



Commentary

Make art (not) after war: The role of the creative arts therapies in the treatment of trauma

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The arts abound at times of nightfall, death, birth, war, and natural disaster, for they help to encapsulate terror. If psychological trauma is the origin of art, is it any wonder that the creative arts therapies hold so much promise as a reparative force?

(Johnson, 1987, p. 13)

In an archeological expedition in Rhino Cave in the Tsolido Hills, one of the Middle Stone Age sites in Botswana, Coulson, Staurset, and Walker (2011) discovered evidence of our ancestral capacity to engage in abstract, imaginative thought and performative rituals. Given the shape and artistic markings found within, it was surmised that an authorized healer would climb into the passageway behind a rock, etched like a python's head, and speak to the local community in times of suffering and struggle. Indeed, as the quote by Johnson suggests, for as long as we have faced exposure to psychologically traumatic experiences, we have turned to art to discover, contend with, and commune with others about our fears and desires. However, it has only been within the last 50 years that survivors, advocates, and researchers have provided insight into the sequelae of trauma, finally resulting in the creation of a specific diagnostic category to capture the most common negative consequences. The inclusion of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-III) in 1980 set the stage for systematic study leading to a leap in interest among mental health researchers and practitioners. This included creative arts therapists and cultural workers who sought to better understand and develop effective approaches to aid individuals and communities affected by trauma across the life span (Golub, 1985; James & Johnson, 1996, 2012; Johnson, 1987; Johnson, Lahad, & Gray, 2009; Malchiodi, 2015; Sajnani & Johnson, 2014). However, the science of why, when, how, where, and with whom the arts and arts therapies are effective needs sustained attention (Baker, Metcalf, Varker, & O'Donnell, 2018), which is why, 10 years after the last special issue on trauma in this journal (Haen, 2009), this collection is such an important contribution.

Ali and Haen have curated 11 articles that reinforce past insights, prompt new questions, and advance our knowledge about the role of the creative arts therapies and arts-based approaches in the treatment of trauma, with a special focus on those who have or are currently serving in the military. These articles reflect a commitment to collaboration between service members, artists, therapists, researchers, and policy makers in facilitating the return to civilian life. Ali, Wolfert, Fahmy, Nayyar, and Chaudhry (2019), for example, have presented a

collaboration between a researcher and veteran-practitioner. Balfour (2019) wrote about the necessity of co-ordinating across expertise. Also in common is the high value each contributor places on the necessity of visual art, drama, music, movement, or writing in safely eliciting traumatic memories, working through difficult symptoms, and/or moving from isolation to community. Bradt, Biondo, and Vaudreuil (2019) have offered song writing, with its use of music and metaphor, as a means of “lowering resistance to exploration and expression of emotions.” Similarly, Ram-Vlasov, Goldner, and Lev-Weisel (2019) found that art therapy and the creative process itself provide an “intermediary between subjective imagery and objective product,” facilitating internal and external connections. Art makes the ambiguous and intrusive ghost of trauma tangible. Once tangible in the form of a song or monologue, it is available to be worked with and shared, thereby facilitating understanding and social support, which can, in turn, reduce stigma, isolation, and loneliness.

There are also several unique aspects that differ within the contributions in this Special Issue. First, several authors respond to the need, identified in previous literature (Baker et al., 2018; Edwards, 2017; Sajnani & Johnson, 2014), to evolve how the arts and arts therapies may address specific kinds of trauma and symptomology. Second, these articles reflect different sites of practice ranging from the theatre and gallery to specialized and university-based transition programs, hospitals, and virtual communities online. Each site carries its own cultural norms, which are, at times, transmitted through the language, metaphors, and images used by authors. Balfour (2019) and Spooner et al. (2019), for example, advance how digital media may be used to expand the reach of the creative arts therapies and arts-based interventions. Balfour (2019) offered insight into both the nuances and influence of specific media. Noting the disappointing reach of their first social media campaign (“56 hits, two comments, and three likes”), his team leveraged the popularity of music videos, and the legitimacy of an Australian singer with diplomatic experience, to engage 28,700 targeted views of their film *Going Home* on YouTube.

Third, this collection reveals differing approaches to researching and responding to the experience of military personnel before, during, and/or after intervention. Several, though not all, articles privilege first-hand voices and perspectives. For example, Haen (2019) offers a deft analysis of eight memoirs written by soldiers to illuminate recurrent themes for practitioners. The analysis by Kaimal, Jones, Dieterich-Hartwell, Acharya, and Wang (2019) of soldiers' perceptions

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of art therapy reinforce its expressive and restorative potential. In the words of one of her respondents, “creativity got the shit of war out.” Some authors offer innovative approaches to analysis grounded in practice. Belliveau, Cook, McLean, and Lea (2019), for example, used the objectives of three therapeutic approaches—Gestalt, drama, and sensorimotor therapy—as a framework for their analysis. In a similar vein, Winters (2019) used Laban terminology to categorize and analyze data. While not grounded in artistic practice, per se, Landless, Walker, and Kaimal (2019) expand options for analysis in their account of computer-based text analysis in understanding service members’ experience of therapeutic writing. Fourth, there are valuable examples of self-reflexivity. Lobban and Murphy (2019), for example, question the impact of trauma stories on the therapist and emphasize the necessity of examining one’s own biases and motives for working with trauma and with the military in particular.

I will conclude with a comment on two questions raised in reading this collection. The first has to do with the underlying assumption that war is the inevitable. The contributors to this Special Issue offer detailed interventions that respond to the aftermath of violence. There is an unquestionable need to address the distress experienced by military personnel, and this is effectively argued throughout. However, with recent support for art therapy coming from Pence (2017), wife of the current Vice President of the United States of America, one has to question whose interests are served by shifting focus from prevention and peacekeeping to picking up the pieces after the fact. Second, it should not escape attention that those cast in the role of military are all from Western countries including Australia, Canada, Israel, and the United States with trace mentions of the people and spaces in which combat took place. Of course, this could be seen as reasonable given the advances of these countries in terms of military, educational, technological, artistic, and medical infrastructure. Yet, it beckons an encounter with the other side, with those displaced by war, and with those whose fight for survival is not given national significance nor protection. In the final instance, this Special Issue demands a conversation, which is what makes it so valuable.

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