Creating Alternative Public Spaces: Community-based Art Practice, Critical Consciousness, and Social Justice
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This chapter expands the concept of art therapy beyond the narrowly defined, medicalized, and privatized encounter between the clinician and the client, and serves to demonstrate how, in responding to trauma and oppression, clinical models are not the only viable ones (Cvetkovich, 2003). In order to effectively change the lives of marginalized individuals, we need to pay attention to social justice and advocacy models. There is increasing evidence across health care disciplines of disparities in the delivery of care to minority populations (Kumagai & Lypson, 2009). In response to the growing diversity of the population of the United States, most professional health organizations—the American Art Therapy Association (AATA), American Counseling Association (ACA), American Psychological Association (APA), National Association for Social Workers (NASW)—have introduced multicultural competencies to promote effective treatment for minorities. The current model of multicultural competency centers on gaining knowledge, awareness, and skills. The foundation of this model comes from counseling and the practice of psychotherapy with individuals, which emphasize active listening, empathy and reflection on feelings. Although such qualities are important, to have a positive impact on the individuals we work with, we need to consider community-based practices that connect multiculturalism, cultural competence, and social justice.

In this chapter, I first discuss the relationship between multiculturalism, cultural competence, and social justice. I then examine the importance of critical consciousness for social justice models of working within communities and how they might relate to the training of art therapists. Finally, I offer an example of a community-based art program “Girl/Friends Institute,” organized by A Long Walk Home (ALWH), to illustrate how social justice and advocacy can become a central part of art therapy services, leading to empowerment and instilling agency.
Cultural Competence and Social Justice

The AATA ethical principle (2011) 6.0 describes cultural competence as:

Multicultural/Diversity competence in art therapy is a capacity whereby art therapists possess cultural and diversity awareness and knowledge about self and others, and at the same time ensure that this awareness and knowledge is skillfully applied in practice with clients and client groups. Art therapists maintain multicultural/diversity competence to provide treatment interventions and strategies that include awareness of and responsiveness to cultural issues.

A number of art therapists have argued for cultural competence to be the cornerstone of art therapy education and training (Doby-Copeland, 2006; Dufrene, 1994; Hiscox & Calisch, 1998; George, Greene, & Blackwell, 2005; Talwar, Iyer, & Doby-Copeland, 2004; ter Maat, 1997, 2011). The recent article by ter Maat (2011) outlined several ways to “strengthen awareness of personal and professional competencies necessary for culturally responsible practice” (p. 4). The AATA Multicultural/Diversity competencies (2011) document highlights the importance of promoting cultural competence for understanding the self and the client’s worldview, and it stressed the need for art therapists to develop appropriate interventions, strategies, and techniques in working with clients.

In order to offer culturally competent services, it is important to know both the historical context within which the concept of multiculturalism originated in the United States and its connection to social justice. Developed in the wake of the civil rights movement, diversity and multiculturalism are not just about the knowledge and skills one needs to demonstrate sensitivity, develop empathy, and sharpen listening skills; they also entail advocacy growing out of an understanding of discrimination within the personal and political realms based on issues of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. This means that we need to locate lived experience in an intersectional, cultural, and systemic context (Talwar, 2010). When we talk about discrimination and oppression, we need to consider how lived experience contributes to the trauma discourse, since issues of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation are directly linked to the intergenerational transmission of the past into the present, as represented by such issues as slavery, harassment, violence, and the cultural memory of trauma. In order to effectively address issues surrounding culture and competence, we need to examine what we mean by culture, so that we do not essentialize the individual experiences of the people we serve.

Conceptually, the term “culture” has often been relegated to simplistic categories of ethnicity and behavior, running the risk of making culture a static concept and objectifying minorities on the basis of race, appearance, language, nationality, gender, religion, and sexual orientation (Kumagai & Lypson, 2009), thus reinforcing the status quo. My goal in this chapter is not to dismiss the calls for cultural competence, but rather to urge a “critical consciousness”—an understanding of race, class, gender, and sexuality as reflections of the systems of power and subordination within which we all function. Such a stance is important not only for being culturally competent art therapists, but also for the ones who embody the role of social justice in our work with...
minority clients. This means that art therapists are concerned with the individual’s social identity as well as his or her personal story. In this way, we form a collaboration that promotes cultural awareness, working within the boundaries of the personal and the political. As hooks (1989) stated, naming one’s personal pain is insufficient, for we can only make change when it is linked to the “overall education for critical consciousness of collective political resistance” (p. 32).

The social justice paradigm means using “social advocacy and activism as a means to address inequitable social, political, and economic conditions that impede the academic, career, and personal/social development of individuals, families, and communities” (Ratt, 2009, p. 160). In this sense, human development does not simply relate to affect, behavior, or cognitive development; it also includes the culture within which individuals are socialized. When we work with people from marginalized communities, we need to take into account how issues arising from race, class, and gender have historically shaped their development. As such, a critical viewpoint is important if art therapy is to complicate its theoretical basis.

**Critical Approaches to Art Therapy: Developing Critical Consciousness in Art Therapists**

The term “critical” here entails a challenge to the passive acceptance of established frameworks by enquiring into their limitations and contradictions, and understanding how the theories and frameworks that inform them also serve inequality and injustice. It is important that art therapists recognize the prevailing power structures, so we can be instrumental in reducing the client’s entrapment in systems of domination and dependence (Lévesque, 2007).

In the United States, art therapy has, for the most part, been shaped by psychology, which favors individualism and quantitative methods of research. Leaning toward the natural sciences, psychology has endorsed positivism in a “search for universals, for norms of emotional life and behavior, and for modes of treatment for individuals who deviate from these norms” (Watkins & Shulman, 2008, p. 4). In the past decade, some psychologists and counselors have embraced critical theory to advocate for social justice. Critiquing the universalizing nature of psychology, they challenge the passive acceptance of the naturalness of human development, diagnosis, personality structures, and forms of abnormality. They support reexamining the epistemological structures of psychological theory, and they stress the need to take into account the power structures that promote entrapment and dependence among consumers of mental health (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 2001). In similar ways, art therapists are beginning to question the epistemological framework of art therapy (such as Frosting, 2011; Hogan, 1997; Lévesque, 2007; Whitaker, 2005), increasingly recognizing the psychosocial wellness of people who disturb the status quo.

As practicing art therapists and educators, we have an obligation to understand and evaluate the assumptions upon which art therapy has been practiced. If the goal is to provide the resources and tools that enable and empower our clients in and outside of the art therapy encounter, we need to understand the social, cultural, political, and economic influences that affect client care and treatment (Lévesque, 2007). In such
an approach, the client is the expert, and as such the art therapy encounter becomes the space where histories, memories, and identities are explored. The cultural work of the art therapist is to consistently help clients increase awareness, re-inscribe their personal narratives, and destabilize the socially imposed identities that are a result of cultural marginalization, oppression, or mental health stigma. As art therapists, it is our responsibility to raise awareness, correct power imbalances, and, when necessary, be advocates for social justice for our clients.

Developing Critical Consciousness: Working with People

The term “critical consciousness” is often confused with critical thinking. According to Kumagai and Lypson (2009), critical thinking involves analysis and evaluation of the client’s family history and functioning level, and then the development of a diagnosis for treatment planning. It is a cognitive process that helps practitioners improve their clinical skills and decisions, but critical consciousness is the ability to perceive social, political, and economic oppression. The term critical consciousness, coined by Paulo Freire (1970), suggests that individuals live in a relational world, not a vacuum. For him, true social justice is when political action is taken with people who are oppressed. Developing critical consciousness involves acknowledging the link between trauma, oppression, power, privilege, and the historical inequities embedded in social relationships.

From a critical thinking perspective, art therapists acknowledge that the client has been affected by one or more intersectional markers of difference—and the resulting trauma from racism, classism, gendered violence, or sexism—but a critical consciousness model entails first acknowledging the historical inequities that have shaped lived experience, then finding ways to get our clients to understand their social entrapment within cultural systems of power, and, as the goal, empowering them to take action.

According to Ward (2007), critical consciousness is about “knowing and learning how to interpret one’s own experience, trust one’s own voice, and give legitimacy to one’s own perspective” (p. 247). Using a Freirean model, Ward developed a program for working with African American girls to identify issues of racism, gendered violence, and sexism. For her, the first step in working with the girls was to facilitate the importance of reading and naming socially marginalizing patterns: media images and stereotypes that have informed lived experiences. This means educating the girls to find the “relationship between attitudes, behaviors, feelings and ideas” (p. 255). The next step was to explore ways to respond to the socially negative images by opposing it. The knowledge gained from reading and naming their cultural construction, responding, and speaking up is a means of instilling agency. In this way, the girls became aware of their social marginalization, negative images, and stereotypes. Finally, the important step was to replace the negative images with images of pride. Critical consciousness, in this sense, is a living methodology that draws on the tensions between formal and informal knowledge. Everyday experiences are potential vehicles for informal knowledge; these experiences provoke us to question the theoretical frameworks or the formal knowledge that has defined minority experiences. It is the
space between formal and informal knowledge that becomes the site for a critical self-reflexive practice. As Golub (2005) argued, social action art therapy is ideally a participatory, collaborative process that emphasizes art making as a vehicle through which communities name and understand their realities, identify their needs and strengths, and transform their lives in ways that contribute to individual, collective well-being and social justice.

**Girl/Friends Summer Institute: Creating Alternative Public Spheres**

The Girl/Friends Summer Institute, begun in 2009, is organized by ALWH. The institute is designed to serve African American girls from low-income communities facing racial, sexual and gender discrimination. Based on a culturally sensitive, youth-led program, its goal is to address the disproportionate impact of sexual and gender violence on low-income African American girls from an individual and systemic perspective. Under the direction of art therapist Scheherzade Tillet, the program focuses on the sexual commodification and consumerism of young African American adolescents. With the goal of raising critical consciousness on individual and social levels, the youth participants go through an intensive 3-week, 75-hour training on sexual and gender violence prevention and recovery. Using multimedia arts and art therapy for advocacy, the program addresses the social and historical factors impacting the experiences of young African American girls, developing awareness of the importance of sexual risk prevention and using the arts to raise awareness among male and female youth, led by the participants (Gipson, Tillet, & Tillet, 2011).

The first part of the program offers a critical space for the young women to examine the intersections of their personal experiences of gender, race, and sexuality. Examining their differences, aspirations, and desires, the sex education component provides the girls with the skills and language to critique the body, gendered violence, reproductive rights, and politics of representation. The second part of the program centers on building alternative public spaces (Fraser, 1990) among the youth and school community. Advocacy takes the form of posters on reproductive rights, distribution of “got consent” wristbands, and making t-shirts for the clothes line project and art exhibits. A central focus is on youth leadership and peer education as a form of empowerment. As the institute moves into its fourth year, the alumni come back to participate in the capacity of youth directors assisting with programming. The program has now been instituted as a semester-long class for high school juniors and seniors, and, to reach a wider group of girls in the community, an after-school program has been added at the North Lawndale Prep Charter High School in Chicago.

According to Tillet (personal communication, July 15, 2012), Girl/Friends is not just about cultural work; at its core, it has a developmental model based on a trauma-informed practice using feminist theory that emphasizes reproductive and social justice models of empowerment. The term “reproductive justice” emerged from the experiences of women of color and their concern for the reproductive health of girls and other women of color. Emphasizing the need for a more comprehensive reproductive choice movement, Crenshaw (1989) developed an
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intersectional approach for the empowerment of all women, but with the understanding that the economic means of women of color, where they live, or go to school is directly linked to their sexual health and human rights. An intersectional approach asks that we take into account a woman’s total reproductive health and its relationship to her living conditions and experiences at work, school, home, and on the street. The goal is not to isolate parts of a woman’s representation, but instead to see women’s lives and experiences as a totality. Thus, reproductive justice means advancing the discussion of women and their bodies, a discussion that must take into account the woman’s community and include environmental factors of oppression, violence, and trauma experienced by women of color via race, class, gender, and sexuality.

The Girl/Friend’s program focuses on offering knowledge as a form of empowerment. The participants begin by exploring their personal experiences to examine how their lives are linked with and impacted by social and political issues. By creating an alternative public space, the program not only empowers the girls, but also offers avenues for engaging the larger school community, including teachers, staff, and the male students.

ALWH published its first collection of art, poetry, and projects done by the youth leaders and participants in the community-based arts curriculum. The curriculum begins with the personal experiences of the girls. Beginning with the “Girl/Me” phase, participants actively engage in examining their sexualized, gendered, and racialized identities during this phase of the program. The work is facilitated through workshops to educate the participants about reproductive health, contraception, sexually transmitted diseases, and healthy communication skills to address the personal and social bodies. In the second phase, “Girl/Culture,” the participants are asked to examine how popular culture and the media represent gendered socializing, and its impact on their communities. Through performance and monologues, they focus on their identities and representation by investigating media, popular culture images, and sexual and racial stereotypes, including competition between peers, teen dating, violence, and sexual assault. The third phase, “Girl/Power,” sets out to create change and foster leadership in the Girl/Friends community. Participants get to share, co-create knowledge, and give meaning to their lived experiences in social action projects. Through social action projects such as making “got consent” t-shirts and distributing wristbands, the participants get to transform their stigmatized and stereotyped identities by engaging their community members directly. For example, distributing “got consent” wristbands to male and female students, teachers, and staff gave the youth leaders an opportunity to share the knowledge they had learned in the institute. In reshaping the youth leaders’ identities, the process creates an avenue of empowerment: participants claim ownership of their bodies and learn how to speak out and advocate for social change and transformation. During the final phase of the program, “Girl/Future,” the youth leaders intern at leading local agencies for ending violence (Rape Victims Advocates, Between Friends, and other domestic violence agencies). They take an active role in participating in—as well as designing—programs to end domestic and gendered violence in their communities. The program helps the participants to critically engage in becoming the “speaking subject” rather than remain the object of sociological and psychological discourse.
Conclusion

In this chapter, I present only a birds-eye view of the Girl/Friends project. When I interviewed the staff at ALWH, some themes emerged around the use of language to contextualize a social justice framework. According to Ravichandran (personal communication July 5, 2012), an important consideration for the staff was introducing the concept of “survivors” versus “victims” in re-conceptualizing violence, trauma, and the gendered identities of the youth leaders. Survivorship offers a positive image, and one that reimagines the participants’ identities in a positive way. The work of ALWH does not focus on treatment but rather on social action. The positive relationships that are created among the participants through the institute help create a supportive community for the youth leaders in the present and for the future.

When art therapists translate their knowledge and experience into the public sphere with community-based art programs informed by critical methodologies, art making is no longer an intuitive process rooted in the unconscious (Frosting, 2011). Instead, community-based programs such as ALWH become a collaborative process, one that is socially conscious, open to public discourse, and invested in social change. When we locate the therapeutic in social praxis that encourages collective participation, art is no longer an object of contemplation; instead, it becomes a critical and communal process. When the participants move from listening to speaking, from private to public, from authentic to subversive, from personal to social, and from observing injustice to naming injustice, we have begun the genuine pursuit of social justice that enables agency and action in the everyday lives of the people we serve.

Endnotes

1 Marita Struken (1997) defines cultural memory as one that is shared outside the avenues of historical discourse. This is memory that relates to the subculture where trauma is central in the formation of identities and shared meaning.

2 Nancy Fraser (1990) argues that a public sphere is a site where social meaning is generated, circulated, contested, and reconstructed. The concept thus allows us to study the discursive construction of social problems and social identities.

References


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