

# **SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS` EXPERIENCES IN “SELF” AND PROFESSIONAL “SELF” AWARENESS BY USING THE ART THERAPY METHOD**

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## **Abstract**

This article analyzes social work students` experiences in “self” and professional “self” awareness by using the art therapy method. The article presents results from a qualitative research study involving six the first-year full-time social work students from university who practiced the art therapy method in the process of the studies. The research revealed the benefit of art therapy method for social work students at the level of personal “self” awareness and at the level of professional “self” awareness. The art therapy method is useful at the level of personal “self” awareness, since it allows social work students to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of personal “self”. At the level of professional “self” awareness the art therapy method is useful in the process of social work studies, because it helps students to understand their professional identity, identify the benefit of acquired professional skills and professional skills that need to be improved through empathic, reflective and transformative learning experience.

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**Keywords:** Art therapy, self-awareness, professional self-awareness, social work students

## **Introduction**

The scientific discourse recognizes that the benefit of art therapy is multidimensional. Art therapy helps to recognise the inner world and the world around us; to discover and understand our problems and find creative solutions; it has therapeutic potential by providing the experience of cathartic and also may be the form of meditation and recreation, which provides internal relief, peace of mind and the feeling of fullness. Thus, art therapy promotes initiation and realization of personal changes, growth and self-awareness, physical and spiritual recovery. The effect of art therapy on various social groups, such as women and children who have experienced the

violence, addicted people, people with disabilities, immigrants, homosexuals, people living with HIV / AIDS or with cancer, and other groups, was proven and studied by researchers not for one decade (Kriukeliene, 2009; Malchiodi, 2007). Meanwhile, the scientific discourse focused on the art therapy method use in educating the self-awareness skills of future support specialists including social work students is open and new for scientific research. Researchers are unanimous that self-awareness of social workers is an important dimension of the expression of professional competence (Kondrat, 1999; Heydt, Sherman, 2005; Yan, Wong, 2005; Urdang, 2010). Thus, self-awareness through the training method of art therapy can be useful in the process of social work studies, since it allows the future social workers to analyze their feelings, motivation, beliefs, behaviour, values and experiences that are important not only in the process of designing interpersonal relationships with a client, but also in the context of personal and professional development. The relevance of art therapy method practice in educating self-awareness skills of future support specialists (including social work students) was revealed by national and international researches. Hensel and etc. (2012) showed nursing students` possibilities in self-awareness by practising the art therapy method in the process of studying. Vosyliene (2012) analyzed the experiences of students from social work and social pedagogy study programs in college who were using the art therapy method in practice. Wang, Yorks (2012) revealed the benefits of art therapy for students designing professional career. However, analysis of the current literature and research shows that there is still a lack of systematic education researchers focused on the art therapy method use in the process of social work studies, which develops self-awareness skills of social work students in the context of personal improvement and development of professional competence.

**The research question** - what are the benefits of art therapy method for social work students at the levels of “self” and professional “self” awareness?

**The aim** - to reveal social work students experiences of self-awareness using the art therapy method in the process of social work studies.

## Methodology

**Sample.** A purposeful sampling strategy was employed. The research involved six the first-year full-time social work students from university who practiced the art therapy method in the process of studies. The research participants were selected according to the following criteria: 1. research participants had to be the first-year full-time social work students from university; 2. research participants had to be practiced the art therapy method in the process of studies.

**Methods.** A qualitative research strategy was used in the research. A semi-structured interview method was applied. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to understand the informants' views, attitudes, opinions and experiences (Partington, 2001). The obtained data was analyzed using content analysis, which includes four steps (Zydzianaite, 2005): 1) reading of the text thorough delineation of essential elements which reflect the phrases, sentences, words, directly linked to the phenomenon; 2) exclusion of notional elements in text; 3) grouping notional elements into categories/subcategories; 4) integrating categories into the context of the analyzed phenomena and describing the content of the categories.

**Tool.** Interview questions related to research question (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Connection between research question and interview questions**

Interview Questions	Research questions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why is self-awareness important for the future social worker?</li> <li>• What have you discovered analyzing the self-portrait painted by yourself?</li> <li>• What have you discovered analyzing the self-portrait painted by yourself as a future social worker?</li> </ul>	<p>What are the benefits of art therapy method for social work students at awareness levels of “self” and “professional self”?</p>

**Ethics.** This qualitative study was carried out by respecting the rights of study participants and working in accordance with the principles of research ethics as delineated by Howe, Moses (1999). The study participants were informed about the purpose of the study and research data collection methods, and they were guaranteed that they would not be harmed (such as by avoiding personal questions that could harm the subjects). All participants agreed to participate voluntarily in the study and confidentiality was guaranteed (participants were informed that participation in the study and their data will not be used against them in the future). In order to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of the study participants, their names were coded with letters from A to F.

## Findings

**The importance of self-awareness for future social worker.** Data analysis showed up two qualitative categories, which revealed the relevance of self-awareness in the context of career and professional identity formation of future social workers, i.e.: self-awareness – an assumption to solve social work problems and self-awareness – a condition to form the professional identity of the social worker (Table 2).

**Table 2. The importance of self-awareness for future social worker**

Subcategory	Category
Assessment of client`s psychosocial situation	SELF-AWARENESS – AN ASSUMPTION TO SOLVE SOCIAL WORK PROBLEMS
Identification of client`s problem	

Practice of adequate intervention strategies	SELF-AWARENESS – A CONDITION TO FORM THE PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY OF SOCIAL WORKER
Possibilities to practice professional skills and abilities	
Identification of professional expectations	
Self-reflection of professional values	
Opportunities for self-realization	

**Category. Self-awareness - an assumption to solve social work problems.** This category reveals the relevance of social work students` self-awareness in social work problem-solving. Future social workers linked self-awareness to three components of social problem-solving: assessment of client's psychosocial situation, identification of client's problem and practice of adequate intervention strategies. The first component of social problem-solving is the assessment of client's psychosocial situation. Social work students linked self-awareness to the skills of client's psychosocial situation assessment. Research participants declared that self-awareness not only helps to know other people, but at the same time the skills of self-awareness could be transformed into practical action, working with a client at individual level: "... *Knowing yourself, knowing, where to look and what kind of nuances, you may notice those nuances in another man. And then, it is easier to judge about a person and easier to notice his deeper qualities*" (D). Thus, social work students` personal self-awareness allows them to unfold their empathy and at the same time self-awareness promotes expression of their professional knowledge. The second component of social problem-solving is identification of client's problem. Research participants associated self-awareness with skills of client`s problem identification. Social work students affirmed that self-awareness helps to understand and analyze other people's problems. Research participants also emphasized the importance of personal problems analysis skills in the context of self-awareness: "*If I do not know me, it will be difficult to analyze the problems of other human. If I am not able to analyze my problem, I will not be able to analyze the problems of other human*" (A). So it can be assumed, that social work students` personal self-awareness allows to reflect their personal problems and develop social problem-solving skills. The third component of social problem-solving is practice of adequate intervention strategies. Future social workers linked self-awareness with appropriate choice and use of problem-solving techniques. Research participants declared that self-awareness helps to understand not only the client, his problem or the situation, but also find appropriate ways to help: "*Self-awareness is important for revealing another person in the process of help. Only knowing yourself you can help others to reveal themselves and look for ways to help*" (E). Other participants of the research associated self-awareness with creative problem-solving. Social work students stated that personal self-awareness helps to find creative

solutions that can help to solve problems of clients. Similar trends are revealed by Segal and etc. (2010), who state that part of social worker's self-awareness is understanding one's own personal problems and biases, and addressing them so that they do not interfere in work with clients.

**Category. Self-awareness – a condition to form the professional identity of social worker.** This category represents importance of social work students' self-awareness in the context of social worker's professional identity formation. The context of future social worker's professional identity incorporates four dimensions of professional "self" awareness: possibilities to practice professional skills and abilities, identification of professional expectations, self-reflection of professional values and opportunities for self-realization. The first dimension of professional "self" awareness is possibility to practice professional skills and abilities. The participants of research related self-awareness with the expression of professional competence. Social work students reported that self-awareness creates opportunities to evaluate their professional skills and abilities. Research participants linked professional skills with the effective and efficient problem-solving: *"If you do not know yourself, you do not know, what you can and what you can do. Then you act in the ordinary way, and do not try to look deeper into the problem and to solve it"* (F). Thus, self-awareness enables social work students to identify their professional "self", which is important in the context of development professional skills and abilities. The second dimension of professional "self" awareness is identification of professional expectations. Social work students' associated professional expectations with awareness of various client groups and social care institutions, which creates preconditions for future social workers to work in one's calling and listening to their intrinsic and extrinsic motivation: *"... if you hate children or always disagree with them, how can you work with children? Also, if you are against something and cannot change it, then it is very important. Then you will provide poor quality social services"* (B). This means that self-awareness of social work students helps them to define their professional expectations, which are inseparable from the formation of professional identity. The third dimension of professional "self" awareness is self-reflection of professional values. The participants of research linked self-awareness with self-reflection possibilities of professional values. Social work students reported that self-awareness enabled them to identify, understand, analyze and evaluate their attitudes and beliefs, which are an integral part of the professional identity formation: *"Self-awareness is essential for the social worker. If he has prejudices, he can reflect on causes and why those prejudices arose, or to work with himself"* (C). Thus, self-awareness of social work students enables them to identify the aspects of their professional "self" through the reflection of professional values. The

fourth dimension of professional “self” awareness is opportunities for self-realization. Social work students reported that self-awareness was important because it allowed them to disclose and to highlight their positive qualities: “... *It is important to know yourself so that you can realize your potential and uncover your strengths*” (D). This means that self-awareness of social work students can be precondition for professional self-realization which lets to integrate positive personal qualities and experiences into the field of social work practice. Similar trends are also reflected by Cournoyer (2000), who states if social workers lack self- awareness, they may unwittingly enact emotional or behavioral patterns that harm the very people you hope to help. In addition Heydt, Sherman (2005) emphasize that the more consciously aware social workers are of how their own beliefs, perceptions, and behaviors impact their professional relationship, the more consciously they can choose how to influence the helping relationships in which they are involved.

**Benefits of art therapy method at the level of personal “self” awareness.** The analysis of research data revealed two qualitative categories, which demonstrated the benefits of art therapy method in the context of future social workers' personal awareness: the discovery of “self” weaknesses and the discovery of “self” strengths (see Table 3).

**Table 3. Benefits of art therapy method at the level of personal “self” awareness**

Subcategory	Category
Openness to others	THE DISCOVERY OF “SELF” WEAKNESSES
Boundary problems	
Lack of personal openness	
Lack of internal harmony	
The “self”validation	THE DISCOVERY OF “SELF” STRENGTHS
Tolerance for others	
Self-empowerment in learning	
One`s “self” and the social environment`s positivity	
Sense of creative power	

**Category. The discovery of “self” weaknesses.** This category revealed the identification of negative “self” characteristics by participants of the research. Research participants linked “self” weaknesses with negative personal features, feelings and experiences, i.e.: openness to others, boundary problems, the lack of personal openness and inner harmony. The first “self” weakness identified by research participants was presence of too big openness to others. Social work students identified themselves as an open book. Research participants stated that art therapy method had enabled them to see and understand the negative aspect of “self”: “*I realized that I had been like an open book. My drawing was like a rainbow. It seemed to me, that it was in warm colours, I do not know how others felt, but I think that I*

*am too much an open book” (A).* The second “self” weakness was discovered by other research participants. It was boundary problems. Thanks to the art therapy method, social work students noticed their boundary problems in relationship with other people. The third “self” weakness, which participants have found in themselves was the lack of personal openness. Social work students reported, that drawing themselves, they did not draw some things about themselves. Important moments should be highlighted here: the first – that the issue of confidentiality during the session of art therapy was not sufficiently emphasized, and the second - conscious resistance to one`s limitation and desire to show oneself only from a positive side to others. The fourth “self” weakness which participants have found through the art therapy method was the lack of inner harmony. Social work students noticed that they had lacked of inner balance and harmony. Also research participants expressed the personal need for reconstruction of the inner balance. Similar trends are demonstrated by Urdang (2010), who suggests that most social work students struggle with boundary problems, with their concerns about feelings closeness to clients and being uncertain of how to deal with these feelings, because they are inexperienced or inadequately trained. Boundary issues should be included in required ethics course for social work students, and in continuing education courses for social workers.

**Category. The discovery of “self” strengths.** This category reveals identification and appreciation of positive “self” qualities by social work students. Participants of the research linked “self” strengths with positive personal features, positive experiences, their capabilities and cherished values, i.e.: self-validation, tolerance for others, self- empowerment in learning, one`s “self” and social environment`s positivity, and the sense of creative power. The first advantage of “self”, identified by participants of the research, was self-validation. Social work students associated their self-validation with awareness of their personal qualities. Research participants stated that through the art therapy, they had an opportunity to look at themselves once again and see themselves as they felt”... *My personal qualities, which I had, were proved” (B).* The second advantage of “self”, which was discovered by other participants of the research, was tolerance for others. Research participants stated that thanks to the art therapy, they had found personal openness to different views. Social work students emphasized that the latter finding was unexpected for them. The third advantage of “self”, which was observed by research participants, was self-empowerment in learning. Social work students linked self-empowerment in learning with acquisition and application of new overcoming strategies. Study participants said that the art therapy method had allowed them to overcome personal resistance and opposition to self-awareness: “... *I think that the tasks that*

*encourage overcome yourself are not bad at all” (C). The fourth advantage of “self”, identified by research participants, was one’s “self” and social environment’s positivity. Social work students reported that they tried to highlight their inner and outer positivity by using the art therapy method: “... I have emphasized beautiful things in the world, and beautiful things in me and around me, because after all there are more bright colours” (D). Here was highlighted an important point which allows to make an assumption, that personal positivity of research participants may be associated with optimism, that is extremely useful in empowering social work clients and solving their problems. The fifth advantage of “self” which was underlined by research participants was the sense of creative power which they associated with the discovery of the new sense of art and generation of new ideas. Social work students reported that thanks to the art therapy, they were able to discover and explore their artistic abilities: “I discovered my artistry that was unlearnt and abandoned, although it had been very cherished before”(C). Research participants stated that through the art therapy method they realized that they had the ability to elaborate new ideas: “When I was drawing, I was all the time thinking, what to draw, and when I started to draw a sprout, then I realized that I often had new ideas, i.e. sprouts”(C). Studies by Hensel and etc. (2012) similarly demonstrate that nursing students, who have participated in art therapy classes gained positive experiences of self-awareness, which are inseparable from personal value clarification and acquisition of empowerment experiences.*

**Benefits of art therapy method at the level of professional “self” awareness.** The analysis of research data revealed three qualitative categories, which demonstrated benefits of art therapy method in the context of future social worker’s professional “self” awareness: consciousness of social worker's professional identification, the lack of social assistance skills and professional skills of social worker (see Table 4).

**Table 4. Benefits of art therapy method at the level of professional “self” awareness**

<b>Subcategory</b>	<b>Category</b>
Confirmation of the choice of social worker's profession	SOCIAL WORKER’S PROFESSIONAL IDENTIFICATION
Understanding of professional ethics in social work	
Lack of self-regulation skills	LACK OF SOCIAL SUPPORT SKILLS
Lack of group working skills	
Transferable skills	ACQUISITION OF SOCIAL WORKER’S PROFESSIONAL SKILLS
Self-reflection skills	
Communication skills	

**Category. Social worker's professional identification.** This category reveals factors which form social work student’s professional identity: confirmation of the choice of social worker's profession and



understanding of professional ethics in social work. The first factor affecting social work student`s professional identification is confirmation of the choice of social worker`s profession. Participants of the research stated that through the art therapy method, they realized that the choice of their career had been right, because they had had an inner calling for a social work: *“... was the moment, when I realized that I was in my shoes. I did not know, what I wanted to study, but through this portrait I was able to understand that social work reflected me in the best way. I realized that I had all the necessary characteristics to give happiness to people and to help”* (A). Social work students emphasized that the art therapy method had helped to highlight reasons for the choice of profession which was related with expectations to provide help: *“It was revealed the fact that I wanted to help, wanted to communicate, to listen and hear a man”* (E). Other participants of the research said that the art therapy method helped them to overcome doubts and fears related to occupational choice and beginning of the studies: *“When I entered studies, providing assistance to people frightened me, I was scared, but the drawing confirmed that I really wanted it”* (B). The second factor affecting social work student`s professional identification is understanding of professional ethics in social work which research participants linked to the meaning of professional behaviour and understanding the values of social work. Social work students noticed that the art therapy method had helped them to understand the importance of professional social worker`s behaviour in the process of clients support: *“... You must show that you care about the other person. I cannot be like a person to whom he had come, told his problem and can go”* (F). Other participants of the research noted, that the art therapy method helped them to understand social work values in the context of professional ethics. Similar results were also found by Wang, Yorks (2012), who noted the benefits of art therapy in students` career choice and design, and developing professional identity.

**Category. Lack of social support skills.** This category reveals professional “self” limitation of social work students. Research participants related professional “self” limitation with the lack of social support skills, i.e. the lack of self-regulation skills and the lack of group working skills. The first shortage of professional “self” was the lack of self-regulation skills. Social work students said that the art therapy method helped them to notice the lack of empathy in negative feelings and emotions. Research participants stated that “bad” mood may harm their supportive relationship with a client: *“... Sometimes I am in a bad mood and it would be a problem to empathize with a client and I would be critical to him. I would say “what is the problem here”, or I would suggest a solution that would be acceptable to me and would try to pass it to him”* (C). Here an important moment should be highlighted : the satisfaction of social work students` needs in training self-

regulation skills during the study process. Similar trends are also reflected by Butler, Winne (1995), who emphasize that it is important to understand self-regulation as a strategy selection system that deals with problems by integrating motivation and self-control, with a range of support systems. It means that students studying social work should turn to a community of practitioners, who could help build trust, provide instrumental support, promote and develop mentoring and thereby develop personal self-regulation skills. Self-regulation skills not only help maintain an internal balance, but also allow social workers to interact positively with others and solve problems constructively. The second shortage of professional “self” was the lack of group working skills. Research participants stated that the art therapy method helped them to understand that they lacked skills to work in groups: *“I realized that I could not work in a group, and it was hard for me. When I was drawing, I drew a little man alone and a group, but then I masked it, because I did not want to reveal that”* (F). An important point should be highlighted here: social work students` need of group working skills can be satisfied by integrating experiential and reflective learning into social work studies process. Similar trends are revealed by Furman, Rowan, Bender (2009), who state that group work must be learned experientially. Through experiential learning, students apply the principles and theories that they learn and integrate them into their behavioral repertoire. In order to do so, students must develop the ability to be self-reflective about their own use of skills, knowledge, and values and develop the capacity to apply them to various situations.

**Category. Acquisition of social worker's professional skills.** This category reveals professional “self” benefits of social work students. Research participants related professional “self” benefits with acquired professional skills of a social worker: transferable skills, self-reflection skills and communication skills. The first benefit of professional “self” is transferable skills. Research participants stated that the art therapy method was useful in study process, because they would be able to adapt the acquired art therapy skills in practical field. Social work students noted that the art therapy method might be one of the ways to know the clients: *“... When we watched each other's works and listened, what it was and what it meant, there were many parts that were repeated throughout the works, and now it might be available to give this task to others. I could begin to use it and it would really help to know a man”* (D). Other research participants noted that the body parts drawn by them were social tools that can be applied in the practical field: *“I realized that every part of the body could be somehow related to social work, and what exactly could be possible to adapt providing support”* (E). An important moment was highlighted here. It was revealed that social work student`s physical body incorporates resources of

social support. The second benefit of professional “self” is self-reflection skills. Research participants stated that thanks to the art therapy method, they had the ability to think and analyze themselves in the context of social work. Social work students noted that they discovered unknown sides of themselves through the art therapy method: *“Drawing revealed the things that I never would think about, because we had to think, what to draw, and so it was confirmed” (B)*. The third benefit of professional “self” is communication skills. Research participants stated that the art therapy method helped them to discover the skills of social communication – to *establish and maintain social networks and relationships: “I discovered that I am friendly and quickly become friends with people. I discovered my ways of communication with people” (F)*. Similar results were also found by Vosyliene (2012), who note that the use of art therapy method in practical and self-lead sessions gives a possibility for social work students to understand the effect of art therapy and gain professional skills, such as communication, self-reflection and correction.

## **Conclusion**

Social work student`s self-awareness is useful in the context of their professional expression and professional identity formation. Self-awareness enables social work students to seek professional and creative ways of support, that can help to solve the problems of their clients and at the same time self-awareness enables future social workers to find possibilities, expectations and values of their professional “self”, which are preconditions for the formation of their professional identity. The art therapy method is useful at the level of personal “self” awareness, since it allows social work students to recognize their personal strengths and weaknesses. The care of social work students' positive personal qualities, skills and values, and dissemination of good practice makes a presumption for them to become professional social workers. Meanwhile, negative personal characteristics, negative personal feelings and experiences of social work students can be transformed into practical social work activities, if there will be not used the further methods of self-awareness and work with “self” in social work studies process.

At the level of professional “self” awareness the art therapy method is useful in the process of social work studies, because it helps students to understand their professional identity, identify the benefit of acquired professional skills and professional skills that need to be improved through empathic, reflective and transformative learning experience.

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