two participants' marks on the paper,

the borders that delimit each person's painting area, similarities in painting style, and symmetry between the parts of the painting all reflect the couple's intimacy and wish for "togetherness" in their relationship (Molad, 1991; Snir, 2006).

The present study focuses on the identification, documentation, and systematic definition of pictorial phenomena that are expressed during the process of joint painting by the two partners in a couple, which may assist us in understanding their relationship, based on the accumulated theoretical knowledge and clinical experience in the area of art therapy.

Method

Participants

A group of 39 couples, aged 18 to 36 (average age 26.61, standard deviation 3.19), participated in the study. Of these, 21 were married couples and 18 were non-married couples that had been living together for a minimum of 6 months. At the time of the study, 3 of the couples had one child. This group was randomly selected from a larger group of 60 couples that participated in a wider study (Snir, 2006).

The participants were invited to take part in the study through notices calling for "married couples or life-partners that have been living together for at least 6 months, between the ages of 20–35, fluent in the Hebrew language on a native-language level, for participation in a research study on the subject of interpersonal relations. Compensation for participation: NIS 100 per couple. Confidentiality guaranteed." Prospective participants were subsequently informed by phone that participation entailed a 2-h session, during which they would be requested to paint and to complete questionnaires, and that the painting process would be filmed on video. They were also told that no prior experience in painting was required.

Procedure

The sessions with the participants were held in their homes and documented on video. The participants received a short explanation regarding the structure of the session, and were informed that their painting ability or talent was not under scrutiny. Subsequently, they created a painting, and when they had finished, they completed a booklet of questionnaires. Afterwards, the participants took part in a semi-structured interview about their painting. The information that was collected using the questionnaires was not used in the current study but served other research purposes. The videotapes were transcribed, noting the place of each participant in relation to the sheet of paper, the colors that each used at every given moment, the images and marks that each made at every given moment, the direction of the painting, unusual physical gestures, remarks, laughter, and eye contact between the partners.

The painting process included two tasks: the creation of an informal individual painting (as a "warm up", on small pages, measuring 20 cm × 30 cm), and the creation of two joint paintings. For the purpose of the joint painting, the participants were limited to a time frame of 5 min, during which they were instructed to paint freely on a shared sheet of paper, measuring 70 cm × 100 cm, which was tacked horizontally on a wall. Each participant was given the box of oil pastels that he or she had used for the warm-up painting. The couple was instructed: "Here is a sheet of paper for both of you. You may paint on it whatever you like, without conversing." After 4 min of painting, the participants were told that they had one more minute, and then they were asked to finish. This enabled observation of the nonverbal interaction between the couple, as well as how they dealt with the task by painting in a given space. The same instruction was given twice, enabling observation and analysis of

the changes and learning that took place when the participants made their second painting.

Results

Analysis of phenomenological content

The pictorial phenomena that emerged in the paintings and during their creation were identified by means of phenomenological content analysis. Two teams, each comprised of two expert art therapists, analyzed the paintings executed by 20 of the participating couples. Each team was presented with paintings done by different couples. The phenomenological analysis considered each couple's series of paintings as a totality of interrelated and mutually influenced paintings, and did not relate to each painting separately. The process of content analysis resembled the way therapists examine their patients' paintings, based on painting and behavioral phenomena that are observed in the final painting itself or in the process of its creation. It included definition of the phenomena that were considered significant to understanding the personal interaction that took place during the joint painting process (based on the clinical experience of those performing the analysis, and on clinical and theoretical literature). First, an analysis was conducted freely, with no preset structure; the teams attempted to identify the phenomena in the joint paintings that they deemed significant to understanding the couple's relationship. Then, as the analysis of the paintings proceeded, it became possible to discern meaningful categories of pictorial phenomena that appeared repeatedly in the different paintings. When the analysis of all the paintings was complete, a list of pictorial phenomena was compiled. The researchers then edited and revised their lists several times, based on reexamination of each set of paintings. The aim was to create generalized definitions of significant phenomena that would be relevant to understanding all of the paintings by all of the couples, in a comprehensive manner that was nevertheless not too detailed. The final list did not include a full description of stylistic characteristics, but instead focused on the characteristics most relevant to interactions within couples. In addition, the list did not include a comprehensive review of the subjects of the paintings or the manner in which these were expressed, nor did it include references to the existence of different symbols, due to the wide variety that was found.

In the second stage of content analysis, the paintings of an additional 19 couples from the research group were examined based on the list of pictorial phenomena that had been defined in the first stage. The aim here was to test the ability to generalize from the original sample to the entire population. Based on this test, the list of pictorial phenomena was revised and 13 categories were defined.

Categories of pictorial phenomena

1. **Suggestions for cooperation/non-cooperation**—How the couple communicate their needs and wishes regarding cooperation, as well as their perception of themselves and of each other in the relationship, at the beginning of their joint painting. These first steps include, among other things, drawing a line to designate common ground in the painting, creating an image that both members of the couple may use as the basis for the painting, or alternatively, creation of a frame for painting alone, separate to one's partner.
2. **Reactions to suggested cooperation/non-cooperation**—various patterns of reaction to the initial painting actions of one's partner. A common reaction, for instance, is one of cooperation, in which each partner adds on to the images the other has painted. Less common patterns included refusing to cooperate and initiating independent work on the sheet of paper, or forcing the partner to create a shared painting.
3. **Relating to images made by the partner**—The manner in which the participants treat each other's images. Examples include the empowerment of an image by enhancing the area around it, intensifying a line that was drawn by the partner, or dismissing such an image by erasing it. Sometimes the treatment of an image created by one's partner expresses a wish for support; in other cases, it may express a patronizing or controlling attitude.
4. **Distance between the partners in the painting**—The distance between the marks made by the two partners on the shared sheet of paper. In this category, we examined the distance between the partner's marks and the extent to which they gradually moved closer to or moved further away from each other in the course of their painting, as representative of their internalized perception of their closeness and/or their aspiration for change in this aspect of their relationship.
5. **Contact between the marks of the two partners**—Different patterns of contact and absence of contact between the marks made by both partners in the course of their work on the joint painting. These patterns may contribute to the understanding of qualities such as individuality, closeness, intimacy, aggression, or complications in the relationship.
6. **Occupation of areas**—The size of the space that each partner uses on the sheet of paper. The relative occupation of areas in the joint painting is an element that may contribute to understanding the balance of power, control, and presence of the partners, individually and together, relative to the total space available.
7. **Similarity/difference between the painting styles of the participants**—The degree to which the partners work similarly in terms of their choice of colors, shapes used, or subject matter. Such similarity, which is for the most part unconscious, may attest to the partners' ability to listen to one another, and to an internal, emotional, conceptual, or cultural world that they share in common. In the majority of cases in this study, a lack of similarity was evidence of a distinctiveness that enabled sharing, and a feeling of "togetherness" in the relationship.
8. **Connection/separation between images**—Change or accentuation of the level of closeness between the partners as expressed in the early stages of the painting process, representing their respective emotional states and the reaction of the person painting to the reflection of this connection in the painting. A reaction of alarm when confronted with separateness may lead towards the end of the painting process to phenomena such as connecting separate images by creating a shared background or adding of a common base line. Alternatively, anxiety regarding dependence or intimacy may be expressed in the addition of an image, line, or mark that creates a distinction between the two partners doing the painting.
9. **Coherence of the resulting product**—The manner in which the partners relate to the joint space and the extent to which they succeed in creating a whole and coherent creation by means of cooperation, mutual attentiveness, expression of common desires, ability to give and take, and without fear of intimacy. The extent to which they can "tell their story as a couple" coherently, unencumbered, and without ambivalence (which might indicate dependence and a need for control due to attachment anxiety), and free of detachment or idealization (which might express attachment avoidance), is considered a central measure of attachment in interviews that assess relational attachment in current mature relationships (Current Relationship Interview, Crowell & Owens, 1996).

10. **Symbolism of style**—The individual or couple's creative style as demonstrated in the paintings. Based on both the individual and joint paintings, we rated the couple's painting style on different scales, such as a scale between realistic (communicative) and abstract, a scale between inflexibility and incisiveness, a scale of line types and so on. The style of the painting may indicate qualities of the individuals, the extent to which the partners work cooperatively or similarly, and the extent to which the individuals express themselves differently and distinctly in the joint painting.
11. **Images in the painting that are significant to understanding the relationship**—The identification of certain characteristics of the images that recur in a couple's paintings and are considered significant in understanding their relationship. These may include, for example, images associated with a shared experience and humorous, aggressive, friendly, or images that are detached from those around them and from the painting as a whole.
12. **Behavior in the course of the painting process**—Physical and verbal behavior of the partners in the course of the painting process, directed at the work or at each other (for example, talking). The creative process may be accompanied by laughter, testifying to a positive atmosphere, or to a sense of bewilderment and difficulty in dealing with the joint creation. Behaviors noted may include pleasant physical gestures, such as caressing, as well as aggressive gestures, such as pushing or laying a hand in the center of the sheet of paper. As part of our observation of behavior, we examined the extent to which the person painting moved around, as well as the degree of concentration focused on the painting process.
13. **Transitions between the paintings**—Development and change in the second painting following the experience that took place in the previous one. In many cases, the second joint painting is characterized by greater similarity between the partners, a more complete and coherent product, and more cooperation and gratification from the work. In others, the second joint painting reflects the difficulty of functioning in a joint space with greater intensity, in non-contiguous segments of work, hesitation, a product that is less coherent and soft, and demonstration of less gratification from the work. This category also includes the difference between the individual and the joint paintings. With some couples, we observed a difference in the level of functioning following the transition from painting individually to joint painting.

Case studies

This section describes phenomena represented by some of the different categories that were defined in the content analysis, by describing a series of two joint pictures and a semi-structured interview with two of the couples participating in the study.

Couple 1

Hanna and David (not their real names) were a student couple in their late twenties, who had been married for 3 years and had no children.

In the first joint painting (see Fig. 1), the couple began to paint parallel to one another. David painted some large facial features on the left side of the sheet of paper, while Hanna painted smaller images of a sun and sky on the upper right. During the second stage of the painting process, Hanna – apparently based on her acquaintance with David and in response to the relatively large facial features that he had painted – defined a separate area for herself on the sheet of paper, using a brown ground line



Fig. 1. The first painting.

[corresponding to Category 1, “Suggestions for non-cooperation”]. Hanna explained:

That [face that he painted] was not related to the sky that I painted ... like, maybe if he had continued in turn, let's say, if he had continued the sky, added the sun, or another sun or a cloud – I don't know ... maybe even a couple of birds – then I would have felt that it was a continuation. It's just that what he painted was not connected to anything and this bugged me.

Hanna added Images – three relatively small flowers with a pink outline, as well as a sky and sun – above the ground line that she had drawn, to create her own landscape.

David refused to accept Hanna's division of the paper [Category 2, “Reaction to suggested non-cooperation”], and began to add images above the ground line, in the area where Hanna had started to paint, and parallel to her: a thick pink curved shape, relatively large flowers with thick stems, black birds, blue stick figures, and a brown tree-like image. This was his suggestion for joint work [Category 1, “Suggestions for cooperation”]:

After I started painting in the space near me, I started to look for something in common. Then, umm ... I tried to influence the side that was not mine ... the issue of cooperation was important to me here. Working as a team is something I really like to do. It's something that I am kind of looking for.

In reaction, Hanna refused David's suggestion (which she experienced as incompatible with her work style) for most of the time that they painted together. For example, the flowers that he added were large relative to those she had painted previously, and their stems were large and black. She remarked:

He came and sort of pushed me. It's not as if he came and painted, and then I understood that he wanted to gradually get closer. You know, it was kind of like being pushed. Sort of like saying “I'm coming to your territory,” you know, without letting me know ahead of time. Something like that. That's how I experienced it.

In reaction, Hanna imitated the smile in the stick figures that he made, in a manner that can be defined as “canceling out” the image that the other has made [Category 3, “Relating to images made by the partner”]. In the interview, it appeared that David's inappropriate reactions to Hanna's work were based on his understanding, already in the early stages of the painting process, that Hanna was not interested in cooperation. In the interview he mentioned the

pink object that he created as an initial step in the area Hanna had defined as her own:

I know why I painted it . . . Perhaps as soon as I understood [she] wasn't interested in cooperation, I made it, as a sort of reflex reaction.

Other couples also demonstrated the pattern of cooperation demonstrated by David and Hanna in their first joint painting, where each of them sometimes added to the painting as a whole or reacted to the marks and images the other had created, and at other times refrained from reacting, distanced him or herself, and even spoiled what the other had done. We call this pattern “ambivalent responsiveness”. The ambivalence of a desire for intimacy coupled with difficulty in finding common ground was expressed in movements and transitions between working together and separately, and in aggressive painting expressions. As part of the same pattern, the distance between the images created by the two members of the couple became smaller, as David moved closer to the areas in which Hanna was painting [Category 4, “Distance between the partners in the painting”]. As a result of the couple’s bond, which was quite strong at times, they created a joint painting in certain areas below the ground line, both painting in layers, so that marks that one of them made fell on top of the marks the other had made [Category 5, “Contact between the marks of the two partners”]. In this case, the contact between the marks made by the couple was defined as “lots of contact”. Regarding the amount of space taken by each member of the couple [Category 6, “Occupation of areas”], examination of Fig. 1 shows that Hanna initially designated approximately half of the sheet of paper for herself by drawing the ground line, but after a while she “occupied” another half from the area that she had left for David, while David used nearly the entire area of the sheet of paper in his work.

In the couple’s first painting – and even more so in the second – we find several instances of similarity in colors, shapes, and subject matter [Category 7: “Similarity between the painting styles of the participants”]. For example, in the first painting, Hanna began by painting a yellow sun in the upper right hand corner of the sheet of paper (see Fig. 1). Concurrently, and in a symmetrical location on the left-hand side of the sheet, David painted a green eye with eyebrows, which is similar in shape and location to Hanna’s sun. We find other phenomena of this type in the second joint painting, as well. For example, Hanna’s row of houses with one square inside the next is repeated in David’s work, which also includes a number of squares inside one another.

While they were preparing the second painting we called the couple’s attention to the striking similarity of the colors they had chosen to work with. They attributed this similarity to the closeness between them, in spite of the difficulties that were expressed in the painting. Hanna explained:

[It’s] true that I wanted to express . . . here perhaps I wanted to express my own self more, but it seems that even when I express myself, if I am in a relationship, I actually express the relationship in some way – this is exactly how it’s connected. I also react to the relationship, because I am obviously not alone.

After experiencing David’s insensitivity to her boundaries and invasion of her area during the creation of the first painting, Hanna began the second painting by demarcating a closed area for herself with a line that divided the sheet of paper down the center, and indicating to David with her hand that he was forbidden to paint in this area [Category 13, “Transitions between the paintings”]. In the interview, she remarked:

It was something sort of undefined, in my opinion, not something that I had to actually say out loud, but I felt I had to be very

clear about this in the second picture [because] he had barged into the painting, into my territory.

During the work on this painting, each partner painted only on his or her side. It seems that the opportunity to make an additional painting did not improve the couple’s ability to work together cooperatively, but did allow them to find a solution for functioning next to one another within the space of the sheet of paper. Accordingly, the first painting is characterized by an incoherent collection of images, lacking a uniting common denominator, and the second painting, in contrast, consists of two separate paintings, created in parallel [Category 9, “Coherence of the resulting product”].

The lack of coherence between the two parts of the painting can also be attributed to the different painting styles of the two partners [Category 10, “Symbolism of style”]. Hanna’s style is more restrained and refined: she exerted a weak to moderate degree of force when using the crayon, her movements had a uniform rhythm, the line she created is relatively uniform and of medium length, and she chose light and concrete colors. In contrast, David exerted medium to strong force on the crayon, his movements were larger than Hanna’s and directed in different directions, and at times he used a prominent black crayon. In her paintings, Hanna adhered closely to a description of a concrete schematic reality, and she organized the second painting in systematic horizontal strips. In contrast, David’s painting style is associative, idiosyncratic, and full of movement, so that there is no implicit relationship among the images that he created. In his words:

I don’t have a focus, or maybe I should say that there is no focus in the first painting and even less in the second painting, because I didn’t have anything particular that I could paint in the second painting, so what I came up with was a sort of scrawl.

In the images that David created, there is a lack of congruence between size and subject matter, and there are some idiosyncratic and irregular aspects. We find repetitive shapes and lines in the paintings of both partners, but Hanna’s repetitions are rhythmic and systematic, and it seems that she was successful in attaining emotional equilibrium, while David’s repetitions were accompanied by changes in movement, location, different degrees of forces, and changing directions, suggesting a lack of internal organization and inability to fulfill a function of self-regulation and relaxation.

The images that appear in the two joint paintings belong to different sub-categories [Category 11, “Images in the painting that are significant to understanding the relationship”]. For example, the smiling sun that Hanna executed was defined as a “friendly image” that may express a wish for harmony and tranquility in the painting. Two of the figures that David created in the first painting – the blue standing figure and the figure kneeling at the first figure’s feet (half person-half dog) – were classified under the sub-category “negative couple relationship,” due to a combination of characteristics that, when taken together, contributed to the feeling that this relationship lacked pleasantness, contact, and intimacy. These include, for example, the position of the two figures facing forward, which prevents eye contact between them; the contact of the head with the foot; and the unbalanced height, in combination with the similarity in color (hinting at equal identities), as well as Hanna’s erasure of the smile.

Observation of the couple’s behavior during the painting process [Category 12, “Behavior in the course of the painting process”], revealed Hanna’s placement of her left hand in the center of the sheet of paper, conveying to David that he was not welcome to work together with her. Hanna appeared relatively serene, but David’s movements upon transition to the second painting were restless, his work was accompanied by many breaks, and it was obvious



Fig. 2. The second painting.



Fig. 3. The first painting.

that he felt uncomfortable with the development of the joint work (Fig. 2).

It pretty much [moved] me aside [and] I didn't feel comfortable with it. I also felt [as if] she didn't get the message that I was trying to convey. Also, we were not allowed to speak, so obviously I couldn't convey the message to her. So maybe under these circumstances she felt hostility or something – I don't know.

Couple 2

Naomi and Adam, a student couple in their twenties, had lived together for a year in the student dorms. Adam began their first picture by painting a large passenger plane in the center of the sheet of paper. In the interview he said he had not intended for Naomi to draw with him.

No, I simply painted the first thing that came into my mind. I didn't think of a specific subject that I would paint so that she could join in . . . A plane just came to mind.

It was important to Adam to make it clear that he did not mean to invite Naomi to paint with him, but the first image he painted, as in a communicative painting, was not protected, isolated, or barred off, and did not prevent Naomi from adding her own images in a way that complemented what he had done, creating one complete picture [Category 1, "Ambivalent suggestions for cooperation"]. Adam also said other things during the interview that strengthened the impression that he was unsure about how much he wanted to cooperate with Naomi in painting. When asked what he had expected her to do, he replied:

I thought it would be interesting to see how she would react to it. But I didn't have any specific expectation . . . Then I thought she'd add something, that she'd find her own way, but I wasn't sure how.

Naomi, who wanted to cooperate with Adam in painting the picture, interpreted the theme he chose as an expression of their joint plan to take a vacation in the US (ignoring his ambivalence and responding to the suggestion for cooperation), and began painting on the lower part of the sheet. She painted squares of fields and a blue lake, which she explained represented the view seen from a plane.

Each of the members of the couple painted his or her own images, without adding to or touching the images that the other painted [Category 3, "(Not) relating to images made by the partner"]. Both were careful not to touch the images the other had

made [Category 5, "(Lack of) contact between the marks of the two partners"], and to maintain space between the images they painted [Category 4, "Distance between the partners in the painting"]. The occupation of areas by the two [Category 6] was similar, but Adam, who painted in the upper part of the sheet of paper, occupied a larger area than Naomi did.

Along with the senses of distance and detachment between the partners, which were expressed in the distance and lack of contact between the marks and images that they made, and which they further supported in the interview, the similarity of colors and shapes and the creation of a single picture with a clear theme indicate that they were very attentive to each other during the work. For instance, the shape of the flag that Adam drew on the plane resembles that of the fields that Naomi painted, and the form and color of the lake that Naomi painted is similar to that of the cloud that Adam painted immediately afterwards [Category 7, "Similarity/difference between the painting styles of the participants"].

Furthermore, the two black figures that Adam added in the areas where Naomi had painted can be understood as his desire, despite other indications to the contrary, for some connection between what he and Naomi did in the painting. The two figures are standing on the ground, looking at the plane in the sky [Category 8, "Connection between images"]. As a result of the resemblance of these figures, as well as the similar style employed and attentiveness to one another when adding images, the painting – despite the restraint, detachment, distance, lack of sensuality, and contact between the members of the couple – actually functions as a coherent unit [Category 9, "Coherence of the resulting product"] (Fig. 3).

With respect to the symbolism of style, both two partners employed a realistic, linear, structured, and restrained style. They both exerted moderate pressure and used color moderately. In the first painting, Adam tended more towards linear work and Naomi colored in outlined areas. In comparison, in the second painting, Naomi painted emphasized lines and Adam colored defined areas. Nevertheless, the restrained style seems to express a low degree of sensuality and intimacy in the couple interaction. In the transition to the second painting, Naomi tried to change the pattern of cooperation and suggest collaborative work:

I knew that each of us would paint his or her own part separately in the first painting, But I hoped he'd continue with the house.

When asked why, she replied:

Because the house is something we have planned for a long time. We think about it.



Fig. 4. The second painting.

Despite Naomi's wish, there was no major change in the couple's process of creating the second painting (see Fig. 4). Naomi chose the subject of the home they had planned to build together in the future, which they had previously designed on cardboard. The suggestion to cooperate was evident at the thematic level, in the location of the image in the center of the sheet of paper, and in Naomi's pace of work. She painted slowly and sometimes made room for Adam to join and add his own images to the house (Category 12, "Behavior in the course of the painting process"). Adam, who understood Naomi's intentions, nevertheless refrained from joining in:

Yes, I immediately understood what she meant. Even though it is just a typical house, this house also has elements that are reminiscent of the house we planned. So I immediately understood the theme of the painting. I understood she wanted me to join in, but I didn't necessarily want to . . . I don't know, I don't think I cooperated much. I painted what I wanted to.

Adam felt a bit pushed into a corner, lacking enough room for his creation: a car and a mountain landscape to the left of the house.

In the second painting she began first, and she took the center of the sheet of paper. I was actually left with only the left part, which is one-third, so I was restricted in this space. I felt I needed to paint something limited to this space.

As in the first painting, the space he occupied on the sheet of paper was slightly more than what Naomi took for herself. Nevertheless, similar to his behavior in the first painting, Adam's refusal to cooperate was ambivalent. He refrained from painting the house together with Naomi, but nevertheless, the car he painted next to the house blends in with the theme and style of the house. In addition, as in the first painting, similar shapes and colors were used in the two partner's sections of the painting. For example, the squares of the windows and door of the house resemble the windows and door of the car, the triangular structure of the roof of the house resembles the pointy shape of the mountains, and so forth.

Ambivalence regarding the desire for intimacy is also evident in the characteristics of the images that Adam painted. Although both the vehicles he painted – the plane in the first painting and the car in the second – integrate into their respective pictures in terms of theme and style, they are both facing the edge of the painting, opposite Naomi's location, as though to reflect Adam moving away from the relationship. Adam also painted a vehicle (a boat) in the individual painting that preceded the joint painting. In addition,

the two figures that he painted in the first painting also help us understand the relationship; their hands are extended upwards, like a couple calling for help (Fig. 3).

In summary, these two case studies present some of the pictorial phenomena that were defined in the first part of the research. Examination of the phenomena that emerged during the process of painting and those that can be identified in the resulting pieces of work contributes to an understanding of the interaction between couples, as expressed and recorded in the joint creative process. Regarding the first couple, we may surmise that David's clumsy attempts to join Hanna in the painting are an expression of his need for – and perhaps dependence on – her. As for Hanna, she apparently felt threatened by his attempts. It was difficult for her to cooperate with him, and she did so only in a few instances. The anxiety in the couple's relationship is reflected in the paintings by the absence of a discernible composition, a sense of dissolution, and a lack of coherency.

Regarding the second couple, the lack of intimacy and sensuality in their relationship and their ambivalence towards maintaining it are evident, but the pictorial phenomena also indicate the potential for intimacy and cooperation. The partners attributed this situation to the stress in their relationship, as well as their general tendency to act separately. It seems that in this couple, the woman tends to think more about what they share in common and what unites them, and the man focuses on their separateness. The case study highlights how joint paintings by couples may reveal the disparity between verbal expressions that indicate detachment and pictorial phenomena that reveal deeper, hidden aspects, and a desire for intimacy.

Discussion

The present research documented the central pictorial phenomena that were observed in a process of joint painting by romantic couples, and an attempt to define the principal elements of painting language, through which the couple "tell" us about their relationship. The phenomena were documented by means of content analysis, in a manner similar to the process carried out by art therapists that use joint painting for the purpose of assessment. At the same time, we also conducted a study and phenomenological analysis of the couple's behavior in the course of developing and engaging in the creative process, and of the final product.

For the sake of focus and in light of the present research aims, we concentrated mainly on pictorial phenomena that seemed likely to express the couple relationship of the participants.

Observation of the pictorial phenomena in context, taking into account other phenomena that are expressed at the same time, enabled a deeper understanding of the pictorial expressions and of the statements made during the interview. For example, Hanna's attempt to define a separate area for herself at the beginning of the first painting might be understood as an attempt to defend herself against David's attempts to join in, which were noticed later in the work and which she interpreted as insensitive towards her.

In addition, the case analyses using pictorial phenomena demonstrate the ability of art in general, and the joint painting technique in particular, to illuminate joint resources and strengths that might be unnoticed by partners who, like David and Hanna, are in the midst of stress and conflict. Discovery of shared aspects that the partners are unaware of, such as, for instance, the vast similarity of color and shape between their two work styles, provides a window for intervention and strengthening of the couple relationship in the therapeutic process.

The results of this study may contribute to the design of evaluation processes based on observation of joint paintings by couples that include examination of behavior, pictorial phenomena,

and interactions. The procedure of isolating pictorial phenomena enhances our ability to understand the significance of the pictorial phenomena in various contexts. The unique contribution of the study lies in its systematic examination of the pictorial phenomena of a large number of joint paintings by numerous couples. The list of categories may guide observers of joint paintings to pictorial phenomena that reveal qualities of the couple relationship.

The results of the present research illustrate the uniqueness of the joint painting technique for the purpose of observing interactions and understanding relationships of couples. This intervention enables us to examine the couple dynamics, which are visually documented on the paper, in a way that reflects the relationship and documents the interaction between the partners in the course of their joint work. The painting describes certain aspects in the couple relationship, some of which are unconscious and otherwise difficult to observe. One characteristic that may be observed in the joint painting consists of behaviors that may be typical of the couple's day-to-day interactions, such as their ability to work cooperatively or to listen to one another. Another interactive characteristic expresses perceptions and representations of the self, the other, and the relationship within the joint context of the couple. For example, painting a separate ground area in the painting for oneself may reflect the perception of a threat, or of one's partner as controlling, dismissive, or injurious, and the consequent need for separation.

The results of this research represent a significant contribution to the clinical work of art therapists, family therapists, and couple therapists, who may use this simple tool and these categories to achieve quick or ongoing evaluations of couple relationships. Moreover, the evaluation process may serve as an effective tool for exposing conflicts and needs that are significant to understanding the relationship and communication patterns between the partners.

Aside from the importance attached to attending to the observation, interpretation, and insights of the patient in the clinic (Betensky, 1995), the enrichment of the interpretive lexicon suggested in this study may enhance and develop the therapist's interviewing and listening abilities. These two aspects were not discussed in the present paper; however, they were considered in the broader study on which it is based (Snir, 2006).

In the present research we documented the significance and the procedural importance of the preparation of two joint paintings one after another. This technique serves as a source for delving deeper and understanding the complexities of the couple relationship, as well as a basis for development and change, by demonstrating the couple's patterns of coping with overt and hidden subjects that are of concern to them. The results of the study confirm the importance of observing the painting series as it occurs. This process revealed that for some couples, the reasonable functioning in the first painting collapsed in the second painting, exposing interpersonal difficulties that were not evident in the first painting. In comparison, other couples demonstrated the ability in the second painting to resolve difficulties that surfaced in the first, perhaps indicating a process of adaptation to the unfamiliar medium of the painting language, and not necessarily an expression of difficulties in the relationship itself.

It appears that beyond its clinical applications, the definition and methodical documentation of pictorial phenomena in a procedural context, as presented in this study, is a promising theoretical development in the field of art therapy. Such documentation and

definition contribute to the formation of a familiar language, which is essential for communication among those who work in this nonverbal and abstract field (Reves-Shenhav, 1999). The ability to examine a change over time is significant in the examination of the therapeutic process, and in evaluating treatment methods. In addition, the definition of painting processes is of great importance to the existing body of research that examines theoretical and clinical claims in the field of art therapy.

However, caution, as well as skill in understanding the components of the language of art, is required in order to enhance the ability to conduct an in-depth examination of the complexity and meanings of pictorial phenomena, which are sometimes interpreted diametrically. For instance, partners that painted completely different images on both sides of the page may use the same colors concurrently or one after another, use opposite, complementary colors (such as orange and blue), or work with a similar or interlaced rhythm. These phenomena may indicate separateness and difficulties, but they may also reflect the ability to listen to one another, complement each other, or achieve equilibrium.

Despite the inherent differences among the pictorial phenomena in the different samples that were conducted with young couples (as anticipated), the results of the current study may serve as a basis for understanding joint painting as a tool for evaluating interpersonal relationships in general. The present research paves the way for additional and more comprehensive studies based on joint paintings, in populations of mature couples and in dyadic systems such as parent-child, siblings, as well as in therapist-patient sessions.

References

- Barth, R. J., & Kinder, B. N. (1985). The use of art therapy in marital and sex therapy. *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy*, 11(3), 192–198.
- Betensky, M. G. (1995). *What do you see? Phenomenology of therapeutic art expression*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Crowell, J. A., & Owens, G. (1996). *Current relationships interview and scoring system*. Unpublished manuscript. State University of New York at Stony Brook.
- Garai, J. E. (1987). A humanistic approach to art therapy. In J. A. Rubin (Ed.), *Approaches to art therapy: Theory and technique* (pp. 188–208). New York: Brunner/Mazel.
- Goren-Bar, A. (1993). Diagnostic thought in art therapies. *Art Therapies (Terapia B'emtsa'ut Omnuoyot)*, 1(2), 24–30.
- Feder, B., & Feder, E. (1998). *The art and science of evaluation in the arts therapies: How do you know what's working?* Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas.
- Kris, E. (1952). *Psychoanalytic explorations in art*. New York: International Universities Press.
- Kwiatkowska, H. Y. (1978). *Family therapy and evaluation through art*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas.
- Lev-Wiesel, R., & Yosipov-Kaziv, J. (2005). Deafness as reflected in self-figure drawings of deaf people. *Journal of Developmental and Physical Disabilities*, 17(2), 203–212.
- McNiff, S. (1998). Enlarging the vision of art therapy research. *Art Therapy*, 15(2), 86–92.
- Molad, Z. (1991). *Joint drawing characteristics of children with differing degrees of intimacy*. Unpublished master's thesis. Israel: Haifa University.
- Noy, P. (1999). *The psychoanalysis of art and creativity*. Modan Publishers.
- Reves-Shenhav, N. (1999). *Diagnosis and definition of drawing characteristics of borderline personality disorder (BPD)*. Unpublished master's thesis. Israel: Haifa University.
- Robbins, A. (1987). An object relations approach to art therapy. In J. A. Rubin (Ed.), *Approaches to art therapy: Theory and technique* (pp. 63–74). New York: Brunner/Mazel Publishers.
- Rogers, C. R. (1963). The actualizing tendency in relation to motives and to consciousness. In M. Jones (Ed.), *Nebraska symposium on motivation* (pp. 1–24). Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.
- Snir, S. (2006). *Expressions of intimacy and individuality in the joint drawings of couples*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Israel: Haifa University.
- Wadson, H. (1980). *Art psychotherapy*. John Wiley & Sons.