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Case study

Art Therapy Trauma Treatment through Dollmaking in the Community

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Abstract

This article describes the use of dollmaking to address the art therapy treatment of trauma from a community lens. The author provides literature that outlines a framework of treating trauma in the community, that supports the use of somatic work through dollmaking.

The methods in the article articulate ways of working with an individual client using nesting dolls, and the community using fabric dolls, sewing, and embroidery. Using somatic work with dollmaking provides a creative way for clients and communities to process their experiences, and presents a unique opportunity for clients to externalize feelings and sensations, make them conscious, and build a new identity after trauma. The article additionally shows how training art therapists from a community perspective, widens the notion of community to include new therapists.

Community art therapy is an approach and a setting. It is practiced with cultural attunement to the context of the area the community lives within, uses creativity as a primary means of healing and transformation, and continues to evolve. Art therapists can support trauma treatment in the community setting. The results layed in this article anecdotally show that dollmaking in community can support healing from trauma.

***Key words**: community art therapy, trauma, somatic art therapy, training art therapists, dollmaking*

Introduction

One of the things that sets trauma apart from other concerns art therapists address is that the trauma itself is an event, or series of events that happen to someone resulting in serious consequences. The psychological, social, physical, and spiritual effects of that experience are determined by several individual and community factors, but overall, the trauma overwhelms one's ability to cope. The event can be one that is relational in nature, a shock, or happen incrementally. Regardless, trauma is an injury that requires healing. Recovering from trauma includes establishing safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnecting the person's trust in themselves and fostering a sense of belonging with others (Herman, 2022). Experiences of trauma include individual experiences of physical and sexual abuse, domestic violence, and rape, and collective experiences of war, violence, and genocide, to name a few.

As an art therapist in the U.S., my specialties include community art therapy and working with individuals who ha-ve survived trauma as a practitioner, researcher, and educator. In my experience, here in the U.S., traditional mental health treatment has been primarily concerned with treating individuals. However, when working with someone individually, my perspective is to strengthen the client's connection to their social relationships and community. When working with the community, relationships are also leveraged with therapeutic intention. As an educator, I see that my research and practice directly impact how and what I teach. In this paper I aim to describe the community's interplay with the treatment of trauma from an art therapy lens using dollmaking. I include demonstrations of my art therapy work with individuals, communities, and teaching art therapy students.

Literature Review

Community Art Therapy

In the simplest terms, community can be defined as a collection of people who share an interest and location (Ritter and Lampkin, 2012). However, I see community is a feeling and set of relationships among people who meet common needs and have a shared sense of care, trust, and belonging. Communities are embedded within interacting systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1974; 1977; 1979; 1986), the shared interest of the group can be varied, and the location can be a physical location, or a virtual space. For example, I belong to the community of art therapists. That community can include not only ones that are physically close in proximity to me but also ones that practice across continents in an entirely different country.

Community art therapy has been practiced for as long as the profession has been in existence, but has been called many things, such as community-based art therapy, museum-based art therapy, social action art therapy, public practice art therapy etc. (Nolan & Mumpton, 2024). Art therapists have practiced community art therapy yet have not had the common language to explicate what it is and how it is implemented. Community art therapy is defined as:

1. Both a way that art therapists' approach participants and a setting where they do their work.
2. Developed and shaped in context by the culture of where it is practiced.
3. The art therapists working in community encourage intentional creative practices with individuals and the collective for therapeutic and transformational benefits.
4. Continuing to evolve (Nolan, 2023).

Community Art Therapy and Trauma Treatment

The treatment of trauma in community art therapy is indicated as potentially beneficial in several ways. The following ideas are extrapolated from grounded theory developed from interviews of art therapists working in community in 36 different countries (Nolan, 2023). Practitioners in community are highly skilled and practice ethically. This means that practitioners in community art therapy contexts have specialized knowledge and training and are critically reflective in practice. Community art therapy expands the practice of art therapy beyond traditional treatment that uses the medical model. Art therapists are no longer bound to mining for deep personal insight from participants about their experiences. Instead, they can focus on creativity and art making while taking a community centered and strengths-based perspective. People who have experienced trauma need to feel safe. Art therapists in community provide a structure to the experience that attends to the safety of the group through access, inclusion, and supporting a sense of belonging. Many traumas happen in the social realm, relational trauma, such as domestic violence etc., or collective trauma, such as environmental disasters and political violence. It is logical that healing happens in the same social sphere. Social issues need social solutions. Art therapists working in community art therapy encourage interdependent and egalitarian relationships. Trauma can often rupture a survivor's willingness to trust others, community healing in art therapy fosters deeper social connections and aids in developing trust. Lastly, art therapy in community encourages an embodied practice that supports emotional and nervous system regulation. Humans were meant to co-regulate (Badenoch, 2018). Trauma survivors often become dysregulated because of their experiences. Art making can be one way to regulate

oneself, and community art making encourages co-regulation.

Using Art Therapy to Address Trauma Through the Body

Levine (1997) argued that when an organism is experiencing a threat there is a physiological cycle the body completes that demonstrates nervous system regulation. Nervous system regulation happens when the body becomes activated to meet the demands of a threat and then settles back into a normal state once the threat has passed. Specifically, the organism experiences a heightened state of arousal to meet the demands of the threat, and either flees, fights, or freezes to survive. Once the threat has past, the organism discharges the arousal and brings the body back into a settled, and normal nervous system rhythm. However, trauma can get stuck in the body if it is not able to complete the threat cycle. Somatic experiencing, as "generalized psychobiological model of resilience" (Kuhfuß et al., 2021, p. 3), can be used in the therapist's work to help the clients successfully complete the threat cycle by reexperiencing the trauma through somatic experiencing exercises that integrate sensations, images, behaviors, affect, and meaning making, or SIBAM. However, Kuhfuß et al. (2021) wrote,

> *[Somatic experiencing's]... major in-terventional strategy builds on bottom-up processing. Clients' attention is directed to internal sensations, both visceral (interoception) and musculoskeletal (proprioception and kinaesthesis), rather than to primarily cognitive or emotional experiences (p. 3).*

Hetherington and Gentile (2022) and Hetherington and Luna (2023) described using art therapy and somatic experiencing methods to address trauma through the body with success. Art making is a practice that inherently includes the body to some degree, and pairs well with the use of SIBAM. SIBAM provides opportunities to integrate art making in externalizing sensations and images, engaging in behaviors, identifying emotions, and making meaning through symbols and changed perspectives.

Similarly in art therapy, the Expressive Therapies Continuum or the ETC is a framework for use in assessment and treatment (Kagin & Lusebrink, 1978) that mirrors brain structure and functions. The ETC can help guide art therapists on how to approach processing traumatic experiences from both the top-down (Cognitive/Symbolic) and the bottom-up (Kinesthetic/Sensory) (Lusebrink & Hinz, 2025). Community art therapists can offer materials and processes that attend to all levels of the ETC. When clients can use all levels of the ETC, particularly the sensory/kinesthetic level, which bridges greater body involvement, this can have a positive impact on alleviating the symptoms of trauma.

Dollmaking

Most associated with play, dolls have been used in ritual and healing throughout time (Feen-Calligan, et al., 2009). Many examples of using and making dolls in session have been described by art therapists, with several benefits for both the clients and art therapists (Munro Smith 1996; Vollman, 1997; Wadeson, 2000; Crone-Findlay,2003; Stace, 2014; and Royster, 2021). "One benefit from making dolls in groups is the enhancement of a person's sense of self with the help of others who provide feedback," (Feen-Calligan et al, 2009, p. 172). Dolls that ta-ke on a human-like form can become mi-rrors and help someone to solidify their sense of identity. "[F]or clients who have complex trauma histories, therapeutic doll making can help to facilitate reparation and reintegration, among other diverse functions" (Stace, 2014, p.12). Royster (2022) noted that doll making can be communally therapeutic, empowering through community resistance, as well as fostering healthy grief through honoring and remembering people who died by gun violence. The use of dollmaking in community art therapy to expand resilience after experiencing trauma has many potential benefits to participants. Estes (1992) contended that dolls are reminders of what one does not see but what one feels. Using the doll as an externalized body, the community participant can explore bodily sensations and emotions, encouraging identification and dialogue with the body, setting up a partnership with the body instead of seeing it as contentious. The doll provides a vehicle for the participant to access the unspeakable (Wicks & Rippon, 2001; Porter & Rippon, 2012), at first, bypassing cognitive processes to work more intuitively (Reilly, 2021). The doll can be used as a part of storying the trauma narrative, and as a transitional object (Winnicott, 1991) to mediate between the internal experiences of the participant and their being in community.

Summary

The literature reviewed above creates an argument for the treatment of trauma in the community. Community healing acknowledges the social aspects of the trauma and provides an appropriate analogous treatment setting. Somatic methods have risen to treatment popularity when working with trauma survivors and extrapolating this to community contexts is logical in that humans are designed for co-regulation. In community art therapy, therapeutic dollmaking can be used to bring together all components of addressing and processing trauma for increased agency and capacity. In the following sections I provide methods and examples of dollmaking with an individual from a community perspective, with a community with the goal of increasing resilience, and with students as a method for teaching trauma concepts and applications.

Methods

The following section outlines two methods for creatively using dollmaking with clients and community. The first outlines an individual process. The importance in this process is placed on helping the client to see the overall effect of the traumatic events on their life, how those experiences interact with other experiences in their life, and who they think they were at each phase. The second is a community group dollmaking experience that encourages safety, expression of emotion and sensation, and exploring identity through co-regulation.

Individual terapeutic work

Korištenje Babuški za istraživanje vremenske linije traume

Materials: Paper, writing utensil, blank nesting doll form, paint

Sessions: multiple

Goals: Creating a trauma story in the second stage of trauma treatment after safety has been thoroughly established for the client. Understanding the full context of the traumatic event(s) and providing an opportunity for remembrance and mourning and begin to orient the client to a future with reconnection to themselves and others.

1. *Client and therapist will create a trauma timeline.*
2. *Client will choose different points on the timeline to explore who they were at that time and explore that using the doll form that correlates with that place in time.*
3. *Client and therapist will discuss the impact of the events of the trauma in the context of the rest of the client's life.*

Finding Creativity and Safety: A Community Group to Build Resilience After Experiencing Trauma

6 sessions: 2-hours each

5 participants

Methods: Art and Somatic Psychotherapy

Goals: Using art and somatic techniques to find safety in the body and process trauma.

Materials: Fabric, doll pattern, needles, all-purpose thread, embroidery thread, scissors, yarn, pins, color pencils, markers, fabric markers, hot glue gun, hot glue sticks, blank body maps

Closed group offered to the community in a community setting

This group will focus on finding safety and regulation in the body. Participants will learn and use hand sewing, and work with other art materials to process traumatic experiences.

- *The first 2 weeks will focus on finding and feeling a sense of safety.*
- *The second 2 weeks will focus on emotion regulation.*
- *And the last 2 weeks will focus on building a stronger life after experiencing trauma.*

Week 1:

Group members will create group agreements.

Group members will participate in somatic exercises to create awareness in their body. They will be led through both an external and internal scan of their body, explore concepts related to sensations such as cold and hot, noticing where they feel safe, and where they may feel activated or numb.

Group members will reflect on the resources they have around them for support using art materials.

Week 2:

Group members will participate in somatic exercises to create awareness in their body. They will be led through both an external and internal scan of their body, explore concepts related to sensations, noticing where they feel safe, and where they may feel activated or numb.

Group members will begin to explore the idea of pendulating between activation or numb areas and those that feel resourced.

Group members will explore the idea of safety and containment using art materials, doll forms, and sewing materials.

Group members will process their experiences in the studio that day.

Week 3:

Group members will participate in somatic exercises to create awareness in their body and spend some time pendulating between areas where they feel activated and numb and where they feel safe and resourced.

Group members will create a body map of what they feel in their bodies.

Group members will reflect on the body map to understand how emotions express themselves in the body. Group members will then begin to create a representation of those emotions and sensations on their dolls using art materials and embroidery.

Group members will process their experiences in the studio that day.

Week 4, 5, and 6:

Group members will continue to participate in somatic exercises to create awareness in their body and spend some time pendulating between areas where they feel activated and numb and where they feel safe and resourced. Group members will create a body map of what they feel in their bodies.

Group members will continue to work on the representation of emotions and sensations on their dolls, or other art pieces using art materials and embroidery.

In the following week, they will reflect on what they would like to experience in the present and future. They will create an identity for the doll and continue to make clothes and adornments on the dolls that relate to their identity after experiencing and processing trauma.

The next week participants will continue to work on their dolls and artwork related to their identity after experiencing and processing trauma.

Group members will process their experiences in the studio after each meeting.

At the last meeting group members will process their experiences in the studio, share their finished dolls, and what the overall experience of this group has been like for them.

Teaching Trauma to Art Therapy Graduate Students

Below is an example of how this work is taught to graduate art therapy students. The students use the same methods to understand trauma, as the client and community uses to process and explore their traumatic experiences.

The students are assigned 2 creative projects over the semester long course. The first is to conceptualize developmental/incremental trauma, or chronic stress through the creation of a nesting doll. Students watch not only my recorded lectures but also movies, and documentaries about these types of traumas. Using the lectures and movies is in lieu of having them create a timeline from their own trauma material prior to creating the doll. Then they create a nesting doll that corresponds. The second assignment is to create a fabric doll focused on learning the stages of creating safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnecting. For the doll making, the students follow a similar process to the community group, they cut out the pattern, sew and stuff the appendages and body, then embellish the body with embroidery to indicate potential sensation and emotion that might be felt by a trauma survivor. Finally, students create an identity for the doll, representing the survivor's hope for the future.

Dollmaking Vignettes

Gary

Gary was a boy that I started therapy with when he was nine years old. He had a very flat affect, and he didn't talk very much. Gary was adopted when he was an infant, his parents were incarcerated, and his mother gave birth to him while in custody. Both parents struggled with drug addiction and alcoholism. Gary was born with fetal alcohol syndrome and eventually determined to have lowered cognitive ability. When Gary was adopted, his adoptive parents also adopted two older boys. The oldest of whom was four, had been in and out of different foster homes since he was an

infant, and had been diagnosed with a reactive attachment. The oldest adopted child perpetrated sexual abuse against the younger children in the home until Gary was age nine.

Gary had been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder and ADHD when he started to see me. He would only play games for the first three years of his treatment. I often wondered if what I was doing was helping him, but he came back each week. When Gary was about 12 years old, his older sibling was going to be released from the treatment center that he had been living in. I wrote a letter on Gary's behalf at the request of his mother petitioning that there be no contact between the boys. Gary was aware of my advocacy for him, and after that he began to participate in art therapy. After three years we had successfully established a sense of safety for Gary.

During this time, Gary found a rhythm in the studio, coming in and painting on one canvas each session. He would paint one layer each week, working kinesthetically, punching the canvas with his brush. Eventually, Gary created peaks of paint on the canvas. I knew that he was ready to move along on the ETC up to the perceptual level, since his kinesthetic movements were creating form (see figure 1). At this time, I gave Gary a blank set of matryoshka or nesting dolls (see figure 2). I talked about the dolls as a metaphor for his history of trauma. The smallest doll represented his first experiences in the womb, and subsequent dolls who he was at different points while experiencing sexual abuse. Gary painted the smallest doll as an American football. The rest of the dolls corresponded with his favorite football players at different ages in his life. I let Gary work on the dolls over several sessions. I saw the doll making as an opportunity to bring in other levels of the ETC, moving up to the cognitive level through planning and following several steps, and then symbolic by bringing in the metaphor.



Figure 1 Gary's kinesthetic painting

While Gary was in therapy, I was also meeting with his mom, and the team of special education teachers and support personnel at his school. Gary was having trouble staying in the classroom, he couldn't seem to sit still in his body. He would wander the halls and then eventually someone would accuse him of wrong doing, he would be interrogated, and subsequently retraumatized. I worked with the team, shared with them the how his trauma was affecting his ability to be



Figure 2 Blank Nesting Dolls

present, and helped to create a plan to help Gary be successful in school. In this way, a personal trauma was processed in the context of the comunity, encompassing wider framework of reintegrating trauma.

Milwaukee, Wisconsin Community

Milwaukee, Wisconsin is a vibrant community, alive with arts and music, however it is not without a history of systemic racism, violence, crime, and trauma. Large corporations, Harley-Davidson, Potawatomi Hotel and Casino, Advocate Aurora Health Care, and Marquette University, all located on the near west side of Milwaukee, formed a non-profit to help address community needs and change perception of the area. Scaling Wellness in Milwaukee, or SWIM, was created in 2024 to address community needs and provide low-cost support for wellness and trauma treatment. SWIM is located within the neighborhood of the near west side and houses many collaborators who provide some form of trauma-informed care at low or no cost. The organization that I practice with, Bloom Art and Integrated Therapies, Inc. was invited to provide art therapy services at SWIM.

With a grant from SWIM, I led a community group of trauma survivors in dollmaking focused on resilience. The community met for 6 sessions; each session was 2 hours long. The community group began with 7 participants, including myself and an undergraduate art therapy intern, 2 participants did not return after the first session. During each session the participants engaged in body awareness and somatic exercises, used art materials to create body maps, and worked on creating dolls. The participants were given



Figure 3 Dollmaking in progress, embroidery.

a choice of fabric, then they cut out the pattern. Once they cut out the pattern, I took the pieces home to sew on my machine. I brought the sewn pieces back the following week and the participants stuffed the doll and began to assemble it. I taught the community basic sewing skills. Once the dolls were assembled, they used embroidery thread and fabric marker to embellish areas of the body they recognize as holding trauma through emotion and sensation. Then the participants were encouraged to give the dolls an identity by adding hair, faces, and clothing. (See Figures 3, 4, 5).

Dollmaking processes and materials can be applied across the ETC. The use of fabric has sensory qualities and mapping the body sensations on the doll also supports this. The stitching itself can be kinesthetic, stabbing the needle through the fabric. As the doll takes shape, and is stuffed, this moves the maker to the perceptual level of the ETC. The identification of emotions related to sensations and correlation between the emotion happens while choosing a thread color. Dollmaking requires engaging in a multistep process, which follows the cognitive level of the ETC. The meaning



Figure 4 Dollmaking in progress



Figure 5 Finished dolls.

the participant makes from the doll, satisfies the symbolic level. Finally, the entire doll making process requires use of the participant's creativity.

Results and Discussion

Individuals and Community

With Gary, even though I worked with him individually, my approach was community focused. I not only worked with Gary, but also, I often brought his mom into session. She invited me to work with his school, and I often attended meetings there. I wanted Gary to know his community cared about him and his healing, that he was not alone. When I work with individuals, I encourage them to participate in community in ways that are meaningful and can aid in their recovery. With other individuals in treatment, I often refer them to the community art therapy studio offered weekly at my practice, as community art therapy can be the treatment itself, or a way into or out of further treatment (Nolan 2023, Nolan, and Mumpton, 2024). As

an individualistic society, a lot of work in therapy in the US is individual based, but art therapists can always be community focused.

In the community group, dollmaking provided a platform for coregulation through art and sewing. The participants reported they felt successful as they gained new skills in sewing, and body awareness and processing. Although when focusing on body processing alone during the second session, 2 group members reported feeling challenged. One reported feeling "numb" after listening to one group member discuss feeling overwhelmed in her body.

The next session we moved the focused body processing to the end of the group, so that the participants could make art first and ease them into the body processing. The group conversation while making offered support to one another, connecting while sharing frustrations, and allowed for personal storytelling in a safe space.

One participant reported that she was proud that she was able to sew her doll, and work through the frustration of learning a new skill. Another participant reported that they liked that they had an object that they could look at outside of sessions that would remind them of the safety and enjoyment that they experienced during the session. Another participant appreciated the perspectives of the group members, and that they helped her to feel "worthy."

Teaching Trauma to Art Therapy Graduate Students

The basic framework of how this work is taught to graduate art therapy students is layed out in the Methods. I will discuss the course here to explicate the community lense from an educational persepctive and widen the scope of understanding.

In 2024, I was tasked with developing an online trauma course for the graduate students in the art therapy program at Syracuse University. I began by carefully choosing required texts to accompany the class, making sure that the authors represented diverse backgrounds and view-points. Then I conceptualized what was necessary to include in an introductory overview of trauma treatment for art therapists. I read articles and books on trauma and revisited my somatic training materials. I thought about many of the clients and communities I have worked with, my history and education as an art therapist, the experiences I had treating trauma that shaped me, and the skills I have gained that seem to benefit my clients the most.

All the classes that we teach in our program are arts-based. Thus, I began to imagine the ways that I could meaningfully teach students about trauma while the students are learning new skills, such as body awareness, somatic trauma processing, and sewing. Additionally, I wanted to include connections to various indigenous practices of healing and thought that sewing and dollmaking

could be a good way to achieve this in our art practice.

From a community perspective, a widened notion of community includes new art therapists. Egalitarian relationships are encouraged, and the art therapist is viewed as also a community participant (Nolan, 2023). Art therapy practitioners in community contexts are highly skilled and ethical. Student training programs in the U.S. do not requires students to take a trauma course and often offer trauma theory and application classes as electives. In my opinion, both courses on community art therapy practice and trauma are necessary in training new art therapy professionals.

Conclusion

Healing from trauma is a social, cultural, psychological, physical, and spiritual endeavor. Community engagement in art therapy can encourage trauma healing and coregulation. Using somatic work with dollmaking provides a creative way for clients and communities to process their experiences, and for students to learn about the lasting effects of trauma. Working with dolls presents a unique opportunity for clients to externalize feelings and sensations, create an object that represents healing, and process their experiences of grief and loss due to trauma.

Community art therapy is an approach and a setting, is practiced with cultural attunement to the context of the area the community lives within, uses creativity as a primary means of healing and transformation, and continues to evolve. Art therapists can support trauma treatment in the community setting. As the world continues to experience individual and collective trauma, people will need art therapy and each other.

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