

Conference: *Training Art Therapists for Social Justice*

Introductory address by:

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University of Johannesburg's Art Therapy in the Global South Conference with the theme *Training Art Therapists for Social Justice*, Johannesburg, July 2023

Abstract

This opening address presents excerpts from the opening address of the University of Johannesburg's Art Therapy in the Global South Conference with the theme *Training Art Therapists for Social Justice*, Johannesburg, July 2023. Key themes touched on in the address include the role of privilege, intersectionality, and trauma-informed practices in promoting equity and inclusivity within the field. It further examines the challenges and opportunities in addressing societal inequalities through art therapy education. This opening address aims to contribute to ongoing dialogues on social justice within art therapy pedagogy and practice.

Bios

Nataly Woollett is part of the core team of theory lecturers for the art therapy programme at the University of Johannesburg and also contributes to community and professional practice. Woollett is a South African therapist

and researcher, trained and registered in the fields of psychology, play therapy, and art therapy. She is a senior researcher and senior lecturer at the University of Witwatersrand.

Dr Hayley Berman is an art psychotherapist and group analyst. She is part of the core team of theory lecturers for the UJ art therapy programme Johannesburg and contributes to community and professional practice. She is the author of *Dreaming Revolutions, Group Analysis Beyond Words – The Elaborative Matrix* and has been hosting social dreaming matrices since 2006, predominantly within contexts of political and social trauma.

Nataly Woollett and Hayley Berman

We would like to welcome you to our conference called *Training Art Therapists for Social Justice*. It is a wonderful opportunity to be together, both in person and online, and to engage in some heady, and hopefully productive, dialogue around what social justice means within the context of training arts therapists.

‘Social justice’ is a term coined by Jesuit scholar Luigi Taparelli in the 1840s. It is a concept that elicits strong emotional responses. It speaks to redressing oppression, speaking out and challenging inequality and injustice. Frequently, engaging in dialogue around social justice can lead to fragmentation and conflict, defensiveness, and frustration. As such, we would like to invite that we all take care of ourselves and one another, entering a discourse where we honour one another’s perspectives and voices. It is important that at this conference, we all speak from a place of positionality where we own our voice and experience and create a context of shared learning and understanding. Kindness matters in this regard.

We are aware, as the hosts and conveners of the University of Johannesburg art therapy training, that we are white, South African women speaking about issues of social justice and what that might mean. It is because of our privilege that we were all able to train professionally in other countries.

Both of us were clinicians within community settings before we stepped into academia. The course convenor Kim Berman, and us, in our personal capacities, co-founded the NGOs Artist Proof Studios, Lefika La Phodiso, and Lawyers Against Abuse, responsive to the needs of the community and redress, such as creating jobs, expertise, training, and sustainability. These endeavours require the commitment of many invested people and this level of commitment is required over the long term. Many people on the panels and

within the audience have created NGOs and community projects themselves, so they fundamentally understand what this entails.

The South African National Arts Therapies Association (SANATA) is another NGO that has responded to the needs of our community and has been beneficial to all of us. The value of civil society and the NGO sector in South Africa and generally in low and middle-income countries (LMICs) cannot be underestimated in catalysing systemic change and forging paths towards social justice.

The Master of Art Therapy training and qualification launched at the University of Johannesburg came about after many years of advocacy and determination of a group of people, not just those staffed on the programme. The training also drew from the expertise of trailblazers at other South African institutions that founded academic programmes before ours, namely the Music Therapy department at the University of Pretoria and the Drama Therapy department at Wits University. Leaders in our field here in South Africa have been grappling with creating curricula that are responsive to the realities of our context and that ensure graduates leave their training with ethical, reflexive, and long-term abilities to work meaningfully.

Our training at the University of Johannesburg has been underscored by a commitment to social justice and intersectionality (Berman, 2022; Crenshaw, 1989) with a trauma-informed and future-focused lens. We have found incorporating psychoanalytic and group analytic language useful to deal with the complexity of intergenerational oppression and repression. The language has core concepts of free association, free-floating attention, non-censorship of speech, containing, and holding of thoughts and feelings. In addition, the use of objects and images provides spaces of “cultural experience” (Winnicott, 1974) bridging disparate worlds. The enormous social and structural determinants that lead to poor mental health in our context are poverty, food insecurity, unemployment, HIV, violence, poor access to quality education and healthcare, and the unscrupulous corruption of the State (Coovadia, 2009; Jacobs & George, 2021) and all these were exacerbated by the pandemic (Nguse & Wassenaar, 2021). These determinants of poor mental health are deemed crucial to informing curricula and ensuring we make effective attempts to meet the needs of people living in South Africa. Mental health needs tend to be unrecognised and untreated, especially with those most vulnerable, and we as professionals are required to be reflexive

and responsive if we are to be of value. Whilst honouring our own truths and experiences, we need to be open to the truths of others and, as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) warns, not be limited by the “dangers of a single story”. We all carry many stories within us and many of those stories are only told when we feel safe enough to share them.

Nelson Mandela (1994) said that “as long as poverty, injustice and gross inequality persist in our world, none of us can truly rest”, and we would add ‘be free’. While our skill sets cannot change all the challenges our clients endure, particularly in low and middle-income countries contexts, we can mitigate risk and respond to vulnerability and strengths through the way we are with others. Creativity plays a crucial role in addressing the challenges of biopsychosocial health.

There are a few pertinent questions that we all should try to problem solve and hold in mind. We need to consider access when it comes to training in art therapy and being remunerated for this profession. Not everyone has access to the education required to practice as a licenced and registered art therapist in South Africa. Not everyone has access to income to pay for services. Who has access has enormous ramifications for social transformation in the field.

As a point of reflection, according to the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS, 2021), 81% of Grade 4 children (ten-year-olds) are unable to read for meaning in South Africa – this is a test administered in our 11 official languages every five years and compares trends globally in student competencies in relation to goals and standards for reading education. As a comparison, Grade 4s in South Africa are three years behind Grade 4s in Brazil, a similar country in terms of GDP and inequity. Incidentally, the last time the PIRLS was administered, in 2016, 78% of Grade 4 children could not read for meaning (Roux et al., 2023), thus we are not ‘catching up’ over time. These kinds of statistics have grown over decades. The gap between those who are literate and those who are not is also currently growing exponentially in our country. What does this mean for us all? Having a course *available* does not mean it is *accessible* and how do we bridge these divides? This gap elucidates another concept of social injustice: “childism”, which is an active prejudice against children (Sporre, 2021; Young-Bruehl, 2009; Wall, 2022).

In order to place this training in context, the Foundation Course in Art Therapy was first developed and delivered in 1996 by Hayley Berman in the basement of the sculpture studio at the Technikon of the Witwatersrand

before it became the University of Johannesburg. This foundation course was a significant precursor to the Master of Art Therapy programme. Community art counselling evolved as a category of profession, bypassing the limitations of access to tertiary education that is still delivered by Lefika La Phodiso, parallel to this new Master of Art Therapy.

The programme aims to catalyse personal, social, and political change towards “a democratic way of life for good world citizenship” (Foulkes, 1964). Intermediate professional training in art therapy, as well as other creative arts therapies, and indeed in other mental health professions like psychology, were initiated to address the skills required to respond to high levels of trauma. This model is replicated in other contexts, especially in low and middle-income countries. Ideas of skills shortage and skills transfer are important in global arts and mental health sector responses, especially when governments do not take up the responsibility to invest in the mental health of populations in need. At this conference, we will consider what this means in hierarchical systems when professionals are not valued ‘as much’ in multidisciplinary teams, are not properly registered, and are not remunerated equally for their level of experience, skill, and commitment.

At the University of Johannesburg, our model is based on the inclusion of co-created arts-based participatory action approaches and visual research, allowing us to move beyond deficits, promoting people’s agency and the strengths of what they bring. The creative arts also offer new and innovative ways of connecting. The COVID-19 pandemic offered opportunities to find imaginative ways of connecting globally. As John Dewey (1934) reminds us, we do not learn from experience; we learn from the way we reflect on that experience, and we all need each other to digest and metabolise those experiences. Our interdependence is implicated here. At the heart of it all is developing reflexivity, not only reflection. The creative arts offer powerful ways of doing this. This conference is a matrix representing the social unconscious of the creative arts therapies.

We will pose questions in these next few days to think collectively about a long-term commitment to addressing psychosocial needs with a social justice focus. Let us be aware of our positionality, stay curious and open, and engage gently and critically with this discourse. Group analyst Dick Blackwell (2003) suggests we need to confront our colonising and colonised identities, interrogate how and when we have become raced, gendered, and classed,

and “we need a space where we are allowed to let it come to the surface”. Perhaps together it is possible to imagine a place where social justice might be realised more meaningfully and where a move towards democratic thinking and practice is implicit. This conference is a rich and fertile space for us to do this collectively.

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