

# **Sustainable Social Change Through Art Exhibits and Art Therapy**

## **Abstract**

In addition to providing individual psychological treatment, art therapists can incorporate the philosophy of nonviolent resistance to use art as dialogue in the service of relationship formation, social change, and activism. The philosophy and tactic of nonviolent resistance can be integrated in art therapy, as it seeks to bring two parties into equality by realigning relationship dynamics and fostering empathy for sustainable change (Hardiman, 2003). For empathy and perspective taking to be a catalyst for social change, it needs to be nurtured and protected against the damaging effects of bias or personal distress (Trout, 2009). By thinking on a continuum of individual to societal need (Moon, 2002), art therapists have a unique opportunity to use their skill set to mediate dialogue in art, empower clients and act as intermediaries in bridging the social distance that often leads to misunderstanding, discrimination, and injustice (Galtung, 1996). Given the role of the image and the creative process to serve as a meeting ground (Buber, 1923/1970), art therapists can facilitate opportunities for expression, communication, and understanding.

This paper will present a phenomenological research study that was conducted to understand how art exhibits and art-based viewing strategies can bridge the gap between people living with mental illness and others in society. Forty-six participants with differing relationships to people living with mental illness (mental health workers, relatives, general community) attended an art therapy exhibit created by artists living with mental illness. The participants were provided strategies to guide them through the exhibit by helping them to focus on the relational aspects.

Results showed that the participants found that the combination of viewing and making art enhanced their understanding of mental illness. One reason for this effect was that the art in the exhibit served as a temporary substitute for the artist therefore allowing for a different type of relationship that was not impeded by bias, political correctness, or politeness. While viewing art allowed intimate access to the artist, making art provided an opportunity for self-reflection that enhanced perceptions of connection. As a result, many participants experienced increased empathy, perception of relationship with the artist, and a desire to help people living with mental illness.

The findings of the study suggest that art exhibits when combined with reflective tools, responsive art making, and other relational strategies may be able to facilitate social change through individual relationship building. Art therapists may have a specific role in order to ensure that art in the exhibits are emotionally engaging, while mitigating potential exhibit attendees' distress, which may block empathy. By providing viewers with methods to view art within a supportive environment, art therapists can structure an experience that allows art to function as a catalyst for sustainable social change.

### **References**

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