

# Editorial

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One of the key aspects of arts for social justice is the central recognition of its collaborative nature that foregrounds interconnectedness and empathy. The forum of a conference in the early stages of the development of the Art Therapy qualification at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) enabled both evaluation and reflection by situating student participants as dynamic partners. We engaged the first cohort of Art Therapy master's students to collaborate in designing the conference and website to share with the art therapy field and exchange practice with leaders in global change initiatives.

The University of Johannesburg's Art Therapy in the Global South Conference with the theme *Training Art Therapists for Social Justice* focused on the training and practice of art therapy in social justice in the Global South. The keynote address by Dr Lireko Qhobela cautions us to be intentional about attending to historical wounds. Panel presentations included 'Art therapy in the Global South: Now and next' (Moon et al.), 'Research as storytelling' (Potash & Kapitan), 'Using the arts to work with refugees and displaced persons in times of crisis and war' (Speizers et al.), and 'Art therapy and social activism in community-based projects' (Myburgh et al.). A social dreaming workshop with the theme 'Deep diving towards a vision for social justice: A visual dream matrix' was a practical visualisation that included approximately 70 participants (Berman & Pule). The Art Therapy master's students published their research projects in the newly established *South African Journal of Arts Therapies* (SAJAT), which was launched as the concluding highlight of the conference. The students participated in critical evaluation through the peer review process and were encouraged to invite and engage with a range of leaders in the field. The students were asked to critically reflect on how they understood their own agency in the field of transformative art therapy practice and social justice using group and individual art practice and writing. Their comments and experiences are situated and textured to a local context and can be integrated and shared with future cohorts to enrich the field.

# Reflections on the conference for SAJAT

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By Kim Berman with Art Therapy student voices

## Introduction

In organising this conference, it became evident to me that the art therapy profession and its professional bodies have a contested position as “notably, Black individuals remain conspicuously invisible within the field of arts therapies” (Moonga 2024, forthcoming). The very skewed demographics persisted during the first four years of the Art Therapy training at UJ. While this Art Therapy programme is new and the first art therapy academic qualification on the continent, the programme is still finding its way. The sector remains primarily white, with less than 20% black student enrolment. Critical voices are vital for both hearing and amplification. It is essential for art therapists to envision identity and difference from an intersectional framework that regards race, class, gender, and sexuality as intersecting principles that shape everyday life (Talwar 2010) and what is required is “deconstructing our own positions of power and privilege [that lie] at the heart of a social model” (Talwar, 2015). Growing the diversity among the students in the programme is fundamental to meeting the core principles of transformation, equity, and access. Further work is required to prepare applicants and access external funding to develop this programme.

Lireko Qhobela was the keynote speaker at the conference, and she called us to be intentional about attending to historical wounds. She asks: “*How can we, as creative arts therapists on the African continent, begin to unpack historical wounds together?*” Nsamu Moonga further notes in his draft reflections that “the wounds of historical inequality and exclusion through such mechanisms as colonialism and apartheid continue to fester, much to the discomfort and desire to move on with the more effortless and fun things of being an art therapist”(Moonga 2024, forthcoming).

This first Art Therapy conference with a focus on training for social justice seeks to promote coalitions, partnerships and initiatives that aim to interrogate a deeper understanding of social justice decoloniality as well as identify strategies to address these inequities and promote greater diversity in our training programme.

## Objectives of the conference

As the first formal art therapy postgraduate programme in South Africa, the first objective was to present the innovative research of the new art therapy students to the field. The second objective was to network with the broader community and the field to establish a position and to evaluate where we are going as a field. The third objective was guided by the funding received from the UJ for a conference focusing on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the context of a traumatised South African society in response to the UJ mission of 4IR for community impact and UJ's call to Global Excellence and Stature (GES.4). Evaluation itself can be seen as a development strategy when it is inclusive and participatory, opening doorways to ongoing capacity building and social change. Insights and reflections from the conference can extend and inform evaluation processes to the particular needs of innovative systems change (Patton, 2010).

## Pedagogy of social justice

UJ's Art Therapy programme is at a threshold of research and practice, which presents a unique opportunity to develop a new teaching and learning programme through the lens of how we understand decoloniality and social impact. Embracing a pedagogy of social justice in the Global South necessitates the development of a new curriculum that critically examines and challenges the inherent power dynamics and inequalities stemming from a history of colonialism and apartheid. Moreover, a pedagogy of social justice places a responsibility on educators to cultivate a critical consciousness among students, fostering a commitment to social justice. Developmental evaluation is integrated into the programme design and implementation. It can also deepen connections to important values shared by those involved (Berman, 2018, p. 87-127).

In my view, this new art therapy training has added a valuable dimension to social action research within the context of arts education in South Africa by advocating for social change through community processes with purposeful social impact. Higher education institutions can create safe spaces that help individuals engage with and identify approaches to alleviate the widespread anxiety and fear caused by the pandemic. Moving forward, the arts are valuable to apply these lessons in educational institutions, offering students –

as well as the communities they work with – coping strategies for navigating constant uncertainty and anxiety.

Part of the aims of the conference presentations was to share examples of ethical praxis and approaches that can accommodate the complexity and multi-dimensional nature of art therapy practice in a traumatised environment.

### *Value of student voices*

It is important to encourage and listen to the critical voices of the students in how they experience the value of their training and the conference. All the honours and master's students attending the conference were asked three questions:

1. What are your reflections on art therapy and social justice - personally and in your training/professional development to date?
2. What do you feel has been the most useful part of your training to be an art therapist in South Africa?
3. What are your reflections on the conference, and what are the most significant take-aways of the conference?

The honours and master's students had various crucial insights into their own experiences, the programme, and the conference. For the purpose of profiling their voices, I have extracted quotes from their reflections that address some of the themes with which the conference engaged. While these extracts are not comprehensive, the selection addresses some of the themes of training for social justice, such as intersectionality, diversity, community engagement, participatory approaches, empathy, and the SDGs.

One of the speakers at the conference, Lynne Kapitan, pointed out the fundamental core values of embracing art therapy. In an earlier paper on 'Social action in practice: Shifting the ethnocentric lens in cross-cultural art therapy encounters', Kapitan (2007, p. 104) acknowledges that art therapists become social activists when they embrace awareness of the connection between suffering and social imbalance and actively commit to social transformation through advocacy for disenfranchised people. She points out both in her presentation and in the paper that to engage responsibly, "relevant ethical obligations that accompany professional activism must be identified, including (and especially) cultural competence" (Kapitan, 2015, p. 104). Her

call for “self-reflexive strategies for disrupting ethnocentric lenses” is echoed in some of the students’ responses (Kapitan, 2015).

### *Ethical obligation*

One of the honours students embraces self-reflexivity in her own positionality in addressing the question of how she understands social justice:

I cannot avoid who I am in this work, and that my whiteness may limit who I can serve (especially when it comes to language). However, I am determined to fight for a rhythm that meets my own professional and activist needs when I am qualified as an art therapist. I believe this question is one I will be asking myself again and again. Engaging in this work helped me to explore and imagine the scope of an art therapist’s work and to both expand this scope and to know when to reach its edges and avoid white saviourism. I hope that wherever I land on those questions in the future that it leads me to handle the stories of others with extreme care, sensitivity, and respect (*Tavia Viglietti*).

Another honours student understands her role in using art therapy to bridge divides:

Additionally, the medium of art has the power to bridge divides and connect individuals from various walks of life, making it a valuable tool for fostering social unity and promoting positive change in the country. As South Africa continues to navigate its path towards equality and justice, art therapy can play a crucial role in supporting individuals and communities on their journey of healing and transformation (*Vanessa Tsao*).

### **Pedagogical strategies**

Part of students’ preparation for community engagement in the first term module is to engage critically with a range of methodologies such as appreciative inquiry (AI), participatory modes of practice, performance, and accountability reporting (PAR), among other methodologies. There is a core premise that reverses a developmental framework of deficiency that views under-resourced communities as ‘needing help’. The assumption of neediness is a dangerous position that some students enter the programme with as this notion overlooks strengths and resources already present in the communities.

We discuss issues of exploitative research relationships of “doing research on people” compared with participatory practices “with participants” (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). We explore storytelling, aspects of co-creation, and co-researchers as agents of their stories. The students explore Photovoice as a visual research method to better understand the power of participant-led research (Wang et al., 2005).

One honours student (from Botswana), understanding the value of participation, remarked:

Promoting social justice requires understanding of and collaboration and connection with people whose worlds and experiences are different from our own. Art therapy can play a role in social justice by facilitating and fostering connection among people through the safe spaces it creates for sharing. It seems contradictory to be concerned with people’s mental health and not with promoting a more just and equal society. Witnessing the art therapy-related work happening in other African countries, even without formal training, was particularly inspiring (*Michelle Groth*).

A second-year master’s student who is in the process of experiential clinical placements also comments on cultural sensitivity to unequal power dynamics.

Individuals who have had the privilege of receiving formal training in art therapy hold a unique position to advance the field and increase access for those who have not been similarly fortunate. This responsibility comes with the recognition of the power dynamic it creates. Dismantling barriers that limit access is crucial to redressing this power imbalance. Moreover, art therapists must acknowledge that formal training is not the sole measure of expertise. Lived experiences, cultural practices, and community-based learning can also provide valuable knowledge. The field of art therapy can be made more equitable and effective by embracing diverse forms of knowledge (*Kamal Naran*).

Issues of race and diversity have been a consistent challenge in building a new programme that has not managed to attract sufficient Black students with the combination of art, psychology, and the financial means to afford the course. In many ways, the burden of enlightenment on issues of race and exploitation falls on the few students of colour in the programme.

Black art therapists entering a field historically dominated by white practitioners face unique challenges and opportunities. Despite potential barriers, their presence

challenges power dynamics, fostering inclusivity and equitable access to art therapy services. The presence of Black art therapists promotes cultural competence and challenges biases. Their unique insights inspire culturally sensitive interventions that address the needs of historically marginalised communities. Diversifying the profession builds trust and encourages more people from different cultural backgrounds to seek art therapy support (*Gugulethu Manana*).

Regarding training in art therapy, the students unanimously express enthusiasm for their embrace of this modality as effective in addressing some of the core challenges.

I am convinced that no other method can reach people and affect social justice as much as art therapy. Art and the image-making process are strong communicators, and working with the medium allows not only healing but also education and advocacy (*Madri Jansen van Rensburg*).

Art therapy's unique characteristics, such as its creativity, acceptance, and use of metaphor, make it an exceptional discipline for addressing social justice issues in South Africa. By embracing diverse artistic expressions, art therapy creates a safe and inclusive space for healing and growth (*Vanessa Tsao*).

## *Self-reflexivity*

It is evident that students understand the importance of 'un-learning' their assumptions and to self-reflexively engage in critical reflections with community partners that take into account the social, political, economic, and cultural sensitivities and differences.

Art therapy has the potential to increase [meaningful exchange] between respective social identities. It has an ability to emphasise and enhance the overlapping factors, minimising perceived distinctions. Art therapy increases self-awareness and self-discovery. Simultaneously, it increases the awareness of and relation between the self, others, and the moment. It allows feeling others rather than thinking them. This wide-open space is simultaneously intimidating and motivating as aspiring art therapists are becoming pioneers in contextual research in almost any topic they are interested in (*Else Roos*).

My voice is much more present, and I have much more confidence in what I want to say, but this is only because I am not certain of anything. I am always learning. The course has given me the voice of a leader and the humility of a student. I fluctuate between both, and this develops the way I think about people, stories, and what art therapy could mean in a South African context (*Denita Goosen*).

The importance of self-reflexivity has been a core component of the training. This was further reiterated by panel members Jordan Potash and Lynn Kapitan, who reiterated that the context of social action interrogates the self as an ethically responsible member of collective action. Both scholars emphasise self-reflexivity as crucial to broadening one's lens "because it allows one to pay attention not only to what one experiences across cultures but also, just as importantly, how one navigates the cultures internalised within oneself" (Kapitan, 2015, p. 108).

The subjectivity and reflections have been an important part of my personal growth journey to becoming a better arts therapist. Additionally, the facilitation of important conversations and critical thinking has also been an important part of training, for me, so far. Social justice in art therapy is a vital part of the work we do and need to do. I believe that social justice needs to start within each of us individually and then we'll be able to apply it more effectively in practice. I believe the gathering of training and practising arts therapists globally and in a hybrid fashion is a very important and significant addition to the world of arts therapies (*Nicole van Wyk*).

Being able to examine my own prejudice or assumptions and critically engage around these has been most useful, as it has trained me to be a more reflexive practitioner. We may be only at the beginning in many respects with regard to access to arts therapies and social justice but so much is already being achieved through the efforts of passionate individuals within their own communities. This is an inspiring, motivating take-away, as through little steps, we can create a ripple effect (*Jo van Zyl*).

### *Cross-cultural art therapy*

International professor of art therapy Catherine Moon co-facilitated a cross-cultural panel on art therapy in the Global South, which included participants from Botswana, Chile, Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania, and Zambia. Each



panellist reflected on the potential benefit of cross-cultural art therapy as an opportunity to learn from one another and deepen connections and awareness. Moon posed a critical question:

How do we disrupt the long-established and highly problematic pattern of treating the Global North as the producer and distributor of knowledge and the Global South as the recipient of such knowledge?

This question regarding the assumed role of the Global South resonated with some of the students and conference participants.

To experience the work that is being done in art therapy throughout Africa was my personal highlight of this conference. To share this with a growing community of like-minded arts therapists, including drama and music therapists, created a larger community and added to the potential development of the arts in playing a vital role in mental health care. I felt supported and comforted to be a part of a bigger picture. It was wonderful to connect face-to-face with peers by participating in conversations, workshops, studio sessions, and social dreaming. This connectivity, especially in looking at the 'us', was beautifully held by all present in the space, aligning with the ethos of Ubuntu, where our humanness is related to being a part of belonging to a community of art therapists (*Sandra Greeff*).

Training with a focus on social justice equips art therapists to address diverse populations' needs and advocate for positive change. Training as an art therapist in South Africa fosters inclusivity and cultural sensitivity. The art therapy training emphasises cultural sensitivity, integrating local art traditions and addressing unique challenges. This creates more relevant and meaningful therapeutic experiences for clients. The conference's emphasis on promoting the arts therapies as an Africa-centred hub of research and training for social impact aligns with SDGs. This initiative contributes to a more sustainable and equitable future for all, reflecting the dedication of the art therapy profession to social justice and positive societal change (*Gugulethu Manana*).

A consistent theme throughout the conference was the acknowledgement of ethical practice in all cross-cultural encounters. Such encounters require compassionate professionals who recognise the potency of art therapy's capacity to negotiate complex encounters. The qualifying master's students all recognise the value of artmaking as particularly useful for critically examining and stimulating discussion about underlying power dynamics in cross-cultural

encounters. The master's students acknowledge that continuous critical thinking ensures that art therapy is delivered with integrity, cultural sensitivity, and empathy.

The most useful part of my training continues to be the internship. This space provides experience working within our context that is wholly practical and in which you develop professionally as a therapist. The knowledge you gain and create working in these spaces is unique to the context and there are many places that can provide you with various South African experiences. This part of the course is practical and hands-on, and you are challenged each day personally and professionally in significant ways (*Vanessa Tsao*).

As a future art therapist, I feel that our training has been aligned with creating a consciousness around social justice in addressing topics such as homelessness, foreign national refugee status in South Africa, rights, dignity of vulnerable communities, and food insecurities. This has been addressed and explored in supervision connected to placement sites where I have completed my required clinical hours. For me, the most useful part of the training has been the focus on empathy and how this plays forward. I am developing a 'good enough' therapeutic relationship with clients. Creating this in a 'good enough safe-enough space' has been the main part of the training that is essential as a clinician working in a South African context (*Sandra Greeff*).

### *Pedagogically fostered empathy*

Interconnectedness and empathy are fundamental lessons emerging from the students' comments. When educators listen to students and guide them in their learning and analysis, students start to actualise their ambitions in ways that support their personal confidence and they feel empowered. The students understand the value of art as a vehicle for solidarity, empathy, and connection. Art facilitates storytelling in ways that lead to agency in addressing the challenges faced in times of trauma. Self-awareness includes examining one's values, worldviews, beliefs, assumptions, and biases and how these impact cross-cultural relationships.

Personally, and in my training, I connect to art therapy's ability to foster empathy. Art has the unique ability to transcend cultural and linguistic barriers, creating a powerful tool for fostering empathy and understanding. The most useful part of

my training is the reflective practice groups and studio practice, where we engage with self-reflection and clinical work with clients in our training. These reflective spaces are where we can engage with the context that we live and work in, which includes all the intersectionalities that come with living and working in South Africa and in the art therapy (and arts therapies) field in South Africa (*Kamal Naran*).

Reflecting on the intersection of these disciplines allows us to appreciate the power of art as a therapeutic tool and as a catalyst for positive change in the pursuit of social equality and justice. Empathic behaviour is vital to fostering a compassionate and inclusive society. Art therapy's focus on self-expression and healing offers a potent tool to dismantle systemic injustices and promote holistic well-being. The entry of South Africa-trained art therapists, especially Black art therapists, into the field is a significant step toward diversity, representation, and cultural competence in the art therapy profession. Black art therapists' fresh perspectives and lived experiences enrich the therapeutic process, making it more relevant to the diverse needs of the population (*Gugu Manana*).

## Conclusion

The use of art and art therapy potentially enables students to make positive contributions to their communities and society. By the time the students graduate as South Africa's first qualified art therapists, we would like to position them with a heightened sense of agency, preparing them to navigate the complexities of a traumatised society with an intentional capacity for positive impact. Social change and development for social justice require collective action and leadership that will embrace the complexity and multi-dimensional nature of art therapy practice and integrate the understanding that change promotes agency and resilience, as well as active healing and repair.

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## Conference images



Figure 1: Art Therapy students and staff at the conference, July 2023



Figure 2: Celebrating the launch of the *South African Journal of Arts Therapy (SAJAT)* with authors and members of the editorial board, July 2023