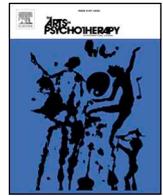




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Creative arts therapies and the military: Integrating research and practice in the service of active duty members and veterans



How can the arts be of use to traumatized military veterans who have formerly served, and active duty service members who are currently serving? To many in the general public, and for many scientists and clinicians, this question may sound frivolous, misguided, or even derogatory; given the magnitude of trauma that many military men and women encounter. However, to a growing group of experts, the arts have emerged as powerful and transformative elements in the therapeutic repertory when working with military populations (e.g., Ali & Wolfert, 2016; Balfour & Stewart, 2015; Bronson, Vaudreuil, & Bradt, 2018; Lea, Belliveau, & Westwood, 2018; Levy et al., 2018; Palmer, Hill, Lobban, & Murphy, 2017; Walker, Kaimal, Gonzaga, Myers-Coffman, & DeGraba, 2017). In keeping with this growing interest, this Special Issue was conceived as a catalyst to spark scientific, practical, and theoretical curiosity about arts-based treatments among experts already versed in these approaches, as well as those who are open to learning about the impact that the arts can have on the lives of service members, veterans, and their families.

An over-arching theme across the varied papers in this Special Issue is a sense of the many ways that the arts can reveal to the researcher, the practitioner, and the client the very deep and often hidden places where trauma can reside. As Winters (2019) describes in her paper, these places are often as much in the body as they are in the psyche. The arts provide a path for circumventing some of the intimidating language-based means of processing trauma by opening up space between client and therapist to explore feelings and bodily experiences *en route* to exploring the trauma itself. This process is in some respects unique to creative arts therapies in that other forms of psychotherapy are more typically construed as goal-focused, linear endeavors. As Bradt, Biondo, and Vaudreuil (2019) demonstrate in their paper, therapy involving art-making can look very different because the experience is *productive* and *generative* in a way that is often novel and intriguing to the client. We see that lack of familiarity in many of the veteran samples represented in these papers, and we further see how the art-making experience can be both liberating and healing as a form of risk-taking that is supported and safe.

For researchers who study the applications of creative arts therapies for trauma, the complexities of such processes can pose a challenge because we often do not know how to time the placement of evaluation points in our data collection. Looking at symptoms at the beginning and end of therapy does not sufficiently capture the multiple nuances involved. Defining experiences like those of these veterans and service

members in terms of symptoms is inadequate from an experiential point of view. Additionally, we need more data on the *one step forward, two steps back* process that typifies work with complex traumatized populations. In these ways, the questions confronting us as we aim to study arts-based therapies with military populations reveal the limits of our current scientific tools and procedures. As such, the analysis of the art produced in therapy with military populations – be it in the form of written word, dramatic or movement performance, music, or visual arts – provides a template for a science of the complexities of interactions between psychology, emotions, and art-making (Ali, Wolfert, Fahmy, Nayyar, & Chaudhry, 2019; Landles, Walker, & Kaimal, 2019; Ram-Vlasov, Goldner, & Lev-Wiesel, 2019). While these sorts of variables do not appear to be imminently measurable, there is great research potential in our attempts to operationalize the therapeutic experience through an arts-based lens.

Another theme across many of the papers in this Special Issue is the importance of community in its numerous forms. This includes the therapeutic benefit of bringing veterans together to share in the healing process through the arts (Lobban & Murphy, 2019), as well as the benefits of using the arts to communicate veterans' suffering and healing to the military community and to the wider civilian community (Belliveau, Cook, McLean, & Lea, 2019). We also see the value of community in the research process itself. As Balfour (2019) illustrates, authors conducting research on the arts can benefit from engaging routinely with military and non-military collaborators at various stages of the research and dissemination process. Additionally, more and more publications and presentations by academic experts – including experts in this Special Issue – partner with veterans as co-researchers and co-authors. This trend is essential in bridging the veteran-civilian divide, as well as the broader divide between those deemed *experts* and those with expertise through actual lived experience.

Our hope with this Special Issue is that clinicians who specialize in working with military populations will perceive their own experiences mirrored in the various papers. There is a transformation that the arts can evoke that no other form of psychotherapeutic intervention can achieve: taking the raw and often toxic materials from one's trauma and creating something tangible with them in the safe therapy space (Kaimal, Jones, Dieterich-Hartwell, Acharya, & Wang, 2019; Spooner et al., 2019). This creative product can organize, contain and integrate, and eventually be brought into the outside world as an artistic expression of the journey of suffering and healing (Haen, 2019). Clients in

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the creative arts therapies can use their art as a way of expressing to their spouses, community members, and family the experiences, discoveries, and dreams for the future that they may otherwise have not been able to express. Doing so offers a visceral form of reconnection, noted to be the final stage of trauma recovery in both seminal (Herman, 1997) and contemporary (Ogden & Fisher, 2015) treatment models.

We also hope that this Special Issue will contribute to the body of knowledge on the therapeutic benefits of the arts in working with military populations, and with traumatized populations more generally. Despite the understanding practitioners and clients have about the therapeutic benefits of creative arts, research in this area continues to lag behind practice. There is a dire need for research that illustrates, validates, and broadly communicates the effectiveness of the arts in working with military men and women, as well as research that utilizes the communicative potential for artwork as data.

We also need studies that tie outcomes from creative arts processes and outcomes to data that show the dangers associated with drug treatment for mental health conditions, especially those conditions that arise primarily from trauma (Penn & Tracy, 2012; Whitaker, 2011). In contrast to the side effects of many psychiatric medications, the correlated effects of art-making are more likely to bring meaning to one's life. As seen across numerous papers in this Special Issue, these effects include a new appreciation for the arts in general, as well as an embodied sense of oneself as a creative being. For soldiers and veterans, that appreciation is especially hard-won, given that seeking psychological treatment in any form continues to be stigmatized (Davidson et al., 2018; Russell, Schaubel, & Figley, 2018). That stigmatization may be especially pronounced for those in the rank of officer because they must uphold a veneer of strength while also dealing with the trauma experienced by those serving under them (Walker, Kaimal, Koffman, & DeGraba, 2016). One potential antidote to stigmatization is empirical science: by constructing a compelling evidence base that demonstrates the power of the creative arts in treating the effects of trauma, we will cultivate a strengths-based narrative of care that provides evidence for scientists, practitioners, policy-makers, and the public of the healing potential of the arts.

The papers in this Special Issue speak to some of the ongoing challenges and unanswered questions that necessitate research-practitioner collaborations. Primary among these is the need to understand the factors underlying the concerning trends in psychological treatment for traumatic stress in veterans, most notably the low rates of help-seeking (Cornish, Thys, Vogel, & Wade, 2014), the high rates of dropout from psychological treatment (Najavits, 2015; Steenkamp, Litz, Hoge, & Marmar, 2015), and the over-reliance on drugs (both prescribed and illegal) among veterans and active service members (Janssen, Vermetten, Egberts, & Heerdink, 2017; Petrakis, Sofuoglu, & Rosenheck, 2015). Another set of challenges involves the damaging stereotypes and stigmas surrounding the capacities and inclinations of veterans, including the abiding belief that veterans are psychologically "broken" and unable to fully contribute to society economically or otherwise (Schreger & Kimble, 2017). Such stereotypes operate in tandem with a prevailing fear of veterans' assumed violent tendencies, the anticipation of which causes the general population and even some clinicians to avoid interaction and involvement with service members and veterans' groups. The arts can be a solution to these problems because art-making can serve as an intermediary between a veteran's internal suffering and the gaze of the outside world. We hope that the papers in this Special Issue connect the science of psychotherapy research with cutting-edge treatment with veterans to forge new territory in establishing the worth of psychological practice that harnesses veterans' potential for creativity, recovery, and transformation.

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Alisha Ali*, Craig Haen*
New York University, United States

* Guest editors.