

The use of “The Talking Mask” in prison: an example case report

Margherita Dahò

Abstract

Studies state that prisoners adapt to an environment usually depicted as painful, fearful and aggressive by wearing emotional “masks” of “hyper-masculinity”, which hide their vulnerabilities and the true self. These masks may also generate behaviours, thoughts or a self-perception that are dysfunctional for the post-prison adjustment. “The Talking Mask” is a new useful art-therapy tool that has been created recently by the author of this paper. It uses pictures to improve the self-awareness of inmates and help to shape a post-prison identity. The goal of the technique is to help prisoners to watch within themselves without masks, while the aim of this paper is to introduce the technique and to show its working principles with a single case.

Keywords: *art therapy, offender rehabilitation, defence mechanisms; psychodynamic psychology.*

Introduction

Many recent studies state that prisoners tend to adapt to an environment that is usually depicted to be painful, fearful, mistrust, and aggressive by wearing emotional “masks” of “hyper-masculinity”. These masks are used to deter aggressive behaviours and to hide or cover the vulnerabilities and emotions (Crewe et al., 2014; Laws & Crewe, 2016). However, masks also hide the true self of the subject and, together with rigid defence mechanisms, they may generate behaviours, thoughts or self-perceptions that are dysfunctional for the post-prison adjustment. It is commonly thought that prisons’ goal is to punish people (Belton & Barclay, 2008). However, the incarceration period should be instead intended to achieve “*retribution, deterrence, and rehabilitation*” (Kellam, 2006). For this reason, prisoners need special rehabilitation care during incarceration, especially at the end, when they have to deal with a new life transition and they need to establish a new identity (Haney, 2012). Individual’s identity, in fact, is shaped by the contexts in which it is formed, and, at the same time, it shapes in response to the context (Holland et al., 1998). Therefore, it is important that prisoners learn to remove their unhealthy emotional masks during a path of personal evolution and rehabilitation so that the new identity achieved is functional for the actual social environment.

The aim of this paper is to introduce “*The Talking Mask*”, an art therapy technique that may facilitate this process and can be used by any kind of trained psychotherapist, psychologist or counsellor regardless of conceptual orientation, professional affiliation, preferred intervention model or approach. (However, there is to say that the conceptual theory foundation of the technique refers to the psychodynamic. For this reason, the therapist should have some basic understanding of psychoanalysis and be able to plan a long term intervention of rehabilitation or psychotherapy). The second aim of this paper is to show the working

principle of this tool or instrument with an example case. As first thing, it is suggested to use it within a single session of a long term intervention because it may take much more than a few hours to work through or replace unhealthy coping or defence mechanisms. For this reason, it is not considered di per se as an intervention that can solve alone the main problems of an inmate but as a tool that may support the therapeutic path.

As it has just mentioned above, the principal goal of “*The Talking Mask*” is to help prisoners observe themselves without masks in order to discover their true-self. It uses pictures or photographs to improve self-awareness and it also helps to shape a post-prison identity. Furthermore, it facilitates the expression of personal emotive experiences or contents that have been repressed. During a 1½-2h one-to-one counselling meeting (other sessions can be planned as follow-up or to talk deeper about the work done), the prisoner explores his emotional experience, personal identity and self-awareness making a comparison between the external and internal world of the prison with the support of “*The Talking Mask*”. The subject answers four questions regarding self-perception making a collage found on magazines-pictures. At the end of the session, the psychotherapist or the counsellor provides a final assessment and feedback.

The technique may remind the famous “*Johari window*” created by Luft and Ingham (1955). This method helps people to better understand their personality and their relationship with themselves and others. However, the purpose and the procedure differ from “*The Talking Mask*”. In the exercise of Luft and Ingham, subjects choose a number of adjectives from a list, selecting the ones that describe their personality in the best way. Later, the subject's peers get the same list, and each picks other adjectives to describe the subject. In “*The Talking Mask*”, instead, the individuals make a reflection of their identity by selecting pictures or photographs from magazines. In addition, the subjects have to think about the perceptions that others may have of them. Thus, this task

helps to practice other skills like, for example, understanding others point of view in order to go beyond personal ego. Indeed, the need to foster emotional learning in prisons appears particularly important given the low level of adaptation and self-awareness shown by many inmates (some data seem to suggest that there is a link between emotional intelligence and criminal conduct (Santesso et al., 2006)). Finally, the use of pictures is believed to stimulate the unconscious (Boccalon, 2011). According to Freud, the unconscious works with images rather than words, given that words are not able alone to recall all the memories that the unconscious contains (Freud, 1915; Boccalon, 2011). According to Loewenthal (2011):

“Photographs can be considered as a way to the unconscious; customers give particular meanings to photographs, based on their own projections, thus expressing contents that had previously been repressed. Repression is conventionally defined as the unconscious exclusion of memories, impulses, desires and thoughts that are too distressing to be managed on a conscious level; “the essence of repression consists simply in expelling and keeping away something from the conscience” (Freud, 1915, p.147)”.

For this reason, pictures and symbols are often used as a vehicle of communication because they draw on reality but, at the same time, they have a strong symbolic and emotional meaning. Art, from this perspective, is considered to be another way to do therapy for its rehabilitative value and for recalling from the unconscious unexpressed feelings or experiences (Johnson, 2008). In fact, art-therapy in prison has been considered to be a useful tool from many years (Gussak, 2009; Djurichkovic, 2011). Art, in fact, facilitates the communication of intimal experiences and emotions because it can transmit thoughts, emotions, and feelings usually restrained in an individual's mind (Boccalon, 2011). Furthermore, creative expression through the arts can be a major factor in the success of the

rehabilitation and re-educative processes (Dean & Field, 2003; Clements, 2004). Prison art programs are also generally applied under the philosophical basis of “art is therapy” because, as reported by Johnson (2008): “*art therapy focuses heavily on healing processes*”. However, there is a lack of studies that quantify the benefits of art activities in prisons, except of the investigations conducted by David Gussak. In the last years, the art therapist Gussak undertook several studies on the positive impact of art therapy on well-being, depression, behaviour, and locus of control of prisoners (e.g. Gussak 2004, 2006, 2007, 2009). His method also included follow-up studies and reflections regarding the results and the practice. However, art therapy also provides benefit outcomes on a cognitive level helping prisoners to integrate knowledge, feelings and manual skills’ (Johnson, 2007). Finally, prison art programs are useful for individuals with low levels of education, as well as, in case of verbal communication barriers (Dean & Field, 2003; Johnson, 2008). In this sense, “*The Talking Mask*” technique has been used successfully with a subject who was not fluency speaking the same language of the therapist.

An example case report: the use of the technique and results

During a 1½-2h counseling meeting, the prisoner explored his emotional experience, personal identity and self-awareness making a comparison between the external and internal world of the jail with the support of “*The Talking Mask*”. In the example case reported in this paper, the subject is M., a male Ukrainian 42-year old prisoner, who is transitioning back to society gradually, after 15 years of detention. M. works during the day, under the control of authorities, at an industry of cosmetics close to the jail, and come back to his prison cell on nights and weekends. In the present time, he is the only one to have this permission in his institution. The meeting with the inmate was divided into three different steps. The first step was an

explanation of the task and of its goals. Then, in a second moment, M. completed the artwork guided by the therapist. M. had to answer to four questions by making a collage with magazines-pictures. The collage has the form of a mask and, on the external side of it, the subject projected the “outside” world answering the following questions:

1) how do I see/think myself outside the prison?

2) how do I think others see me outside the prison?

While on the internal side of “*The talking Mask*” he replied to questions regarding the “internal” world of the prison:

3) how do I see/think myself inside the prison?

4) how do I think others see me inside the prison?

To facilitate the work of the projection of the self, it is suggested to select many magazines (around 12) of different topics and rich of images. (A suggested selection of magazines should include topics such as animals, science, female and male fashion, politics, news, home design, general commercial, culture).

At the end of the task, a final assessment and feedback were given. The therapist explored the feelings of the subject and his experience in completing the collage. Some useful questions asked were: *do you like your artwork? Which side of the mask or picture do you like most? Did you like making it? Why? Did this technique help you to discover or comprehend better something about your personality? If yes, what?* The feedback was focused on the redundant or positive/negative elements and on a comparison among the pictures. Given that the prisoner illustrated, through the use of the pictures, his personal path of evolution, the therapist narrated it again verbally underlining the positive elements (e.g. goals achieved, skills gained, etc.). Finally, in order to verify the effectiveness of the art therapy session, a brief follow-up meeting was conducted one month later.

In total, M. selected 20 pictures. For the internal side of the mask which represents the

true self within the prison world, M. chose 12 pictures. While for the external side, to report the true self in the present time, during the transition, M. selected 8 images.

Image 1 shows the internal side of the mask, while image 2 is the external side (In appendix).

1) How do I see/think myself inside the prison?

To depict himself inside the prison M. chose 8 pictures. One of the most significant is a “*strong but tired animal*”. He considers himself as a powerful and robust animal like a rhinoceros or another large mammal but tired or dejected because it is not free and useful to anyone. Like a strong mammal, he has many skills and potentials that he could use, like working, but his life condition was not giving him this possibility. He selected other similar images that highlight this concept like “*an empty wardrobe*” or “*a new USB flash drive*”. Right now he feels “*empty*”, not useful, but with great potential and ready to be “*filled up*” like a wardrobe or a USB-drive. He also selected the picture of a “*sad child with no autonomy*” and the “*handicap sign*” to underline the concept of lack of autonomy. Within the prison environment, in fact, he is over controlled and depends completely on other people (for example, someone else cooks for him every day). He feels like an infant or “*handicapped*” because he cannot even choose what to eat. The child in this picture is sad, bored, thoughtful and melancholy. He selected also a colorful piece of “*pizza*” and an “*airplane*” which symbolize in general his dreams, his desire of freedom, included traveling, cooking, going out with friends for a dinner choosing what to eat. At the end, he put the image of “*a church*” because during his long period of incarceration he stated to have discovered his faith.

2) How do I think others see me inside the prison?

To describe how he thinks others see him as a prisoner, M. selected 4 pictures. The first one shows a child playing soccer but he said that

the child is a “*player who played badly or lost his match*”. He also chose the image of two teenagers fighting. He believes, in fact, that others see him like an individual who was fighting with life and lost his match because he played poorly. M. believes he is viewed as a “*parked car*” because right now no one is driving it although it is almost ready to be. This is a good spider car and it is waiting for the possibility to show its potential. Finally, he added the picture of “*a man painting an art project*”. This artwork symbolizes his rehabilitation process within the prison. It is like if other people were helping him to create a new person. M. had more difficulties in thinking about how others may see him.

3) How do I see/think myself outside the prison?

M. selected 6 pictures to describe himself outside the prison. It is the richest and most colorful side of the entire mask. He selected a pair of “*shoes*” which reflect “*his new life and freedom*” outside. Other pictures that symbolize his new freedom and life are “*a dish of food and chips*”, “*the landscape of a large natural park*”, and “*a man (character Christopher Robin, created by A. A. Milne) talking to Winnie the Pooh*”, which represents true friendship and tenderness. Yet, the pictures do not only talk of freedom or desires who came true, but also of internal serenity. There is also a man who kicks a ball in a soccer stadium. This man represents his happiness because he gave “*a kick to the past life*”. However, he also added a “*naked man*” because M. also feels naked. The man in this image is older, tired and sweaty. M. has to start a new life from zero and he does not exactly how to do it. He owns nothing (clothes, home, furniture, a car, etc.) and he is fatigued. Moreover, the picture is the only one in black and white but this man is also walking over, maybe leaving behind his old habits and objects.

4) How do I think others see me outside the prison?

M. had many difficulties in thinking how others may judge him and for this section, he

selected only 2 pictures. They are a “*vigorous man*”, who symbolizes his new strength. And “*a couple*” (a male and a female –the only female of the entire mask) who are travelling by bike. He chose this couple not only because he is willing to get engaged and be closer to his partner but also because he believes that others judge him as a “*dreamer*”.

Discussion and conclusions

Thanks to the use of “*The Talking Mask*”, M. had the possibility to improve his self-awareness and explored his feelings. He was provoked to explore himself deeply, although he had difficulties initially to overcome his defense mechanisms and leave behind his mask of “*hyper-masculinity*”. However, in the end, he was intrigued by the technique and glad to have had this meeting, although he was not completely satisfied with his artwork and stated he would like to make a “*bigger one in the future*”. It would be interesting to later compare the two masks and understand any differences. M. had a good level of self-awareness as a full-time prisoner, and he is working on his new post-prison identity. However, he had difficulties especially in perceiving how other people may see or judge him, indicating a need to improve this skill. The ability to perceive and understand others’ point of view is considered, in fact, an essential skill in our society and sign of “*emotional intelligence*” (Goleman, 1995). Emotional intelligence implies the ability to perceive emotions, integrate them with thoughts and regulate them within oneself and in interaction with others (Mayer et al., 2000). Emotional learning in prisons appears, therefore, particularly important given the low level of adaptation and self-awareness shown by many inmates.

The inside part of the mask is sadder and less colorful and there are several pictures with children, like if M. had regressed to childhood in jail and had to grow up again. Like a child, he is taking his first steps outside the prison environment and he feels glad for this opportunity but also timorous, vulnerable and

“naked”. For this reason, he is aware of the need to continue to improve but it was also important to help him recognize the positive steps he has already taken (pointed out also by the comparison among the pictures selected). While doing the task, in fact, he noticed feelings of anxiety and confusion and he needed reassurances by the therapist. For instance, it was told him that every step has important value and anxiety and insecurity are normal responses to major life transitions. In fact, fortunately, at a brief follow-up meeting one month later, M. appeared to be more self-confident, aware and also more at peace and grounded in the present time. Given that one of the goals of this particular task is to improve the self-awareness and help to remove unhealthy masks (which may be also defence mechanisms) stimulating the unconscious, this process could stir up strong feelings in the inmate, included oppositions or negative memories. The psychotherapist or counsellor, in this case, should find strategies, tools or resources from his educational background to help the inmate to navigate such emotions. For example, the therapist could help the person to understand better these feelings, relax and/or accept his emotions, like happened in the case presented in this paper.

The external side of the mask is more colorful, happy and with no kids. The only picture that may evoke childhood is the one with the stuffed bear “Winnie the Pooh”. However, this image shows the adult Christopher Robin in a shot of the recent movie (*Christopher Robin* by Marc Forster, 2018) saying goodbye to his old teddy bear friend, symbol of his childhood. M. gave another meaning to this image, and probably has not watched this movie and did not make this reasoning, yet his unconscious may have done it.

Making “*The Talking Mask*” artwork is not an easy task and it may be necessary to ask other questions in order to stimulate the mind of the subject, as happened with M. For example, the therapist may suggest to think deeply or recall feelings or experiences lived during the incarceration time and to find pictures that

explain these concepts. Other questions may regard dreams or aspirations.

Summarizing, the result obtained with “*The Talking Mask*” art therapy technique is a collage of pictures that described the identity and personality of the individual in the present time and without emotional masks which may cover or hide the true self. Given that it is an artwork, it is recommended that the counselor continue to stay close to the subject during the completion of it in order to collect any thoughts or comments and to value his/her experience in making it. In fact, it would be useful to ask why he/she chose an image instead of another one. Furthermore, the therapist should maintain a detached and non-judgmental view of the overall work, as well as of each image selected, to leave the prisoner free to express and discover himself/herself. For this reason, the therapist should guide and stimulate the subject to go deeper but never influence or replace him/her by performing the task. Finally, the therapist should keep in mind the period of incarceration, given that there is an important difference between those who stayed in prison for a short period, and those who served a sentence for many years. The latter ones should be supported more, not only because they spent more time in prison with major changes in their personality as outcome, but also due to the major social changes that tend to occur with time. Thus, it may be harder for them to reintegrate. In these cases, the use of “*The Talking Mask*” is considered to be more effective and beneficial. The technique is useful also with no native speakers or in case of other verbal communication barriers, however major studies to measure the effectiveness of the tool are strongly warranted. Given that the one described is a pilot case with an adult male individual, the primary recommendation for future investigations is to use it with both genders, teenagers included, and compare the results. Moreover, further investigations could compare prisoners of a specific institution or country in order to explore the general state of mind and emotional experiences of that specific population.

Appendix

Image 1: the internal side of the mask



Image 2: the external side of the mask



References

- Belton, S., & Barclay, L. (2008). J Block Women of Art Project Report: Evaluating Community Education in a Prison Setting. *Dawn House* in association with *Ruby Gaea* <http://www.cdu.edu.au/gshp/documents/JBlockWomenofArtProjectReport.pdf>
- Boccalon, R., (2011). "Imago e Psiche": processi creativi e terapie espressive (tr: "Imago and Psyche": creative processes and expressive therapies). *PsicoArt*, 2:1-29.
- Clements, P. (2004). The Rehabilitative Role of Arts Education in Prison: Accommodation or Enlightenment?, *The International Journal of Art & Design Education*, 23(2):169-178.
- Crewe, B., Warr, J., Bennett, P., & Smith, A. (2014). The emotional geography of prison life. *Theoretical Criminology*, 18(1), 56–74. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362480613497778>
- Dean, C., & Field, J., (2003). Building lives through an artistic community, IFECSA Conference 2003, *Australasian Corrections Education Association Inc.* http://www.acea.org.au/Content/2003%20papers/Paper%20Dean_Field.pdf
- Djurichkovic, A., (2011). Art in Prisons. A literature review of the philosophies and impacts of visual art programs for correctional populations. *Australia UTS-ePress*.
- Freud, S. (1915/1984). *The Unconscious*. In Richards A. (Ed.) *The Pelican Freud Library: Vol. II. On metaphysics: the theory of psychoanalysis* (pp. 159-222). Harmondworth: Penguin.
- Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional intelligence*. New York: Bantam Books Inc.

- Gussak, D., (2004). Art therapy with prison inmates: a pilot study. *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, 31(4):245-259.
- Gussak, D., (2006). Effects of art therapy with prison inmates: A follow-up study. *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, 33(3):188-198.
- Gussak, D., (2007). The Effectiveness of Art Therapy in Reducing Depression in Prison Populations. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 51(4):444-460.
- Gussak, D., (2009). Comparing the effectiveness of art therapy on depression and locus of control of male and female inmates. *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, 36(4):202-207.
- Haney, C., (2002). The Psychological Impact of Incarceration: Implications for Post-Prison Adjustment. "From Prison to Home" Conference. http://webarchive.urban.org/UploadedPDF/410624_PsychologicalImpact.pdf
- Holland, D., Lachiocotte, W., Skinner, D., & Cain, C. (1998). *Identity and agency in cultural worlds*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Johnson, L., (2008). A Place for Art in Prison: Art as a Tool for Rehabilitation and Management. *Southwest Journal of Criminal Justice*, 5(2):100-120.
- Johnson, L., (2007). Jail Wall Drawings and Jail Art Programs: Invaluable Tools for Corrections International. *Journal of Criminal Justice Sciences*, 2(2):66-84.
- Kellam, M., (2006). *Mental Health Issues in Parole, National Conference of Parole Authorities*. http://www.correctiveservices.nsw.gov.au/_media/dcs/information/mental-health-issuesin-parole/MentalHealthIssuesinParole-Speech.pdf
- Laws, B., & Crewe B., (2016). Emotion regulation among male prisoners. *Theoretical Criminology*, 20(4):529-547.
- Loewental, D. (2011) *Talking Pictures Therapy: The Use of Photographs in Counselling and Psychotherapy*. In U. Halkola et. al. (2011) *Phototherapy in Europe: Learning and Healing with Phototherapy*. http://phototherapyeurope.utu.fi/photoeurope_handbook.pdf.
- Luft, J., & Ingham, H. (1955). *The Johari window, a graphic model of interpersonal awareness. Proceedings of the western training laboratory in group development*. Los Angeles: University of California.
- Mayer, J. D., Salovey, P., & Caruso, D. R. (2000). *Models of emotional intelligence*. In R.J. Sternberg (ed.), *Handbook of intelligence* (pp 396-420). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Santesso, D. L., Reker, D. L., Schmidt, L. A., & Segalowitz, S. J. (2006). Frontal electroencephalogram activation asymmetry, emotional intelligence, and externalizing behaviors in 10-year-old children. *Child Psychiatry and Human Development*, 36, 311-328.