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To cite this article: Sonia M. Stace (2016) The Use of Sculptural Lifelines in Art Psychotherapy (L'utilisation des lignes de vie sculpturales en art-thérapie), Canadian Art Therapy Association Journal, 29:1, 21-29, DOI: 10.1080/08322473.2016.1176813

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/08322473.2016.1176813

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Published online: 10 Jun 2016.

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The Use of Sculptural Lifelines in Art Psychotherapy (L’utilisation des lignes de vie sculpturales en art-thérapie)

Sonia M. Stace

ABSTRACT
The sculptural lifeline is a technique that can be used in art psychotherapy. A sculptural lifeline may be useful in someone’s therapeutic journey and can be of significant value for people accessing therapeutic services. This article explains the sculptural lifeline technique and uses examples to demonstrate some of the diverse functions and meanings sculptural lifelines hold. In the examples selected, people perceived increased freedom in the three-dimensional construction of a lifeline, as compared to working only two-dimensionally. They found the experience of making a sculptural lifeline to be a less threatening activity than drawing or painting their lifelines. This was partially due to feelings of internal pressure and judgement regarding artistic abilities, as well as the freedom they found in using tangible objects to symbolize their life experiences. They also found the representations on their sculptural lifelines to truly embody their experiences, something that they each felt could not be accomplished through choosing images and words for a collage. Their representations and symbols on their sculptural lifelines acted as “bookmarks” for topics to consider at appropriate junctures in therapy.

RESUME
La ligne de vie sculpturale est une technique qui peut être utilisée dans la psychothérapie par l’art. La ligne de vie sculpturale peut se révéler utile dans le parcours thérapeutique d’un patient en offrant une valeur importante pour les personnes ayant accès aux services thérapeutiques. Cet article explique la technique de la ligne de vie sculpturale et présente des exemples pour démontrer certaines des diverses fonctions et significations des lignes de vie sculpturales. Dans les exemples choisis, les patients ont ressenti une plus grande liberté dans la construction d’une ligne de vie sculpturale en trois dimensions que dans le travail en deux dimensions uniquement. Ils ont trouvé que leur expérience de fabrication d’une ligne de vie sculpturale était une activité moins menaçante que de dessiner ou de peindre leur ligne de vie. En partie, cela était dû à des sentiments de pression et de jugement internes concernant leurs capacités artistiques, mais aussi à la liberté qu’ils ont retrouvée dans l’utilisation d’objets tangibles pour symboliser leurs expériences de vie. Ils ont également trouvé que les représentations se dégageant de leurs lignes de vie sculpturales incarnaient véritablement leurs expériences, ce qu’ils jugeaient ne pas pouvoir accomplir à travers le choix d’images et de mots pour un collage. Les représentations et les symboles sur leurs lignes de vie sculpturales ont servi de “signets” pour marquer les sujets à prendre en compte au moment opportun dans la thérapie.

The sculptural lifeline is an art psychotherapy activity that appeals to a range of people dealing with a variety of issues. A sculptural lifeline is the act of executing a representation of life by making a three-dimensional artwork incorporating representations of significant and meaningful events, places, and relationships. As with other art psychotherapy techniques, the sculptural lifeline activity provides people with therapeutically productive experiences. Emotions associated with past and present events can be experienced and processed in a safe, containing, therapeutic environment, resulting in positive therapeutic outcomes. Such positive therapeutic outcomes may be due to the potential of sensorimotor art therapy interventions to vary neural pathways, and alter and regulate responses to memories (Christian, 2008; Hass-Cohen, 2008b; Hass-Cohen, Clyde Findlay, Carr & Vanderlan, 2014; Vance & Wahlin, 2008). This can assist to integrate thoughts and feelings, which can contribute to a more complete sense of self (Briere, 2002).

The memories and symbolic representations embodied in sculptural lifelines can be a focus for therapeutic work. Some qualities of using this technique can include people gaining perspective...
regarding what has been significant in their life, and how their life narrative has influenced identity creation and impacted on their past and present ways of interacting with their inner and outer selves, relationships with others, as well as their world. Another quality of the technique is that different types of memories can be expressed in a sculptural lifeline: for instance, implicit, explicit, long-term, and short-term memories. When different types of memories are expressed both cognitive and perceptual neural pathways are engaged, which can update memories and expand personal agency (Vance & Wahlin, 2008). This can have positive implications for using the technique during therapy.

Review of the literature

Sometimes “helping professionals” may suggest that someone makes a timeline of their life using marks and/or imagery on paper. This activity is often referred to as a lifeline. The following review of the literature illustrates that the lifeline and its variations, including timelines, life times, life rivers, life maps, and road maps, are therapeutic techniques that have been well documented in academic literature. Coleman (1998), for example, believed that it is appropriate to use a lifeline during any stage of therapy. Hass-Cohen (2008a) found that timelines made during the beginning stage of therapy clarify chronological history and/or symptomatology, and that those made during the midstages of therapy assist the client to revisit memories and reveal schemas. Lifelines have also been elements of art therapy research, for example: Bergland’s (1982) pilot study of the life review process with older adults; Fitzpatrick’s (2002) study that used art therapy as an intervention with refugees; Martin’s (2003) study of the emotions expressed in adults and older adults’ artwork; and Alders Pike’s (2013) study of art therapy’s effect on older adults’ cognitive performance.

Lifelines, and variations of lifelines, have been used beneficially with individuals, couples, families, groups, and various client populations. For instance, working with survivors of war, van der Velden and Koops (2005) suggested painting or drawing lifelines to construct chronological life stories that incorporated traumatic memories and provided a sense of the past for survivors. Meijer-Degen (2006) described their use to assist clients in expressing their experience of spirituality throughout life. Working in mental health, Liebmann (2004) documented using lifelines in group art therapy to assist with introductions, show important events in group members’ lives, help group members understand each other, and generate interest within the group. Many authors have used lifelines, or variations of them, with children and/or adolescents (Carroll & Ribas, 2008; Coleman, 1998; Hinz, 2003; Hobday & Ollier, 1998; Kahn, 1999; Newsome, 2003; Riley, 1994, 1999; Robbins, 1994; Ross, 1997; Rubin, 2005b; Tracz & Gehart-Brooks, 1999). They have been used with adults (Brown, 1970; Fausek, 1997; Fitzpatrick, 2002; Ford, 1990; Frings Keyes, 1983; Gladding, 1998, 2012; Hass-Cohen, 2008a; Hoshino & Cameron, 2008; Landgarten, 1981; Liebmann, 2004, 2012; Martin, 1997, 2003; Meijer-Degen, 2006; Miller, 1993; Rappaport, 2009; Rhyne, 1973; Ricco, 2007; Robbins, 1994; Ross, 1997; Rubin, 2005a, 2010; Silverstone, 1991; Thornton, 1990; Tracz & Gehart-Brooks, 1999; van der Velden & Koops, 2005). Also, older adults have benefited from their use (Alders Pike, 2013; Bergland, 1982; Martin, 2003; Ravid-Horesh, 2004; Woolhiser Stallings, 2010). This literature documented the use of expressive forms of drawing and painting. Several authors also mentioned the use of collage (Alders Pike, 2013; Carroll & Ribas, 2008; Landgarten, 1981; Liebmann, 2004; Riley, 1994, 1999; Woolhiser Stallings, 2010). Due to the techniques employed, all of the lifelines, and their variations, in the above-referenced examples would have been created in two dimensions. However, there is at least one example of a three-dimensional lifeline activity documented in art therapy literature. Although Buchalter (2004) did not provide a case example, her project ideas included a “cardboard tube time line” (p. 144) where clients draw significant times in their lives on the cardboard tube, working from the bottom upward.

Three-dimensional lifelines — Sculptural lifelines

Liebmann (2004), a well-known author of art therapy literature, argued that for some people working three-dimensionally is more appealing than working two-dimensionally. She also stated that “three-dimensional work provides opportunities for expression not afforded by two-dimensional pictures” (p. 137).
Following are some notes regarding the construction of three-dimensional lifelines—termed sculptural lifelines—that are based on my experience using this technique with clients in therapy.

**Construction**

Sculptural lifelines can be constructed during art psychotherapy with degrees of both unconscious and conscious actions; they may involve contemplation about construction techniques, some planning, concentration, and remembering life events with their associated emotions. These actions of planning, attention, and problem-solving are aspects of higher cortical thinking (Hass-Cohen, 2008b). Therapeutic work with higher cortical thinking can be a source of changing neuroplastic patterns in the brain and can build new neuroplastic pathways (Ray, Ullmann, & Francis, 2013).

**Construction verbalizations**

Some of my clients instinctively talked about their sculptural lifelines during construction, while others were quieter. When clients spoke by their own volition, the discussion during and after construction often focused on design, construction techniques, and symbolic representations. Occasionally this discussion was prompted by a broad, open question that I asked if the clients had sat quietly with their completed construction for some time.

**Construction duration**

Construction of sculptural lifelines occurred during a single, or up to four, one-hour sessions. During my one-day therapeutic groups some constructions were completed in an hour, while others took up to four hours to complete. Similarly, Ricco (2007) found that there was sometimes insufficient time for two-dimensional lifelines to be completed during a session. Riley (1999) stated that two-dimensional lifelines required two to three sessions to complete, while van der Velden and Koops (2005) stated that three or four sessions were needed, and Meijer-Degen (2006) stated that it could take several sessions. Even though Bergland’s (1982) groups met weekly and worked on their two-dimensional lifelines for four months, Bergland felt that the complexity of the material warranted more time. During the course of therapy my clients sometimes made a number of sculptural lifelines using different construction techniques.

**Construction techniques**

There are multitudes of possible construction techniques for sculptural lifelines. Prior to beginning construction, it was rare for one of my clients to draft a two-dimensional plan or to make notes regarding the color representations they planned to use. In my sculptural lifeline therapeutic groups, people sometimes assisted one another to overcome construction challenges regarding structural components. The common orientations of sculptural lifelines included vertical, horizontal, diagonal, curved, radiating (to/from center), continuous (no end), and hanging. Sometimes another lifeline was attached to the principal sculptural lifeline to represent an attachment to a significant other, such as a partner in Figure 2.

Liebmann (2004) believed that additional insights may occur due to reflecting on construction processes in art therapy. I have witnessed various techniques being employed to construct sculptural lifelines, including using a branch, items strung on elastic or twine, clay, buttons attached to fabric, a cardboard core, objects grouped together, skewered objects and pieces of paper on which significant life events are recorded, images added to a number of plastic tubs attached to each other, items woven and attached to netting, and popsicle sticks joined to form a ladder or bridge with adornments attached.

In her chapter on art activities and materials, Wadeson (2000) wrote how wrapping can be a soothing, repetitious action. When this technique has been used in constructing sculptural lifelines, my clients have commented that wrapping helped them experience the activity in a physical way, and that the repetitiveness resulted in them being mindful, thoughtful, meditative, calmer, or soothed. Some of these comments were similar to the experiences of a woman I worked with who used the wrapping technique in therapeutic doll-making (Stace, 2014).

**Tendencies**

Many of my clients commented that reflecting on, and symbolically representing, meaningful periods of their lives was a new experience for them. This was congruent with Liebmann’s (2004) thought that the lifeline activity provided perspective as people were enabled...
to “stand back and look at their lives as a whole” (p. 92). I have noticed that when cardboard cores, cylinders, or tree branches are chosen for the foundation of sculptural lifelines, it was generally because they were perceived as a ready-made construction on which to depict life, or because they resembled a structural foundation and conveyed a sense of strength, sturdy-ness, or history. One client said that he immediately connected the concept of a sculptural lifeline with Trajan’s Column in Rome, Italy, where history was depicted on the freestanding column in a spiral bas-relief. When tree branches are chosen for the foundation of sculptural lifelines, I have found that often life, nature, or growth are discussed. It is possible that other people may conceive similar associations to those mentioned, which may inform or underpin the foundation of their sculptural lifelines’ construction.

As illustrated in the examples (Figures 1, 2, and 3), the majority of my clients began their sculptural lifelines with something to represent the beginning of their lives—an umbilical cord, birth, infancy, or pre-memory. This was often represented with a length of ribbon, yarn or twine, a toggle, and/or color. “Growing up” was also often represented and spoken about, both in terms of chronological age as well as life experience. Just as van der Velden and Koops (2005) noted, many of my clients assigned colors to represent emotions pertaining to periods in their lives. They also used color to represent life events and stages.

Although I did not direct that the future be included, it was occasionally depicted, usually as a section at the end of the sculptural lifeline as can be seen.
in the examples. Sometimes that section was used to contemplate the future or was intended to be worked on in the future. Many authors have mentioned the direction or suggestion that two-dimensional lifelines, and their variations, continue into the future (Bergland, 1982; Brown, 1970; Carroll & Ribas, 2008; Coleman, 1998; Frings Keyes, 1983; Gladding, 1998, 2012; Landgarten, 1981; Liebmann, 2004; Miller, 1993; Newsome, 2003; Rappaport, 2009), and death (Bergland, 1982; Frings Keyes, 1983; Miller, 1993). Some people I worked with explained that they joined their sculptural lifelines at the beginning and the end because they believed in reincarnation. Correspondingly, a participant in Liebmann’s (2004) “Friday Group” also believed in reincarnation and he depicted his two-dimensional lifeline in a circular shape.

Once completed, often my clients spontaneously explained the meanings in their sculptural lifelines without being asked to do so. Their explanations generally incorporated representations of significant life situations, as well as significant people, and deaths of significant people and pets. Occasionally clients chose not to talk about particular symbols or parts, and they sometimes commented that they may talk about them at another time.

**Potential limitations**

In a previous article (Stace, 2011) I highlighted how symptoms manifesting from illness and medication can potentially impact a client’s ability to engage with art-making. One similar example from the literature is Bergland (1982) who assisted group participants who had a physical impediment or mild confusion with their two-dimensional lifelines. Occasionally people may present with symptoms that could potentially impact the construction or conceptualization of their sculptural lifeline, such as hand tremors, cognitive decline, or difficulty accessing autobiographical memories. In instances of hand tremors and mild cognitive decline, I have found that symptoms did not overly limit, or disrupt, those people’s ability to engage with the construction, conceptualization, or reflection on the representations in their sculptural lifelines. However, it is possible that for some people their symptoms could potentially have a negative impact on their ability to engage with this activity. For instance, if a person has difficulty accessing their autobiographical memories that person may have some difficulty with their lifeline. However, Hass-Cohen (2008a) maintained that the experience of making a timeline may assist people in those circumstances to facilitate a cohesive life narrative and it may also be a positive experience for them.

**Deviations**

Usually people who feel that they are not very creative are able to conceptualize and execute their sculptural lifeline. However, even though several examples of sculptural lifelines were shown and other construction ideas were provided, one participant in a therapeutic group I held for carers over 70 years old felt unable to work three-dimensionally. Instead he drew his lifeline with a graphite pencil, which illustrates how working three-dimensionally may not appeal to some people. It is possible that some people may begin their lifelines with their current age and work backward, just as Hinz (2003) directed children and adolescents to do. Ryhne (1973) maintained that “life-times” could begin from any moment in life and that it was unnecessary for them to be linear, or for the time sequences to be separated (p. 129). It is also conceivable that rather than depicting events chronologically, events may be grouped or arranged corresponding to the person’s own inner categorization, for instance how they emotionally (or otherwise) perceived particular events.

Some of my clients have focused on a certain span of their lives when making their sculptural lifelines. Hass-Cohen, Clyde Findlay, and Carr and Vanderlan (2014) described the use of an autobiographical two-dimensional timeline to process a traumatic event, in which the timeline is focused on that event, rather than the person’s whole life.

**Examples of the use of the technique**

The following examples of the use of the technique demonstrate some of the diverse functions and meanings sculptural lifelines hold. The clients’ subjective responses, together with my observations, characterize the methodological triangulation in this qualitative study. Each client who is discussed in this article initially provided informed consent. They also reviewed what I wrote about them and their sculptural lifelines for accuracy, confidentiality, and privacy. They reflected on the content, decided whether any amendments were required, and also approved the final data.
Example 1 – Figure 1

One client I worked with said that she chose a cardboard core to construct her sculptural lifeline because she felt plain inside. She later realized that just like the chosen object she was also useful and essential, as other people needed her. She also realized that she covered the cardboard with soft fluffy yarn to represent the softness and femininity of herself. She expressed interest in that one pink thread had loosened at the base, akin to a lifeline itself, which she felt represented connection to her birth, her umbilical cord, her spirituality, and her essence of being.

The client tied black ribbons and cotton around the core to represent not only the multiple experiences of abuse and trauma she had survived, but also her grief and sadness. The final action of tying a thread of black cotton with a black weight attached was significant for her; she said, “I will always have had that abuse, but actually my strong, functional core isn’t being eroded anymore.” After hearing herself say that, she felt that her future would be positive as she now understood her own inner strength and resilience. When her sculptural lifeline was finished, she said “I’m still here. I’m the same feminine person under it all; my core has survived.” It was therapeutically valuable for her to experience herself through her sculptural lifeline in this way. She said, “I’m strong. It’s positive to see myself standing firm, solid, tall, present—I’m now a force to be reckoned with.” In regard to the softness of herself overflowing the top of her sculptural lifeline, she felt this was a further indicator that she had survived the worst and her future looked positive.

Although she had been emotional while making her sculptural lifeline, she reported finding the process to be helpful and interesting. The making and processing of her sculptural lifeline was therapeutically valuable. She explained how she now acknowledged herself as a valuable person, how her lifeline helped her to validate her sense of self and femininity, that she experienced renewed acceptance for her past, and how she had become aware of her resilience and strength.

Example 2 – Figure 2

A young person I saw in therapy likened the final form of his sculptural lifeline to a ladder. He engaged with much emotional processing during the construction phase. Hass-Cohen (2008a) stated that emotional processing could be understood as a vertical ladder within the brain, where “emotional processing ascends and descends through the brainstem, basal ganglia, the limbic system and the right cerebral cortex” (p. 293). This young person gestured to points on his sculptural lifeline during construction, while providing a verbal narrative of the pivotal and meaningful events in his life and how these events had impacted on him in the past and present. He spoke of how he had previously been largely unaware of the connection between his behavior and actions in relation to his life narrative. Allowing his representations and understanding of himself to emerge through his sculptural lifeline enhanced his ability to engage in emotional processing and regulation. Fitzpatrick (2002) asserted that an artwork can tangibly express thoughts and feelings, which can enable them to be identified, discussed, and changed.

This young person believed that his new understanding of himself would positively impact his relationship with his girlfriend. He had represented her and their relationship through the attachment to his sculptural lifeline of transparent flowers, small white and transparent buttons, and a pink glass bead threaded on a flexible, yet strong wire. Exploring these symbols was a revelation to him, as he now realized how much he valued her, their relationship, and the important influence she had on his way of being.

Example 3 – Figure 3

Figure 3 is a sculptural lifeline whose simplicity belies its depth. The maker spoke of how he had lost the connection with the joy, freedom, and creativity of his childhood, yet after completing the beginning of his sculptural lifeline, he felt happy, reconnected, and complete. When finished he reported feeling content and satisfied. Hass-Cohen (2008a) stated: “many clients report that the sense of well-being, pleasure and reward felt during and after the creation of art is profound and fundamental to their change processes” (p. 298). This client thought that these feelings were partially due to the use of ubiquitous household objects combined with a found object to make art, as these were the types of objects he used as a child when art-making at home with his mother. His description of his mother corresponded with aspects of Bowlby’s (1969) theory of attachment, which indicated that the maker had a secure attachment with his mother; she was a significant, consistent adult who acted as his secure base.
He explained that the thin white satin ribbon at the base of his sculptural lifeline represented his birth, and that each of the bread clips attached to the tree branch roughly represented a year of his life. He spoke of how the shape of the branch represented the flow of his life journey, and the nodes between some of the bread clips represented paths not taken. For him, the pre-stamped dates on the bread clips represented the passing of time and the merging of time with memories, some clearer than others. The making and processing of his sculptural lifeline functioned to enhance parts of his autobiographical memory. Hass-Cohen (2008a) explained links between the making of the pre-stamped dates on the bread clips represented paths not taken. For him, his life journey, and the nodes between some of the branches roughly represented a year of his life. He spoke of how the shape of the branch represented the unknown of his future. He thought that his past was completed, and as such his past no longer needed to impact on his present, so he could put it behind him. The colors represented experiences that he said included: “white for pureness, happiness, and peace; red for trauma and distress; brown for death and grief; blue for love, contentedness, and joy.” The stack of bread clips in the middle of his lifeline represented the unknown of his future. He thought that they could later be re-clipped in representative order if he wished to symbolize the significant happenings during that period of his life. The final white batch represented his future years, which he wanted to be “pure, happy, and peaceful” before his death.

Conclusion

Some examples of how the sculptural lifeline technique can be used in art psychotherapy have been presented. Explanation of the technique along with some examples indicate that sculptural lifelines can be of significant therapeutic value for people accessing therapeutic services. While in a safe, contained therapeutic environment and relationship, the making and processing of sculptural lifelines have enhanced people’s consciousness regarding significant and meaningful life events, places, and relationships, and how each life history has impacted on the development of the self, identity, capacity for emotional regulation, and interactions with others. This perspective has assisted people in order to accept their past, acknowledge their current situations, and engage with a deeper level of therapeutic work.

References


