The Role of the Art Therapist in Community-Based Arts Practices: A Critical Review of the Literature

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Abstract

The purpose of this critical review of the literature is to examine and evaluate the relationships between community-based theories, community-based arts practices and art therapy. Trauma and mental health challenges are widely prevalent among a diverse variety of communities in the United States. Yet, due to stigmatized views of mental health treatment and/or limited access and resources, many members of these communities do not receive the services they may need. Many art therapists have argued that the field needs to expand its scope of practice beyond the traditional mental health/medical model in order to serve those in need, reduce stigma around mental health, and promote social inclusion and empowerment. Through a review of the literature, it was found that art therapists have much to contribute to community-based arts programs, including an understanding of the complex dynamics, the effects of trauma, effective interventions for those experiencing difficult emotions and effective conflict resolution techniques. Furthermore, art therapists are particularly adept at balancing structure and flexibility while facilitating empowerment and creating new opportunities for themselves and the community. The readiness, needs and resources of the community are at the center of the model, as they should also play a large role in guiding the process.

Results

A critical analysis of relevant community psychology and community-based art therapy literature revealed the following results. Findings from the literature review were also analyzed and compiled into a visual model shown below. This model can be used by art therapists interested in expanding their scope of practice to communities. It includes overarching theories, beliefs, skills and characteristics that influence the cyclical process, which is further facilitated by goals and applied practices. The readiness, needs and resources of the community are at the center of the model, as they should also play a large role in guiding the process.

COMMUNITY ARTS VS. COMMUNITY ART THERAPY

SIMILARITIES

• Focus on group process and community involvement
• Often culmination in a final product
• Empowerment on emphasis and artist identity

DIFFERENCES

• The level at which issues are being addressed
• Art therapy projects/programs emphasis on social service vs. community arts projects/programs emphasis on development of artistic talents

ADDITONAL KNOWLEDGE & SKILLS THAT ART THERAPISTS CAN CONTRIBUTE

• Knowledge of emotions and the effects of trauma
• Knowledge of conflict resolution
• Knowledge of group dynamics
• Ability to balance structure and freedom
• Ability to fulfill several roles
• Belief in an artist identity in everyone
• Relational sensitivity

Recommendations

FOR THE COMMUNITY-BASED ART THERAPIST

• Further develop and practice cultural competence
• Broaden own view of what art therapy is and can be
• Develop awareness of other disciplines, such as community arts, community psychology, social justice, and disability studies
• Collaborate with other professionals and artists
• Educate others about the field of art therapy to clarify that the intent is to provide a safe space for exploration and recognition of strengths, empowering participants, cultivating resilience, and sharing experiences, as opposed to diagnosing problems

FOR ART THERAPY TRAINING PROGRAMS

• Paradigm shift: Embrace the integration of different ways of practicing
• Prioritize diversity in both the faculty and student body
• Educate art therapy students in postmodern theories, social justices & arts activism, and multiculturalism
• Instill a sense of social responsibility through community service component, opportunity for collaboration & opportunity for multidisciplinary learning
• Provide space for self reflection and development of self awareness
• Allow for continued development of an artist identity through providing time and space for art making

Model for the Art Therapist Engaging in Community-Based Work

Theories & Beliefs

• Systems theory
• Multicultural counseling theory
• Critical psychology
• Social justice framework
• Empowerment theory
• Research/cultural competency
• Belief in an artist identity

Goals & Outcomes

Stressful life events
Empowerment
Resilience
Social justice
Social inclusion
Sense of community

Community Relations

Resilience
Strengths
Needs
Resources

Skills & Characteristics

• Proficiency in conflict mediation
• Skills in group dynamics
• Knowledge of relationships between mental health, trauma, and psychosocial issues
• Self-awareness
• Flexibility in work

Defining Community

A community consists of a group of people who share a common characteristic or value, but are also diverse in many other ways. Community can refer to:

• A physical collective of people
• A state of mind or feeling of connection

Thus, in a community-based project, community can simultaneously mean the participants, the process, and the outcome.

Mental Health Needs in Communities

While an estimated 20 percent of American adults have a diagnosable mental illness, only 38 percent of those individuals receive mental health services. This lack of treatment, coupled with the effects of stigma, can lead to negative outcomes, such as depression, low self-esteem, isolation, and poor prognosis for those coping with mental illness. The strongest evidence for reducing stigma involves social contact between those with and without mental illness.

Community-Based Arts

Community arts is an approach to art-making that involves the collaboration of an artist and non-artist community members with the goal of encouraging people to affiliate and build their collective identity. Thus, community arts offer an engaging vehicle for facilitating social contact and social inclusion, empowering community members to share and create new narratives, building confidence and reducing stigma.

Community-Based Art Therapy

Art therapists have emphasized the need for the field to expand its scope of practice beyond the traditional clinical model, drawing from social justice and advocacy practices in order to effectively serve culturally diverse populations and marginalized individuals. This can be done through community-based art therapy, which involves community residents creating art as a form of self-expression, community development and political expression. Several art therapists have facilitated community-based projects, programs and open studios, and have seen evidence of reduced stigma and increased social inclusion, self-esteem, problem-solving skills and resilience, and empowerment.

References


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