

# Bonsai as a group art therapy intervention among traumatized youth in KwaZulu-Natal

Caroll Hermann 

Department of Psychology, University of Zululand, KwaDlangezwa, South Africa

**Abstract:** Bonsai can be used as an art therapy tool during psychodynamic therapeutic interventions maintenance of good mental health. Bonsai is generally considered to be relaxing and is practiced by many to relieve stress and as an expression of art. The aim was to establish bonsai as an art therapy tool to overcome trauma. Fifteen isiZulu-speaking traumatized youths in a remote area in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa participated in a qualitative study that investigated their narratives around experienced trauma and sense of hopelessness. Materials in the form of bonsai, tools, wire, and pots were supplied, and six sessions were held. Results indicated that the participants experienced an improvement in their mental state, which was attributed by them to the practice of the art of bonsai. Bonsai can be beneficial as a healing medium mental health tool when employed as art therapy and can be promoted in a group setting in potential rehabilitation situations.

**Keywords:** art therapy; bonsai; intervention; mental health; prevention

**Correspondence** Dr Caroll Hermann, Department of Psychology, University of Zululand, Private Bag X1001, KwaDlangezwa 3886, South Africa. Email: hermanncc@unizulu.ac.za

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Art therapy contributes to a positive psychological experience and can bring about change in the life of the participant (Maujean, Pepping, & Kendall, 2014). Gardening, as a leisure activity, is known to have many psychological benefits (O'Brien, 2013), and although bonsai is not gardening nor a common therapy tool, horticultural therapy is well known in America (Fleming, Carroll, Douglas, & Flinton, 2017). Bonsai is an ancient art that can be used as an art therapy tool, especially during psychodynamic therapeutic interventions, and aids in the maintenance of positive mental health.

Fifteen non-English first-language-speaking adolescents in Northern KwaZulu-Natal district who had never been exposed to the art of bonsai were selected to participate in a study using trees to represent the memory of a loved one or used to overcome a traumatic event in their lives. The participants were taught the basics of bonsai husbandry and, in an informal group setting, were encouraged to talk about their "stories." After five sessions, they were asked to describe their feelings again. Their narratives were recorded and analyzed for themes using NVIVO 12 (QSR International, UK).

The primary aim of the study was to see if the art of bonsai can be used in a group setting with non-bonsai artists to overcome trauma. A secondary aim of the study was to see if using bonsai as a tool can overcome language and cultural barriers between the researcher and the participants.

## Theoretical framework

This study was based on an interpretivist phenomenological paradigm through observable and accessible behavior (hermeneutics) and narratives of the participants (phenomenology) in a natural setting. Interpretivism allows options and alternative points of view to be examined as well as different aspects of reality with the participant stating intent (Johansson & Osterman, 2017; Schwandt, 1998). Phenomenology is the lived experiences of and the world in which the participant exists (Laverly, 2003) and is consciously aware of their own "meaning-making" (Schwandt, 1998, p. 232). It is also important to interpret, and it is this interpretive process where the meaning of the experience as

well as its development and effect on the individual and society attaches meaning to the individual.

The hermeneutic circle refers to the moving from parts of the experience to the whole experience over and over to increase the depth of engagement and understanding of narratives, and is not merely recreating someone else's meaning (Laverty, 2003).

A trait of phenomenology is to engage with art (Wrathal, 2011) by showing phenomena to consider, which makes it more powerful than philosophy. According to Zahavi (2019), "Everyday experiences of simple objects can serve as the point of departure for phenomenological analysis" (p. 9), thus making it possible for an object to be perceived differently to different people. The embodied point of view refers to the crucial role the body plays in perception:

There is still more to see here, turn me so you can see all my sides, let your gaze run through me, draw closer to me, open me up, divide me up; keep on looking me over, again and again, turning me to see all sides. . . . (Zahavi, 2019, p. 12)

Phenomenological reduction allows the researcher to examine how circumstances present through experiences (Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019; Zahavi, 2019). Wertz et al. (2011) stated that phenomenology focuses on being reflective; thus, the field of investigation is opened up and expanded to include all complexities, nuances, and intricacies of the life of the participant. Phenomenology extends the science of research into the realm of subjectivity.

## Art therapy

Art therapy has been in existence for many years, and the rich and diverse history spans decades. Adrian Hill, who recognized the health benefits while recovering from tuberculosis, coined the term *art therapy*, and Margaret Naumburg, who is considered to be the "mother of art therapy", believed that freedom of creative expression encourages development in children (Gutek & Gutek, 2020; Kramer & Gerity, 2000). Naumburg also saw the "creative process" (Gutek & Gutek, 2020, p. 583) as a similar process to the verbal narratives that take place in the therapists' rooms where healing takes place during the art session.

Benedetti (Dammann & Meng, 2013) claimed that art therapy is no different than psychotherapy and "does not

exclude amplifying or reconstructive interpretation" (p. 69). Certain art therapies have a confrontational and interpretative approach, but this study is more focused on the supportive approaches such as those by Meng and von Spreiti (as cited in Dammann & Meng, 2013).

This openness and supportiveness is necessary to gain access to sharing the client's symbolism that is revealed through the art. This symbolism does not need to be logical or part of the usual coping mechanisms. The supportive art therapy session results in the group becoming a supportive learning group (Knill, Levine, & Levine, 1988).

In the creative state, a man is taken out of himself. He lets down as it were a bucket into his subconscious and draws up something which is normally beyond his reach. He makes this thing with his normal experiences and out of the mixture he makes a work of art. (E.M. Forster as cited in Singh, 1986, p. 20)

Art therapy can be described as a personal expression of feelings and focuses on nonverbal communication, rather than being aesthetically pleasing to others or external standards, in a safe and trusting environment (Liebman, 2005) and is relevant to everyone, not just the artistically gifted.

Art therapy is mainly analytically oriented and encourages the unconscious projection of conflict, dreams, wishes, or fantasies (Kramer & Gerity, 2000; Naumburg & Caldwell, 1957). Naumburg and Caldwell (1957) engaged in art therapy in group sessions to explore the psychological needs of a study with obese women who have failed to reduce their weight. Within the group, the meaning of the art is not shared with the group—only the significance is shared.

The common ground for all art therapies is venting and fantasizing (Dalebroux, Goldstein, & Winner, 2008) through art, which are considered accepted means to improve mood. By expressing negative affect through art, children's drawings were used as catharsis for Hurricane Katrina to reduce negative effects of the trauma. Freud considered expression through art as subconscious wish fulfillment (Baumeister, Dale, & Sommer, 1998; Freud, 1900). Dalebroux et al. (2008) suggested that when making art (bonsai) during an unpleasant time, the artist is distracted by the positive emotions that are created by the art. Art contains "buffering and coping effects" (Dalebroux et al., p. 289) that assist in repairing mood, especially when associated with positive emotions.

Edwards (2004) maintained that art therapy's role is to express or heal emotional distress through "action tools" (p. 1). These action tools are particularly beneficial to resistant clients such as children or less articulate clients that might be cognitively challenged or clients and therapists who do not share the same first language (English). Kramer and Gerity (2000) heavily criticized the restrictive reliance on language in therapy and urged art therapists to "defend them (clients) against a system that would reduce them to numbers devoid of individuality." (p. 28)

Klein and Winnicott (as cited in Kavalier-Adler, 2014) referred to the presymbolic and symbolic levels of human experiences and how the internal world of fantasy colors these external experiences throughout life. Kavalier-Adler (2014) referred to the dialectical interaction between these two worlds that gets internalized. Winnicott talked about the "transitional space" as the "psychological gap," as a "holding environment," and ultimately as the "area of creation." (Kavalier-Adler, 2014, p. 29)

### **Narrative expression in art**

Narrative inquiry is often used when researching human stories as it focuses on the life, history, biography, and other experiences of the participant (Rankanen, 2014), and is a fairly new mode of therapy (Naidu, 2016). The narrative inquiry focuses on the truth as an interpretation and construction by the storyteller and the effects on their individual lives and others.

Expressionism in visual arts refers to exaggerated or distorted emotions and should emphasize "originality and self-expression" (Edwards, 2004, p. 20). Edwards (2004) claimed that these expressed emotional states do not have to have reference to a narrative but can be a "new way of giving form to inner experience (p. 20).

Jung, however, noted that attached "symbolic form" (as cited in Edwards, 2004, p. 31) can give "expression to conflicting aspects of the psyche" (p. 31), and Naidu (2016) stated that people create their identities and make sense of their lives through the stories they tell about themselves. Thus, art can be a true reflection or a fantasy and may only have meaning for the artist.

The human experience is so vast and complex that human language may not always capture the intricacies of it. Deep thoughts and feelings can be hidden in the unconsciousness that can make the person feel stuck (Edwards, 2004).

### **Group therapy**

Group therapy provides a context in which social learning can take place and where participants with similar challenges might offer mutual support for each other (Buchalter, 2004; Liebman, 2005).

The therapist in group therapy can take on a directive role, concerning him- or herself with existing narratives and guiding the participant to new narratives (McNeilly, 2006). The purpose of this direction is to steer the participants to learn from each other (Yalom, 2005). Yalom (2005, p. 63) claimed that three concepts need to take place before learning from each other occurs:

1. The importance of interpersonal relationships
2. Corrective emotional experience
3. Group of social microcosm. The group must learn to identify emotional responses as valid and indispensable data, that idiosyncratic responses also contain information about the respondent and finally, and that members of the group may respond very differently to the same stimulus (Yalom, 2005).

When the therapist joins alongside group participants in the art-making process, many dynamics within the group change, such as leadership and relationships (Bunn, Goesel, Kinet, & Ray, 2016; Teoli, 2020). During the art-making process, the therapist observes and notes changing dynamics and relationships within the group. The role of the therapist remains one of guidance toward the participants' goals, not that of a director or an authoritarian.

The spontaneous reciprocal relationship between the group members and the group environment will lead to the development of a social microcosm. In this natural environment, the ambiguous challenges will elicit members' experiences that can be addressed during the therapeutic process (Yalom, 2005). During this process, members are able to reflect and understand their challenges.

### **Language and cultural barriers in group therapy**

Working with participants who do not speak English well can be difficult and stressful, as the researcher can feel unsure whether instructions have been fully understood (McDonald, 2017) and whether the participants have been understood. Studies have found that service provision can be impaired if the therapist and participants do not share a common language (Chen & Chen, 2020). Language interpreters are often

used in individual and group therapy to help address language and cultural barriers. It is often found that the therapeutic session is “filtered through the interpreter’s linguistic skills. . .” (Chen & Chen, 2020, p. 248). “Sharing the traumatic experiences with others is a precondition for the restitution of a meaningful world” (Bunn et al., 2016, p. 46).

Supportive group therapy (Bunn et al., 2016; Chen & Chen, 2020) works well with non-English-speaking trauma patients, leading to preventing psychopathology such as posttraumatic stress syndrome and depression, and improved psychosocial functioning. Supportive groups focus on building connections among members and emphasizes social support in recovery.

### Effect of nature on the psyche of humans

Restorative landscape psychology refers to the impact a landscape can have on emotions and is based on work by Appleton, among others (Townsend & Barton, 2018). This study reviewed research on the psychological processes that sensitizes humans to tree and woodland experiences. Its foundations are based on contemporary evolutionary psychology that states that human behavior is dependent on information obtained from the environment. It is therefore posited that visual cues of “spreading treetops” can create a sense of “safety and well-being” (Townsend & Barton, 2018, p. 207) based on the evolutionary notion that man’s original habitat was among tree tops, thus creating this affinity for trees. Townsend and Barton (2018) claimed that this modular processing (to seek trees) is handed down genetically.

Studies have shown that living in areas with no trees is stressful, and human minds unconsciously seek spaces with trees (Orians, 2014; Townsend & Barton, 2018). Orians (2014) also claimed that humans favor particular trees through evolutionary genetics. He specifically referred to the Japanese culture of pruning “woody plants to alter their shapes (p. 68) to resemble past experiences and so attach symbolic significance to it. In doing so, positive values are associated with trees, such as “permanence, stability, trustworthiness, fertility and generosity” (p. 89).

### Bonsai

Bonsai is a very old Eastern art form that “celebrates the connection of the tree with the human heart.” It is essentially the dwarfing of trees or plants in pots. Although the

word “bonsai” is a Japanese word and means “tree in a pot,” the art originated in China in approximately 700 AD (Bonsai Empire, 2020). To create, care, and look after bonsai takes special instruction, and not all species are suited to the art. Bonsai cultivation in Africa is relatively new; the earliest recorded bonsai dates back to the 1940s (Pretorius, 2014).

Various African styles have been developed by Charles Ceronio (1999), who was one of South Africa’s bonsai master artists. He described the Baobab, Pierneef, Flat Crown, Bushveld, Wild Fig and Elbow, and Wonderboom styles as uniquely African (Figure 1).

Many different tree species are used in Africa, such as the baobab (*Umsenge* or *Adansonia digitata*), bush willow (*umBondwe* or *Combretum apiculatum*), knobthorn (*umKhaya* or *Senegalia nigrescens*), marula (*Umganu* or *Sclerocarya birrea*), and thorny rope (*Umzungulu* or *Dalbergia armata*) trees, but the list is limitless, and most species with small leaves can be used (Ceronio, 1999; Pretorius, 2014). More common species that are popular



Figure 1. *Senegalia burkei* (Black Monkey Thorn in the “Flat Crown” Style, age 4 years from seed, 15 cm tall in 8 cm pot).



Figure 2. *Adansonia digitata* (Baobab in the uniquely South African Baobab style, age 11 years from seed, 86 cm tall, 55 cm in circumference).

bonsai trees are Natal Figs (*isiHlamfane* or *Ficus natalensis*; Pooley, 1994) (Figures 1 and 2).

Bonsai can be done by showing participants what to do and not just “telling” them.

## Methods

Snowball sampling via a youth center in the Northern KwaZulu-Natal was used, and 15 isiZulu-speaking respondents were selected based on traumatic incidents in their lives. A further requirement was that they had not been exposed to the art of bonsai. One participant was withdrawn from the study and was referred for individual therapy (during Session 4), and another withdrew from the study because she relocated to another town. A core group of 13 participants plus the researcher met once a month. Initial bonsai introductory lessons were held with the remaining 13 participants, and each participant was allowed to select a tree in a nursery. The project culminated in each participant having made a bonsai tree.

## Design and procedure

An informal group setting was constituted in a naturalistic environment under a tree. The participants were informed of conduct within group therapy and were asked to sign confidentiality and informed consent forms. All participants were introduced to each other and asked to give a short description of why they wanted to join the group. Where necessary, a translator was used to assist with language challenges. The group was subjected during Session 1 to bonsai history, styles, and procedures. In Session 2, the participants were allowed to start working on their trees in the nursery bag while they discussed subjectively how they felt after the incident or about the person. Session 3 explored more of their feelings, and possible suggestions of how to represent them in the tree were discussed. Session 4 focused on changing narratives. Session 5 was spent on attaching positive narratives to their bonsai, and in Session 6, the participants reflected on the process and the way forward.

Participants were asked to describe their mood using one word before being introduced to the art of bonsai and again after six sessions. Participants were requested to tell their story through their trees and to ensure the story had a beginning, a middle, and an end. The group was encouraged to share their traumatic experiences while working on their trees. The study aimed to determine if the participants could relate healing with working on their bonsai and whether working on bonsai trees made it easier to talk about the incidents. Although both researcher and participants were not first-language English speakers, language was not considered a barrier. Participants were allowed and encouraged to converse in their home language, and an interpreter was on hand in case it was deemed necessary for translation.

Each session was recorded and transcribed, and phenomenology was used to analyze participants’ narratives about their experiences. These narratives also included summaries of the researcher’s observations (Wiklund-Gustin, 2010).

Session 1 consisted of constituting the group rules, introducing the various members and cursory reflections of why they wanted to join the group. The instruction for Session 2 was to: “Choose a tree that would best assist with your recovery. Something you can make in memory of someone or something that will represent a memory.

Session 3: Reflective practice (adapted from private conversations in 2013):

a) Spent explaining how the tree can represent life and new beginnings. (Beginning phase).

- b) Starting to see how life could be different (making designs and seeing the potential of the tree). (Middle phase).
- c) Making healthy choices (New pot and soil, wiring and bending tree into a new position)
- d) Healing only begins when the toxic environment is left, (lifting the tree from the old pot and soil)
- e) Going for therapy (breaking open and exposing the roots, removing rotten, broken, restrictive masses)
- f) Starting to appreciate the person you are becoming (looking at the scars of the tree and how it gives it a unique character that appeals to the eye)
- g) Learning to love yourself (watering and feeding the tree and seeing the growth)
- h) Learning to forgive (loving the tree and being thankful for the beauty being seen, knowing nothing is needed from the other person and to let them go in peace)
- i) Maintenance (This little tree is completely in need of care and love, just as the inner child also needed to be nurtured and cared for). (End phase).

Session 4: Based on the explanation last week (repeat affirmation attached to bonsai), how can you see your story in a different light? Discussions revolved around changing narratives.

Session 5: Repeat of point f) to i) above.

Session 6: Reflective practice and the way forward.

## Results

The participants consisted of 10 females and 5 males ( $M$  age = 19,7 years,  $SD = 2,1$  years). All participants described their mood as “unhappy,” “fearful,” “sad,” “angry,” or “scared.” Participants reported traumatic incidents such as hijacking ( $n = 2$ ), rape ( $n = 3$ ), robbery ( $n = 6$ ), and murder ( $n = 2$ ). All remaining participants reported that their subjective mood changed to “happy.”

**Participant 1 (P1):** An 18-year-old male who witnessed the murder of his father during a house robbery. He made a tree in honor of his father, made a tree in memory of his father, and used a *Ficus natalensis*. He described his initial feelings as “unhappy.” “This tree will represent the memory of my father.” “It is something beautiful to remind me of my father.” “. . . look at it every day . . . my mother loves it too . . . my father would have been very proud.” “I am happier now. I have made friends in the group.” “Working on the tree made me forget about everything.” “From day 1, I have felt good working on my tree, even just choosing it.”

**Participant 2 (P2):** An 18-year-old male, who was a passenger in a hijacking and robbed of all his belongings on his way to a job interview, chose a *Ficus natalensis* to remind him how resilient he is. He said that he was “fearful.” “The tree will be a symbol of me moving on from that day. . . .” “I am not thinking about that day so much . . . this is so much fun . . . I look every day to see it grow.” “It makes me happy to have it.” “It was nice to know that we all shared experiences and working on the tree made it easier to talk.” “I went home so happy and told everyone about it.”

**Participant 3 (P3):** A 20-year-old female involved in a house robbery, feeling “sad,” used a *Schotia brachypetala* as it reminds her of a tree in their homestead. “I will be pretty and happy again.” “I love seeing new leaves come out . . . it gives me hope . . .”; “. . . I like taking care of it, it is not hard . . . I am so happy to learn about it, it makes me feel good”. “If it wasn’t for working on the tree, I don’t think I could talk.”

**Participant 4 (P4):** A 23-year-old female also involved in a house robbery, was feeling “depressed” and also chose a *Schotia brachypetala* as it reminded her of the medicine her grandfather used to make from it. “Now I will have my own tree to remind me of him . . . it will purify me of my depression and I will be happy again.” “Don’t laugh! (laughs), I talk to my tree and tell him my problems. . . .” “I feel that my grandfather is always with me when I work on my tree and I can talk freely. I feel so happy.” “It started making me happy walking amongst the trees choosing one.”

**Participant 5 (P5):** An 18-year-old female, feeling “sad,” who was sexually abused by a family member, chose a *Ficus natalensis* and stated that the tree will be her new self (who can look after herself). “I am very angry . . . did not get help from anyone. Will look after this tree . . . because if I don’t, it will die . . . as it is my hope.” “. . . going forward and not looking back any longer. . . .” “. . . reclaiming my life and I can see with this tree that it can be beautiful again. . . .” “I love how happy my tree makes me feel, Miss, I am laughing again.” “I feel that the tree does not judge me.” “At times I could not find the words in English. It was nice being able to speak isiZulu.” “I will always remember the day I picked up this tree.”

**Participant 6 (P6):** An 18-year-old female, who was beaten during a house robbery and feeling “sad,” chose a water berry tree as it reminds her of her beautiful soul. “I like that I can take it with me. . . . I do not have stomach

ache since I started on this tree.” “I just look at the tree and remember how my grandfather’s medicine helped people.” “I cannot help but feel happy again.” “I am happier to talk while working on the tree because it feels like no one is watching me.” “I felt happy from day 1.”

**Participant 7 (P7):** A 19-year-old female, who was in the same vehicle as P2 and robbed of all her belongings during the hijacking, feels “sad.” Chose a tree of unknown species “because I like it.” “Will be my tree of hope . . . because you (researcher) said I can put any meaning to it I like.” “This will be my happy tree because of the joy I felt the day I got it.” “Yes, it helped to work on a tree while talking.” “I learned that other people felt like me . . . and told me the English word.” “My mood started changing the day I started with this tree.”

**Participant 8 (P8):** A 25-year-old female who was robbed on her way home from the stores and feels very “angry.” Chose *Ficus natalensis* (Carries her tree like a baby). “This . . . no one can take away from me because it only has meaning to me.” “To other people, it is just a tree . . . in a pot . . . but to me it is happiness and it is all mine.” “Working on a tree made it easier to talk about my problems.” “I am always happy when I come here to work on my tree and cannot wait for group day.”

**Participant 9 (P9):** A 20-year-old female (related to P5) grew up with grandparents; both she and P5 were sexually abused by their grandfather and uncle, and P9 feels “unhappy.” The family wanted to marry them off to older men. Chose an umzimbeet tree. “I am very strong, like this tree . . . that’s how I am.” “I am still small like my tree, but one day I will be big and strong.” “I will also protect my daughter (one day).” “To me, this tree believes me and makes me happy.” “Yes, it helped.” “I was happy from the first moment.”

**Participant 10 (P10):** A 20-year-old male who initially could not relate his story (abused as a young boy), feeling “sad.” Chose a tall, upright tree that he wanted to bend. He used fencing wire to bend and break the tree, “represents my life,” and started crying uncontrollably. Was withdrawn from the study during this session (4) and referred for counseling.

**Participant 11 (P11):** A 20-year-old female, bullied at school, feels “sad” most of the time. Chose a marula tree because it reminded her of eating the fruit when she was little. “The smell and taste make me happy.” “I have forgiven those boys who bullied me for my money.” “Whenever I am sad, I just go to my tree and I am happy again.”

“It made all the difference working and talking.” “From day 1 to now, I am happy.”

**Participant 12 (P12):** A 19-year-old female robbed on her way home from school, still feels “sad” about it. Chose a *Ficus natalensis* “. . . because the way you explain it, it is beautiful. . . . I want to feel beautiful again.” “Oh, my tree has new leaves . . . it means a new beginning for me too. . . . I don’t want to cut it off. I am going to let it grow until it is strong and every day I will grow strong with it.” “I really enjoyed working on the tree and talking, it made the trauma feel less.” “I started being happier from day 1.”

**Participant 13 (P13):** A 20-year-old male was involved in an armed house robbery, and thinking about it makes him “sad.” Chose a weeping boer-bean (*Schotia brachypetala*) because they have one in their yard and it reminded him of the beauty of his mother. “Means love and hope and is beautiful like my mother.” “I am happy again.” “My mother loves her tree that I made for her.” “Yesssss, it helped!” “I could feel a change from day 1.”

**Participant 14 (P14):** A 21-year-old male who was physically attacked and hurt in a house robbery, was still feeling “scared.” Participant chose a Macadamia tree as he “wanted to be a farmer and make money. “This tree will be a symbol of what I can do.” “I will not stay poor all my life.” “Watch me—(beaming smile)—This is my first farming tree.” “Maybe I will build a road for my community.” “With my hands busy, my mind calmed down.” “Hey! From day 1!”

**Participant 15 (P15):** An 18-year-old female who was raped on her way back from school, reported feeling “unhappy.” Chose a *Ficus natalensis* because it was easy to grow. The participant later withdrew because she relocated to another town.

### Content analysis

Narrative researchers rely on “untold” stories and are also guided by their understanding and interest when identifying contexts (Wiklund-Gustin, 2010). The participants in this study were selected with a specific narrative framework—that of traumatic experiences—in mind. The narratives were also used as a way for the group to connect and to reveal personal experiences. The researcher encouraged autonomy by stepping back and allowing the participants to express their stories.

To identify bonsai as a psychotherapeutic tool, the initial mood of the group was determined by asking them about their state of mind as a pretest question. Ten participants

stated that they felt sad, three felt angry toward their attackers, and two felt fearful. The simple posttest question determined their subjective mood after six sessions. The remaining 13 participants all agreed that they felt happy and attributed it to being able to work on their trees while doing group therapy: "I am so happy now, I don't think of the hijacking all day anymore." "I can just look at my tree and be happy."

Most participants (62%) stated that they wanted to make the tree in honor of themselves or their strengths: ". . . going to make a tree for me on how brave I am", "It is beautiful, just like my spirit." "I am like this tree and I am very strong." Some participants (23%) stated that they were making trees in memory of one of their family members: "I am going to make a tree for my father. . . I do not like to go to his grave . . . this tree will represent his memory." "This tree means 'hope' and love and is beautiful like my mother was."

Participants who made the tree in honor of themselves, whether their "old selves" or "new selves," all expressed renewed hope and change throughout the sessions: "This tree means 'hope' and love." "I will look after this tree as it will be the new me."

## Discussion

Bonsai as a therapy tool is used as an instrument in the storytelling of the participant. Other tools or art mediums can also be used to elicit the narratives that have not been told. In the this study, bonsai was used to help the participants tell their story and explore each participant's symbolism of the tree (Buchalter, 2004). The tree is used to convey information directly or indirectly about the participant (Hinz, 2006; Yalom, 2005): "I am very strong, like this tree. . ." (P9). Moreover, art can be used to focus therapeutic work on relevant issues: "I will also protect my daughter" (P9). "I want to be beautiful again" (P12).

Hinz (2006) stated that art (images) can bypass language-based defenses or barriers, "I really enjoyed working on the tree and talking" (P12); and "If it wasn't for the tree, I don't think I could talk" (P3). Hinz also stated that by participating in art-facilitated therapy, participants are less guarded or prone to self-censor: "I am happier to talk while working on the tree because it feels like no one is watching me" (P6).

Often the process of creating art can be as important as the (image) produced because the process of having chosen

the tree to the style contributes to the learning experience: "I just look at the tree and remember how my grandfather's medicine helped people" (P6); "I love seeing new leaves come out, it gives me hope" (P3); and "It is something beautiful to remind me of my father" (P1). Hinz (2006) also claimed that the therapeutic space is often filled with silences, and the use of art helps to fill those periods of silence with creative activities.

All 13 participants were in a state of despair at the beginning of the project, ranging from "sad and unhappy," "angry," and "fearful" to "happy" after the last session. The art object—in this case, the bonsai tree—facilitated the shift in mood. Using art as a therapeutic medium does not require any talent from the participant to be effective (Hinz, 2006). In bonsai art therapy, the mood of the participant is not reflected in the tree but the tree is used to shift the mood. Baumeister et al. (1998) revealed that expressing positive emotion during art-making, rather than venting, contributed to improved mood and finds its roots in psychoanalysis' "object relations" (p. 30). "To other people, it is just a tree . . . in a pot . . . but to me it is happiness" (P8); "Don't laugh! (laughs), I talk to my tree and tell him my problems . . ." (P4).

Using bonsai as a tool during therapy serves a purpose to distract while digging in deeper subconscious or even unconscious thoughts. The tree becomes the potential/transitional space of hope. By creating a safe space external of the participant and the therapist with the artwork, both the participant and the therapist can begin to understand these experiences. The bonsai tree can be seen as the transitional space or object (in place of Winnicott's "mother" figure) where therapy can take place (Kavaler-Adler, 2014), as it allowed space for "symbolic capacities" (p. 29). "The tree will be a symbol of me moving on from that day" (P2). "This tree will be a symbol of what I can do . . . . With my hands busy, my mind calmed down" (P14). It is in this space where the client can fantasize and be "good enough" again (p. 118). ". . . and every day I will grow strong with it" (P12); "To me, this tree believes me" (P9); and "reclaiming my life and I can see with this tree that it can be beautiful again" (P5).

The importance of the group experiences as shared by all led to increased support structures outside of therapy (Yalom, 2005). "I am happier now. I have made friends in the group" (P1). "It was nice to know that we all shared experiences and working on the tree made it easier to talk" (P2). "We also meet after the group and we do not have to



talk about it” (P3). The group was allowed to converse in isiZulu without hindrance. The group also serves as a very important place for interpersonal learning. This could happen freely in the context of the group. “At times I could not find the words in English. It was nice being able to speak isiZulu” (P5). “I learned that other people felt like me . . . and told me the English word” (P7). Yalom (2005) stated that many group members place a great deal of importance on working through relationships with other members, rather than the group leader. It was for this reason that the group was allowed to converse freely in their language of choice and interacted among themselves.

The group reported that they feel respected being allowed to speak in their home language as well as creating opportunities for learning or improving another language. “Miss, I felt respected when you allowed to us speak Zulu.” “I learned that other people felt like me . . . and told me the English word.” Participant 2 took on the role of unofficial co-leader and translator within the group to translate words to the group and the researcher, creating a dual opportunity for learning.

## Conclusion

The study aimed to see if bonsai could be used as a psychotherapeutic tool to assist within group therapy in a multicultural setting. This tool can cross boundaries in situations where language and culture can be possible barriers. It also opens up further opportunities for study in settings where people have lost their voices or find it difficult to speak. A limitation of the study is the fact that all the participants and the therapist could speak a common language and therefore was not impeded by it. It creates an opportunity for a study where language is not needed. The study should ideally be repeated to see if language does matter in art therapy, and with a larger and more diverse group. The study opens up avenues for rehabilitation investigations.

## Disclosure of conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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Ethical approval was obtained by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Zululand (UZREC 171110-030

DEPT2015/85) before data collection and informed consent was obtained from each participant and all research protocol was observed. Participants were provided with a debriefing sheet with information about the study after the final session.

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