

ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

Book Review by Sally Skaife

**Art Therapy across Cultural and Race Boundaries: Working
with Identity**

Lorette Dye

Jessica Kingsley Publishers 2017

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There is very little in Art Therapy that tackles the difficulties of working cross-culturally and with issues of race; in this respect this book is to be welcomed. It is a practical book rather than a theoretical one, and as such, is the first of its kind in this subject area that I know of. The author, Lorette Dye, clearly has a wealth of experience working with people who come from different cultural groups than her own, mainly in various countries in Africa, and in the USA, and the lessons she has learnt from this form the first section.

The book has a clear focus which is to apply what Dye calls a 'Universal Theory Approach' to working across cultural boundaries. It is called universal, because it works on the principle that everyone can relate to art and that everyone has feelings even though the way these emerge may be different according to different cultures. It is unclear why it is called 'theory' though, as there is no discussion in the book of literature on intercultural therapy.

The Universal Theory Approach is divided into three parts: Context, Acknowledge and Identity, and Identity is subdivided into four further parts: Culture, Individual, Race, and Language. These form the structure of the art therapy intervention. 'Context' is approached through creating a similarities and differences chart between client and therapist of cultural values. 'Acknowledge' is the acceptance between the therapeutic pair of their differences. 'Identity' involves exploring personal, cultural and racial identities and noting where these are insecure. Language differences are thought of and addressed, such as when it is appropriate to involve an interpreter. Art based exercises are used for the different bits of the work and tailored both culturally and according to the particular individual and circumstances.

The basic assumption is that a clear sense of identity, that is, an integration of personal, cultural and racial identity, is the root to self-knowledge, self-acceptance and emotional wellbeing. Dye's overall approach is called the Strepcos approach (it is not explained whether or not this is an acronym) and refers to a holistic attitude with the principle that the client's inner world is what is important rather than any objective truth. The book is full of practical advice for developing visual aids for a shared language, rules for interpreters as well as art-based exercises.

The book offers many wisdoms on what it is important to be aware of, as well as things that can happen, when working with someone who comes from a different culture than your own. I agreed with most of them, but the problem was that they all came with advice. It is almost impossible to give advice without contradicting yourself elsewhere or doing the opposite of what you have just advised and I came across this frequently in the book. An example of this is when Dye says it is important that the therapist is aware of their own culture in relation to that of their clients. Then, in one of the most detailed case examples in the book written by an art therapy colleague, the therapist does not tell us anything about her own cultural background though she describes the challenges and difficulties she encounters with the different culture(s) of those she is working with.

Advice does not recognise the way in which ideologies work at an unconscious level affecting all that we do but in a way that we are unaware of. So for example, there is a section titled 'You are not superior', with one of the pieces of advice 'It would be a mistake to underestimate people's intelligence just because they are from a more disadvantaged group or environment, or because of a lack of language skills' (p35). The problem is most of us art therapists, one hopes, know this, but nevertheless may act **as though** we think someone is less intelligent despite not being aware of thinking it. Listening to the 'other' and to their experience of us, is the only way in which we will not re-enact unconscious racist ideologies. If the therapist comes with an already prescribed plan for the therapy that has been formed in a particular culture, they are not going to be able to do this. Therein lies the problem that underpins the whole book.

There is no acknowledgement that the Universal Theory Approach is born of a culture that is wedded to neo-liberalism, commodifies everything and values individualism and individual freedom over collectivity and community. Although, Dye is aware of these values as part of her culture, she does not acknowledge the way they are apparent in her the art therapy method itself. Thus there is a mismatch in the similarities and differences lists that are made with clients. Dye lists her own values, for example, 'there is always a way out' whilst the client is listing her reality 'there is no way out and no choices available', therapist 'you don't need to be a victim, client 'you are a victim' and so on p.181. A further example is Dye's view on race. Whilst in places in the book she appears to recognise that race is a dynamic construct, at others she takes a more essentialist position shown by her hope for a future in which all races will live in harmony. What is missing here is race as an artificial category designed to divide people as a means to ensuring a few remain extremely wealthy at the expense of everyone else. An analysis of the economic inequality afforded different cultures is missing.

Any cross-cultural art therapy in my view needs to address the power imbalances between therapist and client and not re-enact them through importing a commodified art therapy model unwittingly imbued with the values

of the more powerful culture. Having said that, I am aware that I come to this book from another culture in which my art therapy practice is very different from that described in this book. This cultural gulf in the art therapy world would be well-worth investigating in itself!

Biography

Sally Skaife was formerly a Senior Lecturer in Art Psychotherapy at Goldsmiths, University of London. She now works in private practice.