

The Sculpture Wood: the therapeutic effects of sculpture for autistic children

Research Description

The aim of this research was to investigate the way in which severely autistic children interacted with sculpture, and to consider the therapeutic and educational implications of this. The research was conducted in a special, residential school that had recently acquired some sculptures. These were placed in a wood, and the researcher noticed that the children engaged with sculpture in a way that was qualitatively different to their response to other structures, for example, playground equipment. Their reaction to the sculptures appeared to indicate that the sculptures offered an opportunity for the children to express themselves in a non-directed situation.

The participants were nineteen of the twenty children attending the school, the parents of three of the children, and the staff at the school.

The research involved filming the children over the course of a year. Filming was done by the researcher using a small handheld camera, and standing at some distance from the children. Their behaviour was then analysed from different perspectives, for example, psychodynamic, and other approaches used with autistic behaviour. At this point the researcher's findings were shared with the staff at the school, and also with the children's parents, who were shown the film. The parents of three of the children were subsequently interviewed in depth.

The researcher concluded that the children were meaningfully engaging with the sculptures, and that their behaviour in this context was different to the stereotypical, repetitive behaviours normally associated with autism. These behaviours are often considered to be meaningless, and staff at the school had previously assumed that this was also the case with the sculptures.

These findings question the established views of autism, and have implications for the therapeutic care of autistic children. A major outcome of the research was a number of recommendations for the development of more productive approaches to the use of the sculpture wood. Suggestions were based on the work of art therapists, and would initially involve further observation, looking at the children's interaction with greater empathy as meaningful behaviour. It would also involve training for staff.

The Sculpture Wood

Ethical issues involved

Vulnerable populations

The participants in this research were children under fifteen; they were also non articulate and might possibly react with distress to events that would not cause concern to other children.

Anonymity

Because the participants were filmed as part of the research, any future use of that film, for example for training purposes, would mean that the children could be identified. How will the children's identity be protected in any publication?

Intrusiveness

Research involved extensive filming of the children interacting with the sculptures. To this extent, the researcher was intruding on their lives.

Active consent

All of the children were under fifteen at the time of the research. They were not articulate, and were a particularly vulnerable group. Children's consent to participation in any research or other project is subject to the same principles as that as adults. The consent should be *real* consent, that is, they should fully understand what they are consenting to.

Gatekeepers

If children under sixteen are involved, consent would normally be sought from their parents or those who stand *in loco parentis*, for example, their teachers. In this study consent was sought from the parents.

The right to withdraw

The children should have the right to withdraw at any time during or after the study, but these children would not be able to articulate that wish.

Debriefing and closure

The children who participated in this research would not themselves be able to understand the outcomes or implications of the research. This should be directed towards those who gave initial consent.

Consent for future uses of data

The film that was produced as part of the research may be used in the future for training purposes. Consent should be sought for this new, future application.

Managed access to data

The film provides a permanent, identifiable record. A copy is held by the researcher's university, but it is the responsibility of the researcher to ensure that the film is stored securely and not subject to open access.

Secondary uses of data

The film could provide a useful tool for training. The researcher has a responsibility to protect the identities of her participants, and to ensure that they are not unduly exploited.

Responding to the ethical issues

The researcher adopted a number of measures

Consent for the research project was given by the school principal. Consent for the children's participation was sought from their parents, who were given an information sheet, and asked to sign a consent form. The parents of one child indicated that they did not want their child to be filmed. The children did not avoid the filming, or otherwise indicate non-consent. They were used to being filmed for assessment purposes.

The children are identified, with their parents' permission, by their first name only. Future use of the film will be subject to the parents' consent.

The researcher is putting in place procedures to safeguard the use of the film. For example, she is seeking assurance from the university that it will not be subject to open access.

Ethical questions for reflection

These children are particularly vulnerable, and are not articulate.

- Should we question whether or not such children should take part in such research, even if they may ultimately benefit from it?
- Does it make a difference if the research only involves observing behaviour that would occur anyway?
- How can a researcher ensure that consent given reflects a child's feelings?
- How can a child exercise the *right to withdraw*?

This research highlights a dilemma for researchers who work with sensitive issues, or with vulnerable participants.

- Should data be destroyed when the research has finished, even though it may have future benefit?
- What steps should a researcher take to safeguard its future use?

The parents of one child asked that he should not be filmed. In this case it is unlikely that the child himself would have been aware of this, however in other circumstances this may not be so.

- Does a researcher have any responsibility to consider the impact of exclusion from participation by gatekeepers?
- Is there any way, other than abandoning the study altogether, that a researcher could address this situation?