An Analytical Review of Kim Berman's Art Therapy Training in South Africa: Pedagogical Strategies for Social Action During and Beyond the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Bio

Saxon Kinnear is a registered art therapist living and working in Cape Town, South Africa. Along with the original master's cohort from the University of Johannesburg, she graduated in 2023/24. Before completing her master's, Kinnear received an Honours in Psychology degree and a Postgraduate Certificate in Education. Her special research interests are the relationship between artmaking, art therapy and resilience. She is currently working with older persons living with dementia.

Abstract

Recent interest amongst local and international art therapists in the expediency of art therapy in the advancement of social justice has grown. This paper critically reviews Kim Berman's most recent chapter in the Routledge *Handbook of Arts and Global Development*, published in August 2024. The paper summarises Berman's pedagogical philosophies of social action within the context of the University of Johannesburg's pioneering Art Therapy programme, which coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, it offers insights into Berman's selected methodology and the findings. The paper seeks to provide an overview of Berman's work, emphasising her contribution to the pedagogy of art therapy and social justice. Limitations are briefly discussed, and suggestions for future investigation are offered.

Keywords: Art therapy training, chapter review, COVID-19 pandemic, social justice, social action, South Africa, pedagogy

Disclaimer

It is important to note that I was a student of Kim Berman's and graduated alongside the first masters' cohort in 2023/24. As a former student and supervisee of Berman's, I acknowledge the inherent bias from which I may have written this review.

Introduction

I first encountered the term *'social justice'* during one of our initial Art Therapy honours programme lectures. Our lecturer, occupying one small rectangular box displayed on our computer screens, was calling out terms to which we were creating quick visual responses. Upon calling out 'social justice', I fumbled to find a symbol or visual representation of what was a completely abstract term for me at the time. I recall drawing two black lines, equal in length, one above the other: the mathematical symbol for 'equal to'. Derived by Luigi Taparelli in the 1840s, the term *'social justice'* encompasses notions of challenging oppression, injustice, and inequality (Woollett & Berman, 2024, p. 15). Four years have passed since I drew those two lines, and my understanding of social justice has shifted somewhat; however, the principle of equality remains very much at the forefront of that understanding.

Chapter overview

Berman's (2024) most recent publication, '*Art therapy training in South Africa: Pedagogical strategies for social action during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic*', offers rare insight into the challenges and successes of the innovative art therapy training programme that began at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) in February 2020. The programme was developed within a complex sociocultural context: a post-democratic South Africa, an academic institution newly focused on decolonising its curricula, and a worldwide pandemic. Within this landscape, Berman crafts three intertwined arguments: Firstly, she positions the Art Therapy programme as a form of social action strategy. Secondly, she contextualises the programme's value through the lens of online learning necessitated by COVID-19. Thirdly, she advocates

for the use of evaluation as a critical means to ensure the programme's success, offering suggestions for current and future consideration in the field. Berman's arguments are substantiated by her choice of methodology: a two-part literature review exploring the intersectionality of art therapy and social justice, as well as teaching and learning in the Global South during and as a result of the worldwide pandemic. Furthermore, she includes reflections from former students who share their experiences of both. Alongside these excerpts, she advocates for the value of social justice evaluation, promoting creative ways to measure change. The overall result is a well-positioned argument for the Art Therapy programme as an embodiment of social justice and substantiated optimism for the future of art therapy in South Africa.

Literature overview

Art therapy and social justice

To fully grasp the significance of adopting a *social justice* pedagogy of art therapy in South Africa, it is necessary to acknowledge our country's mental healthcare system and its inherent complexities. According to Kleintjes and Schneider (2023, p. 7), our country faces "an epidemic of mental health problems that stem from this history of colonisation and apartheid, compounded by present-day inefficiencies in State responses to addressing the systemic inequalities which continue to undermine the health and wellbeing of the nation". The University of Johannesburg's Art Therapy programme was founded upon its potential to begin remedying these shortfalls, providing "theoretical and professional training to support individuals affected by trauma and crisis" within what is arguably one of the most unequal countries in the world (Berman, 2024, p. 67). Trauma, as a result of, or in addition to, poverty, violence, and disease, is interwoven with our country's fabric and compounded by the extreme disproportion of wealth and access to healthcare services (Berman, 2024, p. 67; Kleintjes & Schneider, 2023, p. 7). Berman's reviewed literature "references various authors who support the integration of art therapy and social action research, emphasising the arts' ability to communicate experiences and advocate for 'good change' in the service of social justice" (Berman, 2024, p. 70). Strong proponents of social justice in art therapy, such as Jordan Potash (2011, p. 50), suggest that practitioners "adapt their skills from individual

therapy to social healing". Berman's selected literature affirms the power of arts practices as transformative, drawing the link between art therapy and social action, made possible through the practice of intersectionality and critical consciousness.

Pedagogy of discomfort

In addition to the intersection of social justice and art therapy, Berman locates UJ's Art Therapy programme within a *pedagogy of discomfort* (Boler, 1999), illustrating how the pandemic necessitated a swift adaptation of curricula from in-person to online training (Berman, 2024, p. 72). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the programme leaders were compelled "to consider the importance of creating inclusive learning environments that challenge systemic inequalities" (Berman, 2024, p. 72). Moreover, as a result of the pandemic, subsequent changes were made to the curricula, and the implementation of students' practical training was profoundly affected. Considering the scarcity of local art therapy publications in both fields of literature, it is not surprising that few authors from South Africa have been cited. Three key themes were extrapolated from Berman's chapter and are presented in relation to her argument.

Accessing a critically conscious curriculum

In an effort to employ "a more African-centred approach to curricula" (Berman, 2024, p. 68), UJ's Art Therapy programme advocates for critical consciousness, which extends further than cultural competency. These ideas are shared by Leah Gipson (2015), who proposes similar approaches in art therapy training and practice. According to Gipson (2015, p. 143), "critical consciousness expands the use of art, creating new tools to unmask identity, raise ethical questions, and resist domination", while cultural competency refers to one's "ability to understand, appreciate and interact with people from cultures or belief systems different from one's own" (DeAngelis, 2015, p. 64). Both critical consciousness and cultural competency are concepts integral to the pedagogy of social justice.

The university's transition towards a decolonised curriculum is timely and crucial since, in 2022, it was reported that only 7.3% of South Africans are white (RSA, n.d.). Considering these statistics alongside the complexities of our mental healthcare system, it is pertinent that UJ's Art Therapy curriculum

is suitable and appropriate for those who train and even more so for those with whom they work. An African-centred approach to curriculum that values cultural competency, sensitivity, and responsiveness is crucial in considering the diversity of people and mental health care needs in our communities. Gipson's (2015) argument further suggests that a social justice approach to art therapy "requires a more complex engagement with social issues than an introduction to new terminology and recognition of privilege" (Gipson, 2015, p. 142).

It is not enough for us to evaluate language and acknowledge our privilege and power in the context of inequality; we need to formulate, implement, and continuously evaluate the Art Therapy curriculum and practice, interrogating power dynamics and racial inequalities, many of which are rooted in our country's history (Berman, 2024, p. 69; Kleintjes & Schneider, 2023, p. 7). Encouraging students to operate from an intersectional framework, which allows for deeper understanding and strengthened relationships, is another important consideration (Berman, 2024, p. 71). This is made possible when educators provide opportunities for growth and critical consciousness among students in learning spaces that feel safe enough to do so; the exercise cited in the introduction above illustrates one such example. To constitute a social justice pedagogy, Berman (2024, p. 67) asserts the need for "a new curriculum that critically examines and challenges the inherent power dynamics and inequalities stemming from a history of colonialism and apartheid". *'Critical consciousness'* is described as "the ability to recognise and analyse systems of inequality and the commitment to take action against these systems" (El-Amin et al., 2017, sp).

Critical consciousness constitutes the backbone of the Art Therapy programme and is a priority among many of the academics responsible for bringing it into being. The expectation is that students engage in critical consciousness "as well as exercise the importance of dialogue, reflection, and action, promoting self-reflection and agency in the classroom" (Berman, 2024, p. 72). Berman's invitation for me to review her chapter is another example of developing critical consciousness in the academic context. As Art Therapy programme students, our training called for a responsibility to not just think, but to think critically; not just reflect, but to do so reflexively. Having educators who modelled these behaviours allowed us the opportunity to internalise these ways of being and take them into our personal and professional lives thereafter.

Training during the COVID-19 pandemic

From in-person to online

Prior to 2020, no academic institutions were offering formal art therapy training anywhere in Africa. The mountainous feat of constructing and executing a new curriculum was compounded by the complex needs and history of South Africa's mental healthcare and education systems, as well as, more recently, the pandemic. Although destructive and deeply traumatic for many, the COVID-19 pandemic served as an impetus for disrupting the way we do things, especially in academia (Berman, 2024, p. 72). In the Art Therapy programme context, this disruption offered undeniably powerful opportunities for a shift in how we understand and support the most vulnerable in our communities. Within weeks of beginning the ground-breaking programme in person, UJ was forced to transition to online teaching. According to Berman (2024, p. 72), the "lockdown amplified despair and deprivation. Understanding despair and deprivation catapulted the art therapy programme into being socially responsive". Consequently, the content and educational platform were altered in response to the pandemic and its associated challenges. Moments of despondence provided the perfect opportunity for the programme to pivot, and just as the programme had become virtual, "virtual connections became lifelines for at-risk communities" (Berman, 2024, p. 68).

Virtual community projects

These connections took the form of community programmes across three sites, whereby students offered therapeutic artmaking interventions in both novel and digital ways. What would have been in-person services offered at student placement sites were transformed into instructional booklets, video recordings, artmaking directives, and mental health care support made available through online interventions distributed using technological devices (Berman, 2024, p. 73). The result was invaluable training experience for the students and much-needed support for under-resourced communities that felt the socioeconomic effects of the pandemic most profoundly (Berman, 2024, pp. 73-74). The student voices shared in Berman's (2024, p. 69) chapter testify to these valuable learning experiences and "shed light on

the strategies, challenges, and successes they encountered while adapting art therapy practices online". The outcome was that students learned the value of "social responsiveness, active citizenship, ethical behaviour, compassion, and a sense of belonging" (Berman, 2024, p. 74). In summation, these experiences led to profound learning and growth among the students, validating "how disruption and uncertainty can be powerful pedagogical tools for social action" (Berman, 2024, p. 74).

Agents of change

In community

Despite internationally recognised progressive policy and legislation, access to mental healthcare services is limited, with an estimated 75% of South Africans not receiving treatment for common mental health conditions (Sorsdahl et al., 2023, p. 2-3). Lefika La Phodiso (founded by Hayley Berman) offers grassroots interventions that aid in reducing these exorbitantly high and often overlooked levels of mental distress in our country (Berman, 2024, p. 68). The Art Therapy programme at UJ is founded on similar principles. Recognised advocate for social justice in art therapy, Savneet Talwar (2015, p. 102), proposes that practitioners "use their power and privilege to join with marginalised groups seeking social justice", which is precisely what UJ's partnership with Lefika La Phodiso aims to achieve (Berman, 2024, p. 71). Facilitating mental health care support by trainee art therapists necessitates safe and appropriate places in which to do so.

For students residing in Johannesburg, Lefika La Phodiso offers one such environment in which to learn, grow, and develop practical skills. It is both an advantage and a disadvantage of UJ's programme transitioning from in-person to online that many Art Therapy programme students reside elsewhere in the country and are required to seek out similar community partnerships and placements for themselves. While some students are naturally confident in advocating for their modality, others may feel the weight of having to negotiate a training placement while navigating a new practice more profoundly. Arguably, having the capacity to advocate for oneself is a prerequisite for advocating for others, which is imperative considering that locally trained art therapists seeking job opportunities upon graduation will find very few, if any, job vacancies. Accordingly, additional

community partnerships are required across every province from which students are based if the effects of UJ's programme are to be felt across the country. Doing so will not only establish the programme's social justice pedagogy but also offer much-needed mental healthcare services to those who may otherwise not have access.

In curricula

UJ's Art Therapy programme was created in a collaborative manner, with Berman (2024, p. 68) describing how students "contributed to informing the development of the teaching and learning focus of the course, particularly regarding South African cultural sensitivity and responsiveness". Part of this agenda was an aim to redress the largely "Eurocentric epistemic canon" (Mbembe, 2016, p. 32) that exists in the field of art therapy, among other disciplines. Considering that many formal theories of art therapy are derived from European ontology and epistemology (Kuri, 2017, p. 119), UJ's intention for its training to represent the context in which it is being taught and implemented is crucial. In their joint opening address at the *Art Therapy in the Global South: Training Art Therapists for Social Justice Conference*, senior lecturers Nataly Woollett and Hayley Berman expressed how the training itself is "responsive to the realities of our context and ensures graduates leave their training with ethical, reflexive, and long-term abilities to work meaningfully" (Woollett & Berman, 2024, p. 16). The concern, which Berman briefly refers to in her chapter, is not in the programme's curricula, but in its cost and, therefore, accessibility. Of the 37 students currently enrolled in the Art Therapy honours and master's programmes, 30 are white. Since the programme's inception, only three of 12 graduates have been people of colour. Concerns such as this are referred to by Mbembe (2016, p. 30) as demanding the "democratisation of access", which will only be resolved by increased investment in higher learning institutions from the Government of South Africa (Mbembe, 2016, p. 30). Woollett and Berman (2024, p. 17) refer to difficulties of access as having "enormous ramifications for social transformation in the field". Thus, while Berman's (2024) proposition for a social justice approach to the training, implementation, and evaluation of art therapy is both timely and crucial, realising this approach requires just access to the training programme that advocates for it so keenly.

Evaluating change

Following the literature review and student reflections, Berman (2024) extends her discussion in relation to evaluation, somewhat detracting from the cogency of the central argument itself. Here, Berman (2024, p. 75) suggests that predominant methods of evaluation "fail to capture the learnings and increased social agency yielded from complex, culturally nuanced processes" and that this necessitates pioneering, adaptive, and multimodal measurements of change as opposed to "conventional evaluation templates". Minimal examples of real-world implementation are offered or explored, creating a wide gap in this field of research. Berman (2018, p. 88) argues for the integration of evaluation into the design and implementation of the Art Therapy programme, whereby participants are given opportunities to strengthen their shared values. As a proponent of social action research, Berman (2024, p. 70) argues for this approach as one of the most equitable and effective in "a country fraught with violence, despair, and trauma". Social action necessitates problem-solving, which is often associated with creativity (Berman, 2024, p. 69). Berman (2024, p. 69) extrapolates this link, advocating for creative methods of evaluation that strengthen collaboration in and among academic and community relationships. In her own words, "Artists and art practices model ways of imagining and creating new realities as part of their creative practices, which help generate novel solutions more productively than through a more linear problem-solving approach" (Berman, 2018, p. 69). Reflexivity is an essential safeguard in this respect, with Berman (2024, p. 75) cautioning that when "arts practices are not designed and implemented in respectful ways for vulnerable community participants, they may intensify trauma and undermine transformative potential". Kuri (2017, p. 120) also encapsulates these sentiments eloquently, expressing the need for practitioners to "make a commitment to ongoing reflexivity, which means working toward a critical awareness of their social location and assumptions with respect to power, privilege, and oppression".

The arts and artmaking have the profound ability to generate questions and answer them, a duality which Berman (2024, p. 70) suggests should be utilised in navigating the complexities of our context and how we go about improving it. By doing so, she suggests that "arts practices, providing essential energy towards healing and empowerment, can be both a methodology for discovery as well as an evaluative tool" (Berman, 2024, p.

70). Artmaking can facilitate emotional engagement, which has the potential to "enhance empathy and dialogue, which may result in the desired personal, societal, and political changes" (Potash, 2011, p. 52). By adopting these methods in evaluative endeavours, we are more likely to generate insights into the role of the arts and art therapy in pursuing social justice in South Africa, and possibly even the Global South.

Considering the paucity of literature in this particular field, an expansive terrain of research exists for current and future art therapists in South Africa. Alongside her discussion of evaluation, Berman (2024) refers to UJ's inaugural Art Therapy programme journal publication and conference, both of which serve as significant evaluation measures of the programme's success. Together, these accomplishments promoted student agency, showcased their unique voices, and fostered a sense of responsibility and critical reflectiveness as it pertains to social justice (Berman, 2024, p. 76). What remains is for us to keep reflecting on how the arts and art therapy intersect with social justice in real-life instances, and moreover, decipher what the most applicable means through which to measure their effectiveness are. Specifically, we need to ensure that Art Therapy trainees will embody these learnings and take them into future work. Thus, Berman's chapter serves as a powerful catalyst for these queries; yet further clarity and concise direction are needed if we are to achieve the social justice agenda championed in UJ's Art Therapy curriculum.

Limitations

Berman (2024, p. 78) acknowledges the limitations of her research with respect to generalisability, sampling, and potential bias. While generalisability is impacted by the unique context of place and time, there is sufficient evidence to support Berman's key arguments for art therapists in South Africa. The small sample of student voices presented was largely positive, despite Berman's (2024, p. 69) reference to student "frustrations" regarding online learning, suggesting possible selection bias. Moreover, including the students' voices through their reflections, as opposed to those of the community project participants, suggests some participation bias. Arguably, a richer and more comprehensive presentation of findings would have included these voices alongside those of the students.

Conclusion

Berman's chapter offers novel and timely considerations for art therapy training, practice, and evaluation, aligned with a social justice framework within the South African context. Just as research seeks to make meaning of phenomena, so do art therapists in their day-to-day work. As Berman's work illustrates, the value of this depends upon continual re-examination and reflection on our own experiences and those of the people with whom we work. The chapter also serves as a compelling reminder of our responsibility as art therapy students, educators, and practitioners to remain critically conscious of how, with whom, and where we are situated within our fight for social justice.

By offering innovative ways of conceptualising evaluation, Berman simultaneously advocates for creativity and the arts as compelling means to advance and enhance a social justice agenda in art therapy. Arguably, current and future art therapists in South Africa have a responsibility to assist in bridging the ever-widening gap in mental healthcare access. By working collaboratively to close that gap, we may begin to see change on a profound level. Considering that motivation for social justice is often as personal as it is political, the question for future art therapists in South Africa therefore remains: Is being trained within a pedagogy of social justice sufficient to disrupt the status quo? Will future Art Therapy programme graduates continue to implement and exemplify these social justice agendas throughout their personal and professional lives? These answers will likely become evident in the future. Thus, in the uncertain and often anxiety-producing present, perhaps we should, as Berman suggests, place our confidence in the power of creativity and hope—two of the most formidable resources we possess for redressing inequality and injustice.

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