

Using the Emotional Learning Cards – An Art Psychotherapist's perspective

PROFILE

Jess Linton, art psychotherapist, shares some examples from her work with adult asylum seekers illustrating how she has used the emotional learning cards in therapy sessions with them. The clients' names have been changed to ensure anonymity. You can contact Jess on jess.a.linton@gmail.com.

Using the Emotional Learning Cards in Therapy Sessions Examples from work with Adult Asylum Seekers

Introduction

For over a year, I have been supporting work with adult asylum seekers, including some vulnerable young adults, as an art therapist within the therapeutic case unit of a refugee service. The therapeutic case unit offers clients one-to-one emotional and psychological support as well as practical support (such as liaising with legal aid, housing support and GPs) in line with the psycho-social model of the service. I am currently offering an open art therapy group within one of their destitution centres. My main focus has been on using art therapy to support clients to: reclaim a sense of self; find a voice through the art-making and art image; bridge past and present experiences and cope with various, often complex, symptoms of post-traumatic distress.

Having been introduced to the A Space & INIVA **Emotional Learning Cards** I decided to bring them in to my art therapeutic work at the refugee service. I wondered whether the cards might become useful 'transitional objects' for the clients as they accustomed themselves to the sessions - traditional Western concepts of 'art' and 'therapy' are often very different to their own cultural, social, ethnic, religious and/or political contexts. I wondered whether the cards would support the clients in slowing down their thoughts as well as enabling them to make use of the art image in the art therapy when they were not able to engage in their own art making. I also wondered whether, in line with the ethos of the psycho-social model of the therapeutic service, the very act of selecting and working with these cards would offer clients an empowering space to play an active part in their therapy and recovery - shaping the direction of their sessions and using the card as a physical object to 'make concrete' difficult thoughts, experiences and memories.

In my one-to-one sessions I leave the **'Who are you? Where are you going?'** card series out alongside other resources, to be used by clients as and when they became curious about them. These cards seem particularly significant when working with asylum seekers and refugees as they all share the difficult experience of being forced to flee home and also face great uncertainty about the future. In our sessions, we explore the impact of this and the need to rebuild 'home' - "as not only the place but the cluster of feelings associated with it" (The Oxford English Dictionary in Papadopoulos (2002: 10)).

I also suggest clients look through the cards with me when they were not sure what they want to do or if they do not want to make art work. I invite my clients to select a card from the pack and make a piece of work in response and/ or talk through what they see in the card and what attracted them to it. We then turn the card over and read the text together. Whilst the cards



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offer the opportunity to work solely with the visual through the images, reading the text together can be an additional benefit when working with individuals who are often still learning the English language. The therapist can offer additional support in helping the client to develop a wider vocabulary, another practical need - most asylum seekers and refugees will have a hunger to learn and to improve their English as part of their fight for survival in their new host country. The act of looking at the image and of reading the card together creates a shared experience that strengthens the therapeutic relationship. Often clients decide to use our sessions to discuss and explore the emotional learning cards and related themes with me rather than create a piece of art work in response. I share two case examples below from my one-to-one work:

Using “Peregrinations” by Aya Haidar (2008) with a young trafficked woman:

Ana (*a pseudonym I've used to protect her identity*) arrived in the UK having escaped a sex trafficking ring that she had been forced into by her ex-partner in Albania. Due to local policemen being involved in the network when her partner became abusive to her, she was not able to turn to the police for support. Ana advised me that she had a very close relationship with her family throughout her childhood but her family had disowned her when they had discovered that Ana had formed a relationship outside of marriage. When she became abused by her partner and his network, and her life was threatened, she had no one to turn to. Ana and her family have had no further contact with each other since she left Albania. During our work together Ana lived with a family (a young couple with a small child) who had met her when she first arrived in the UK and had agreed to offer her a place to stay until she found a long-term solution. Although Ana felt very fortunate to have their support and felt safe and well looked after she also expressed a desire to find her own independence and stability.

Ana paused at Aya Haidar's card, “**Peregrinations**”, and looked at the image for some time. She pointed out that the slippers were tied - both pegged to a clothes line and also tied to each other with threads. We thought about the support footwear gives us to make our journey from A to B but in Aya Haidar's art work, the fact that they are tied means they are stopped from travelling in the direction that they might want to take. This felt very significant to Ana. She thought about being trapped, both in being trafficked and now in her struggle in a new unknown country, without status and without knowing in what direction her life is moving.

Ana was quick to point out the maps stitched inside Haidar's slippers in “**Peregrinations**”. For her this highlighted the question: ‘Where am I going?’ I reflected back to a picture that she had started the week before which included the faint outline of an aeroplane in the sky. Ana hadn't been sure whether the plane was arriving or leaving. After some reflection, she had suggested that it was leaving and we had thought about her longing for the same independence and freedom that the aeroplane seemed to represent. She was able to acknowledge how different this was to her current situation of feeling trapped and reliant on the people supporting her. This led us to reading the final section on the back of the card as we thought about the absence of Ana's family as a support network around her in extremely challenging times:

“We all have parts of our family or our country's histories that we feel good about and some that we are confused about.”



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Ana seemed relieved to consider that her confusion around her personal and family history was not so unusual. This 'normalising' was important for Ana, enabling her to address her loneliness and work through strong feelings of guilt and shame. (It can be common for individuals who have fled traumatic experiences and 'home' to feel that they have failed by leaving loved ones or by not being able to stop the violence.)

We thought about Ana's Albanian heritage and her new life in the UK. Ana talked about her family, the overpowering presence of her father in the family and the tensions her mother and grandmother faced in trying to support both him and Ana and her siblings. After several sessions Ana was able to bring her family and her past in to the sessions. She thought about her family disowning her and how this act became a very real abandonment of her, leading to their forcing her to leave the family home. The slippers may have also connected with Ana on an unconscious level in their representation of her physical act of departure and their symbolism of embarking on a journey. To quote from the back of the card:

'If the shoes were worn, the maps would be hidden from sight. This suggests that we all take personal journeys that are known only to us.'

When we read this text, Ana and I thought about the difficult experiences that regularly re-surfaced as traumatic memories which she had found hard to share or even allow to come to mind in our sessions. Ana was able to begin to permit me to bear witness to some aspects of her personal journey, interwoven with and gently encouraged by safely exploring collective experiences and themes brought up in the image and commentary on the emotional learning cards.

We were able to use **"Peregrinations" by Aya Haidar (2008)** to explore some important themes for Ana: identity; independence; freedom and basic human rights; personal and cultural history and heritage. The slippers may still be tied together and pegged on a line but there was hope that they might be able to come down and find their direction again, the in-built threads of personal history travelling with them as a fortifying layer of their unique identity.

Using "Ambitions and Dreams" by NS Harsha (2005) with a victim of political and religious persecution from Iran:

Rosa (*again I have used a pseudonym to protect her identity*) had fled her home country of Iran when she had been arrested and physically beaten by Iranian authorities for speaking out about the governing system. She had been granted refugee status a few months after arriving in the UK. Rosa was living in accommodation arranged by the Home Office, but which was only temporary and brought a range of other difficulties with it. Rosa was born with a number of health difficulties including physical disability in her left arm and severe epilepsy. She shared that she had been left at a mosque as a baby by her parents who had rejected her. Rosa told me that her epilepsy and cognitive skills had deteriorated since she had been beaten by police and suffered severe head injuries in the assault.

Rosa was an artist who had a passion for painting. When she picked up the emotional learning card entitled **"Ambitions and Dreams" by NS Harsha** she became mesmerized by it. Brought up

with traditional art media such as oil paint, Rosa took a careful look at the image in an attempt to decipher what medium it was created in. "It's a painting" she declared, before looking at me questioningly. It took her a while to believe that the piece was a photograph, commenting: "This is so different!" on several occasions throughout the session. This was a good reminder of how very different and 'strange' the UK can seem for many of the clients who are forced to rebuild their lives here having come from different social, cultural, ethnic, religious and political backgrounds. Whilst the cards feature a range of contemporary, international artists and offer universal imagery, symbolism and themes to work with, Rosa's response to Harsha's image emphasised the importance of being able to recognise and work with difference and diversity.

Using the emotional learning cards in the safe, confidential space of a therapy session provided Rosa with the support she needed to be introduced to new approaches, mirroring her introduction to the UK with its unique characteristics and customs. She shared her amazement that the scene and the people in front of her in Harsha's image were real people, and that they had staged the scene. We explored trust as a theme in this session, which was a challenging topic for Rosa who had a long personal history of being marginalised and mistreated. We were able to use the card to think about togetherness versus isolation as we looked in at the group of people on the hillside and considered whether we felt a part of this scene or observers from the outside. We thought about the phrase *'following the crowd'* and the alternative of standing up for what you believe in, speaking out or being different. I also held in mind Rosa's physical disabilities and the health needs which have led to her being marginalised throughout her life.

We read the back of the card together, stopping occasionally to look up words in Rosa's dictionary. Rosa found the language difficult at times but we were able to draw on the rich imagery as a reaffirming shared language. Whilst at times it can be difficult to know how much Rosa understands of the English language, she is very astute and seems to connect on a deeper level whether she can verbalise a response or not. One of the comments on the back of the card says:

"It (the photograph) features young people standing on the side of a gently sloping hill with long white shadow-shapes stretching out behind them. They are all facing the same way as if looking towards their future. Perhaps the white shadows stand for their life so far."

Rosa picked up on the emphasis on the "white shadow-shapes" and we began to talk about people's "life so far" and the personal histories that might travel with us. Rosa was still not in a place where she wanted to revisit her past and was quick to let me know that she felt it was more important to focus on "the future, the now".

I wondered aloud whether thinking about the future felt easier for Rosa than touching on the difficult feelings and memories from a turbulent past. Taking a cue from the text, we thought about the white shadows and the good and the bad that we might carry with us. As an example focusing on the 'good' and the future, I wondered aloud whether Rosa might be able to internalize our sessions together and carry the knowledge that I am able to hold her in mind.

Answering the questions posed on the back of the cards was too challenging for Rosa but the discussion around the content of the cards supported her in bringing difficult thoughts and



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feelings into our sessions. I acknowledged her openness and highlighted the hope that the emotional learning cards seemed to enable her to make connections with the experiences of others and feel less alone. As well, identifying with the themes captured in the art work perhaps helped her to re-connect with aspects of her past and present life while also allowing her to reflect on her experiences from a safe distance.

What did you think of this resource? We want to hear from you...

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About Iniva Creative Learning

Iniva Creative Learning is a not-for-profit partnership between [A Space](#) (arts and therapy service, Hackney) and [Iniva](#) (the Institute of International Visual Arts). We share a commitment to producing art-based resources and delivering initiatives which promote emotional learning, personal development and psychological growth.

Emotional Learning Cards

It is now widely recognised that well-being in every part of life depends on successfully building understanding, insight and emotional resilience. **A Space** and **Iniva** have been co-publishing **Emotional Learning Cards since 2008** and they now occupy a leading position in the growing fields of **emotional learning and psychological therapies**.

Each boxed set of Emotional Learning Cards includes 20 cards:

- **On the front:** visually rich images of a contemporary artwork by a variety of culturally diverse and emerging artists known for their engagement in social or political enquiry.
- **On the back:** open questions and discussion prompts around the theme 'What do you feel?', 'Who are you? Where are you going?' and 'How do we live well with others?' for group or one-to-one use.

Suggestions for using the cards in different contexts such as school, home, gallery workshops and individual or group therapy settings are offered in a **fold-out leaflet**.