**Neutral Mask with Adolescents**

The “neutral mask” is a kind of clean slate. It allows for the projection of emotions and feelings, exploration of movement, drama, and various art materials. The neutral mask does not have a defined facial expression, character trait, or mood. It does not express anything. Therefore, it can express everything: any character, mood, or feeling.

This chapter describes the creation of masks by young adolescents who attended group drama therapy sessions in their middle schools. They created wounded, bruised, and threatening masks, expressing their vulnerability, pain, and struggles. The mask stands on its own, as a work of art created by the patient. The mask can also be the face of a character, which can move and act in space. The use of the mask as a prop creates a distinction between the patient and a fictional character. Creating the mask and acting with it allows the patient to embody painful experiences and difficulties in a safe space.

**The Neutral Mask**

Masks have been used in various fields such as rituals, shows, and theater performances, as well as in various types of therapy, including art therapy. The neutral mask creates a visual image of an expressionless human face. The uniqueness of the neutral mask is its lack of specific characterization, which creates a generalized human. Out of neutrality grows the possibility to express and embody any emotion, any identity, any character, any gender, any status.

The director Jacques Lecoq used the neutral mask as a training tool for acting students. By working with the neutral mask, students practice a neutral state as performers. They become a *tabula rasa*. According to Lecoq, the neutral mask allows the performer to reach a state of mental and physical awareness, to be present in the moment. The neutral state is a primary starting point for awareness and intention, before acting out the identity of a fictional character. “The mask helps to identify a resting state for the actor, a condition of presence from which all things are possible,” (Eldredge & Huston, 1978, 28).

The neutral mask hides the entire face. It is impossible to speak while wearing it. Working with the mask emphasizes physical expression, as opposed to usual means of communication such as voice and facial expressions. The color of the mask depends on the material from which it was made. Neutral masks used to train actors are usually mostly made of leather, papier mâché or Celastic (plastic fabric).

**The Mask as a Therapeutic Tool in Art Therapy**

In therapy, the mask is an image of the Self. It is used as a projective technique to separate one part of the self from another (Landy, 1986). The mask simultaneously hides and reveals the person wearing it. It conceals and hides individuals’ faces, and reveals their behaver, movement, gestures and more. “The neutral mask allows the quality of movement to be seen, it takes that quality on itself and magnifies it,” (Eldredge & Huston, 1978, 28). Steinhardt (1992) claimed that working with masks allows patients to connect to their strengths. With the help of the mask, the patient becomes a screenwriter, a director, and an actor at the same time. The mask expresses a character that already exists in the patient in one way or another.

Landy (1986) distinguished between three approaches for using masks in therapy. The first is more distant. The patient plays with the mask spontaneously, and creates some kind of story. The story can reflect a personal experience, or it can be distanced by reference to the characters in the third person or in a “once upon a time” framework. In the second approach, the patient works with the mask, assuming roles within a family of characters, engaging in dialogue with other characters. The therapist can offer the client to explore some characters points of view of. The third approach is psycho-dramatic. The therapist, or other group members, play auxiliary ego roles, such as mother, father, sibling, or self. The patient’s dilemmas can be brought into focus through a confrontation with the auxiliary ego. Each enactment is followed by a period of closure or reflection upon the action.

Jones (1996) referred to the mask as a projection object. He indicated three main points regarding dramatic projection when working with masks. First, The form of the mask affects the content that the patients project. Second, with the help of the mask, patients express parts of their personalities that were denied or hidden, and attribute these to the mask and not to themselves. Third, The mask allows focusing and presenting certain aspects or parts of the self.

**Description of Case A**

**Background on the Patient**

A. is a 12-year-old boy who is an albino and visually impaired (due to sensitivity to sunlight). A.’s parents described him as a victim of social rejection due to his appearance. They said that he dyes his hair and refuses to do his schoolwork because he is an albino. His albinism and visual impairment are not discussed at home. He lives with his parents and older sister. Due to the social rejection that he experienced in elementary school, his parents insisted that in first grade he study in a special education class. A. was diagnosed with mild attention deficit disorder, with an emotional basis.

**The Group Therapy**

A. came to group drama therapy with two other students from his class. This class is designated for students with learning disabilities. The students came to this middle school from different elementary schools. Each of the participants faced social difficulties in elementary school. The goal of the group was to develop their social skills and provide a space where they could share their various difficulties and process the transition from elementary school to middle school. At the beginning of the year, the group discussed the experience of social rejection, which all the participants went through at one time or another. The therapy continued throughout the school year.

A. almost never spoke explicitly about his social and physical difficulties. He seemed happy to come to the group meetings, and was seeking interaction and joint play with the group members and with me (the therapist). A. often teased the other group members, possibly out of a desire for attention and interaction with them. They did not tease him back, but while the other two became closer during the year, A.’s social place in the group and in his class remained the same.

The participants mostly engaged in dramatic play. Together, we pretended to be police officers, robbers, and hostages, and had a shootout, were injured, escaped, and more. A. often played a shrewd and powerful bandit, while another group member was the *schlemiel* (misfit) and unsuccessful bandit. The third participant and I played the victims, ordinary people who were being robbed in a bank, café, or store. A. had various ideas for the course of the drama and development of the plot. Sometimes the robber he played would escape, and other times he was caught by the police.

**The Process of Working on the Mask**

A. began working on the mask during a meeting in which one of the participants was looking for a mask that had been used for the thief/robber character in the group drama game. The participant found a package of neutral masks, and asked if he could paint one of them. A. agreed with this suggestion. The neutral masks were made of white plastic. The inside is smooth and the outer part has a rough texture, like velvety fabric. This allows for the use of a variety of art materials such as markers, watercolors, acrylic paint, and gluing decorations to it.

A. put a mask on a table, sat down, chose markers, and began to draw on the mask. He seemed to be concentrating, and did not speak to the other members of the group, which was not typical for him. He chose a black marker and a dark green marker. He drew two thick lines from the upper edge of the mask, each line with a different marker. The lines formed a hollow rectangle around the forehead area and to the lower end of the nose. He colored in the rectangle with a yellow marker. He then chose a red marker and colored around one of the eyes, down the cheek, and under the nose and mouth. A. looked at his mask and said, with enthusiasm, “His brain is spilling out and dripping down his face.”

He paused, looked at the mask, and studied it for a few moments. Then he asked me if I had Tipp-Ex (correction fluid), because he wanted to remove some things from the mask. I gave him a bottle of Tipp-Ex, and he erased the rectangle and the lines he had drawn. But the Tipp-Ex didn’t remove the lines as A. wanted, so I suggested that he use white oil pastel. With the white oil pastel, he colored over the red part he had drawn with the marker. He explained that he wanted to “make it a scar” and for it to look like an “old wound.” He highlighted the area around the eye with pink oil pastel. When he finished, he tried on the mask.

A. continued to work on the mask during several more sessions. In one meeting, he added a black scar above one eye. In another meeting, he drew a red spot around and below the other eye, with red lines along the sides of the mask. He said that these were scars. After finishing his work on the mask, A. would wear it during the dramatic group games, when he played the character of a strong and menacing bandit.

**Summary and Interpretation**

The neutral white mask, like a blank page, can be decorated and drawn on with different colors, materials, and textures. It has limits, but is full of potential. Kandinsky (1911/1977) saw the color white as having spiritual meaning, with rich possibilities, a color of deep silence and primary formation–the creation. Netzer (2008) stated that white is seen as symbolizing spirituality, purity, innocence, and holiness, but also death, since paleness is associated with lack of energy. Netzer claimed that there is universality in the symbolism of colors, alongside cultural variation and personal meaning. While white is associated with purity and spirituality in our culture, we also perceive albinos as abnormal, strange, and even sick. The mask is an inanimate plastic work of art that stands on its own, and also a creation of a character with certain traits that will come to life and be acted out.

A., who did not talk about his personal difficulties and avoided openly dealing with his limitations, often chose to play the role of the strong, shrewd, and menacing bandit in the drama, and he created a mask with bruises and wounds, battle-hardened, representing great pain. The wounds that A. created, and which he went over again and again with the white oil pastel, turned into scars, as if time has passed and the wounds had healed, but a memory of what happened remained. Drawing on the mask allowed A. to erase and reorganize various experiences, creating a layered representation of the depth of his pain and experience, in which there was interplay between the visible and the hidden. It was no longer possible to make out all the first lines that A. drew on the mask. Creating the mask, playing with it, and portraying the character of the bandit while wearing it, allowed A. to deal with emotional content in a nonverbal way. By using the mask, which was a visual expression of inner feelings, A. took off, for a few minutes, the “mask” that he wore every day, and touched his pain, fear, and hurts. Precisely through his choice to embody a strong, powerful, and threatening character, he revealed his pain, weakness and ability to survive.

**Description of Case B**

**Background on the Patient**

B. is a 13-year-old boy. His father died when he was six. He lives with his mother and her partner. B. has an older sister who does not live at home. B. began studying in special education settings starting in kindergarten due to verbal and emotional difficulties. In elementary school, he occasionally hit other children out of frustration at being unable to express himself. He suffered from social rejection. Towards the end of second grade, he transferred into a regular class. As an adolescent, B. had difficulty initiating and maintaining social relationships. His mother said that he often locks himself in his room and plays computer games.

**The Group Therapy**

B. came to group drama therapy with three other students, each from a different class in the same grade. The purpose of the group was to develop their social skills and abilities. The treatment continued throughout the school year. B. was very withdrawn in the group meetings throughout the process. He avoided sharing personal experiences. When there was a round in which everyone spoke about how they were doing or different experiences they had the previous week, B. would briefly answer with a word or two, but no more. Sometimes he would cooperate with games I initiated, but for the most part he refused.

At the beginning of the group process, the meetings were semi-structured, in order to create familiarity and closeness among the members through various games, alongside free time, during which each group member acted freely in the therapy room. As the therapeutic process progressed, B. connected with one other group member in particular. They played board games or ball games together. Their interaction showed other sides of B.: playfulness, energy, humor, and a desire for friendship. Their relationship continued even outside the weekly group meetings.

**The Process of Working on the Mask**

B. and another participant decided to work with the neutral masks in one of the first group meetings. In these meetings, it was difficult to coordinate and gather the four participants together around a joint activity for any length of time. B. and another participant saw the neutral masks in the supply closet in the room, and wanted to paint them. They sat together and began to draw. B., who was very passive in the group meetings, seemed focused and active. He worked quickly, thoroughly, and with great skill. Using pink plasticine, he created a wound on the mask’s forehead, with worms crawling in and out of it. B. used a glue gun to make holes in the plasticine worms and added drops of hot glue on the mask, to create a three-dimensional mask. He seemed to be familiar with using the various materials. While working, he turned to me and enthusiastically showed me the mask during various stages of work. He put on the mask and asked me to take his picture. Towards the end of the meeting, B. and the other participant who also made a mask had fun together, wearing the masks they made and some hats that were in the room. B. continued to work on the mask in subsequent sessions. He added red by melting a red oil pastel with the hot glue gun, and added drips of glue, and colored it with a blue marker. After he finished, he put on the mask again and asked me to take a picture of him in it. After he completed the mask, he did not deal with it anymore.

**Summary and Interpretation**

B., who seemed introverted, quiet, and sometimes disconnected from the group activity, became full of life, creativity, pleasure, and satisfaction while working on the mask. During the creation process, B. revealed abilities and skills that he had not shown before. The neutral mask is a platform for projection. It enables expression of issues and experiences that are difficult to voice in words. Steinhardt (1992) said that creating and looking at a mask allows for an internal dialogue with silenced and hidden parts of one’s self. Images, feelings, desires, and fears are embedded in the mask. It seems that through the mask, B. revealed to the other group members various topics touching on his experiences of vulnerability, horror, rejection, and disgust. He did not reveal these issues to the group in any other way during the therapy process.

As Levine (1992, 14) wrote: “The task of therapy is not to eliminate suffering but to give voice to it, to find a form in which it can be expressed. Expression is itself transformation. This is the message that art brings. The therapist then would be a therapist of the soul, working with sufferers to enable them to find the proper container for their pain, the form in which it would be embodied.”

The mask, then, is a vehicle for giving testimony, a tangible expression and embodiment of pain (red color symbolizing blood and worms crawling in and out of the face). B. was possibly showing the pain of rejection, loss, vulnerability, loneliness, and difficulties with transitions in his life. It seems that the mask carried these feelings during the meetings in which B worked on it. While creating the mask, he behaved in a more relaxed and communicative manner. The connection that he developed with another participant while making the mask led to a friendship that continued outside the therapy room.

This chapter briefly described the work using neutral masks by two adolescents who had experienced bullying, rejection, and abandonment. They used various art material to create layers of cuts, wounds, and scars on the masks as an expression of their pain. The mask is in an intermediary between the inside and outside, the human and fictional, covering and revealing. In a mask we remain ourselves, yet also become someone else. The power of the mask lays in its possibility to unmasks parts of the self, carrying the internal and external together.

The mask provides a measure of distance for the patients, who can attribute parts of their personality that had been denied to the mask, and not to themselves. This distance is especially important in therapeutic work with adolescents, who often resist direct contact with personal experiences and emotional exposure.

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