Chapter 13

Art Therapy: A Social Work Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Art therapy is universally practiced and has proven to be a successful intervention for trauma. This chapter focuses on how art therapy can be used to heal transgenerational trauma in Aboriginal Australians with a particular focus on children. The effects of trauma in general and transgenerational trauma more specifically on one’s brain, physiology, and physical, emotional, and behavioural health are discussed. Promising practices of why art therapy works are outlined, challenges and cultural considerations for working with Aboriginal populations are identified, and solutions and future research are recommended.

INTRODUCTION

Art is an important, universal facet of human expression as old as human civilization. Creating art is an innate human tendency that has been likened to speech and tool making for defining our species (Dissanayake, 1992). Expressive arts (e.g. dancing, drawing, play or drama, creative writing, painting, poetry, music, sculpting, and photography) have long been used with children to promote psychological health and social support.

Currently, art therapy is diversely practiced in a range of countries, cultures, and contexts (Rubin, 2005). In this paper, I investigate the use of art therapy for healing the effects of trauma in today’s Australian Aboriginal society. More specifically, I review the benefits, considerations, and challenges for using art therapy as a therapeutic intervention for Aboriginal children experiencing transgenerational stress and trauma, with a particular focus on early childhood.

I discuss different art therapy approaches, as well as the factors influencing the effectiveness of various art therapy programmes. The objectives are to provide: (1) a comprehensive overview of the impact of transgenerational trauma; and (2) future directions for research and art therapy design. The strongest recommendations are to: (1) include Aboriginals in the design of art therapy programmes; and (2) to consider how to best
include the caregivers of children in art therapy programmes, particularly since the caregivers have often also experienced transgenerational trauma.

BACKGROUND

I have worked as an art therapist and group facilitator for the past 15 years in both the private and public sectors. I began my social work experience in a developing town near the northern border of Israel. It was a town that had a large number of vulnerable complex families who also had to deal with the daily reality of living in a war zone. Working with very young children in extreme trauma conditions, I felt that talk therapy was not sufficient or appropriate. Instead, with a small suitcase full of art materials, I started exploring different approaches whilst simultaneously studying art therapy.

I worked with Ethiopian immigrants, Bedouins, and with women and children who survived different forms of trauma. I found that art filled the gaps words could not. Art gave colour and shape to the unmentionable and created a bridge that allowed me to cross and meet people of different cultures. It was non-threatening and allowed healing to occur, especially with the children.

Eight years ago, I immigrated to Australia and opened a private practice working with vulnerable, complex families who are often referred from the Department of Child Services, Sydney Children Services, and Foster Care services. I also manage a rural project for a non-profit organisation called “Gunawirra” where we work with 43 Aboriginal preschool children in the New South Wales outback. Through Gunawirra I work with traumatised educators and therapists who themselves work with vulnerable, traumatised families.

The work is two-fold. It involves designing programmes that can make a real and lasting improvement to the lives of traumatised children and their parents, and it involves helping the facilitators of these programmes to work through their own trauma, so that they are in a space to care for others. Using art as a therapeutic medium helps to create a foundation upon which both carers and families can express themselves. It helps to open up topics that are painful and gives a language for deep traumatic experiences to be expressed and processed.

We work in partnership. I learn about their culture by what they share and show me and this helps me to shape the therapy in contrast to previous imperialistic models which, in practice, were irrelevant for this culture. This is an ever-evolving model which is as much their design as mine. The key success factor is the relationship that is created between the staff and me. Utilising art as therapy has been key in working with the trauma experienced by the childcare centre staff and is also central to the programmes that we create together for the children and their parents as a necessary on-flow.

Throughout my work over the years, I have seen that art is a wonderful tool in which children and adults can communicate a vast variety of feelings in a non-threatening way in order to gain self-esteem, improved communication, empowerment, and emotional health. This experience, in addition to my research, has largely informed this paper.

THE DEVELOPMENTAL IMPORTANCE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD

The first years of life are critical for brain, social, and emotional development. During early childhood (birth to age four), brain development peaks and its growth is faster than at any other developmental stage (Pally & Olds, 2000). Trauma experienced during early childhood may also alter the brain’s biology and functions and have long-term negative consequences. Early experiences have a great impact on an infant’s physiological systems because they are so unformed and easily influenced. Stress responses, emotional systems,
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