



Indigenous and traditional arts in art therapy: Value, meaning, and clinical implications

Asli Arslanbek^{*}, Bani Malhotra, Girija Kaimal

Department of Creative Arts Therapies, Drexel University, Philadelphia, PA, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Art therapy
Clinical practice
Indigenous art
Traditional art
Ecological model of Indigenous and traditional art practices

ABSTRACT

There is limited research on the health implications of Indigenous and traditional art practices. This study investigated the therapeutic value and meaning of these practices and their use in art therapy. Twenty-one art therapists who identified as belonging to or working closely with a culturally diverse or Indigenous community provided insights about the use of traditional art practices in therapy or their own artmaking. Through grounded theory methodology, we developed a framework to identify therapeutic potentials, individual and community benefits and risks of involving culturally significant art practices in art therapy. Results suggested that Indigenous and traditional art practices are embedded in the culture and land they emerge from. These practices are considered familiar if the client has learned them from older generations which can lead to increased cultural pride and reclaiming cultural identity. Certain art practices and art forms have specific therapeutic qualities that can be used with a larger population. Our findings led to the development of an emerging ecological model of Indigenous and traditional art practices. The model suggests that the individual, family, community, and culture are deeply interlinked. When using traditional and Indigenous arts in art therapy, we suggest art therapists to consider this ecological model and make ethical choices to avoid appropriation.

Indigenous and traditional artistic practices in art therapy

Art therapy developed as a clinical profession in the Western world and the role of art media in the profession is therefore also defined primarily by North American and European arts traditions (Junge, 2016; Kaimal & Arslanbek, 2020; Rubin, 2009). “Art therapy and abstract painting emerged out of the same artistic and philosophical firmament, Modernism. Art Therapy and modern art consider the unconscious mind to be a vast reservoir of personal and collective imagery. Both see the unconscious as the fountain of all creativity.” (Haslam, 2005, p. 20). The American Art Therapy Association (2011) recognizes the need for multicultural competence and diversity, as well as sensitivity to one’s own and clients’ cultural awareness and cultural heritage- including how esthetic experience and experiences in the arts influence the art therapy process. Standing up to such ethical considerations, art therapists have recognized the need for locally relevant approaches to art therapy, and have adapted to unique socio-cultural contexts (Bonz et al., 2019; Gómez Carlier & Salom, 2012; Potash, Bardot, & Ho, 2012; Potash et al., 2017).

Arts are an integral part of many Indigenous practices and

Indigenous knowledge is a valuable resource for mental health professions (Napoli, 2019). Acknowledging that the traditional arts can have specific meanings and deep connection amongst the community or shared across generations, there is increasing interest among art therapists in examining Indigenous knowledge and traditional artmaking practices and their benefits to the community (Huang, 2021; Kaimal & Arslanbek, 2020; Lu & Yuen, 2012; Muirhead & De Leeuw, 2013; Park, Lee, Kim, & Kim, 2020; Warson, 2012; Weinberg, 2018). Art therapists are recognizing the value of locally available and natural art materials such as rice, rice flour, shredded coconut, rocks, feathers, seeds, grass, flowers, and natural ink (Carew, 2018; Gómez Carlier & Salom, 2012, Iyer, 2021; Jhaveri, 2021; Park et al., 2020) and traditional textiles including weaving, embroidery, crocheting (Cohen & Agosin, 2013; Homer, 2020; Leone, 2021) that reflect cultural and geographical identities of the clients and the community. In a review of Indigenous and traditional visual artistic practices, Kaimal and Arslanbek (2020) summarize the use and benefits of these practices as highlighted by art therapists. These include incorporating traditional arts for restoration from cultural oppression (Campanelli, 1996; Napoli, 2019), to build safety and trust (Weinberg, 2018); for cultural inclusion and

^{*} Correspondence to: Drexel University College of Nursing and Health Professions, 1601 Cherry Street, Philadelphia, PA 19102, United States.
E-mail address: aa4352@drexel.edu (A. Arslanbek).

cross-cultural communication (Cameron, 2010); as a tool for empowerment (Huss & Cwikel, 2005) and community engagement for holistic healing (Basto, Warson, & Barbour, 2012; Warson, 2012; Warson, Taulkchiray, & Barbour, 2013).

Art therapists have highlighted the importance of cultural awareness and traditional and Indigenous knowledge systems when working with diverse populations (Potash et al., 2017; Talwar, 2015). Understanding that traditional artforms are often a part of a cultural system of the community, art therapists have emphasized a culturally humble stance that regards the client as the expert, especially when working with marginalized cultures and Indigenous clients (Campanelli, 1996; Kapitani, 2015). Promoting a non-hierarchical participatory stance, working with community mentors and leaders, and allowing cultural values to emerge are some ethical considerations and recommendations that have been highlighted in the literature (Campanelli, 1996; Huss, Kaufman, Avgar, & Shouker, 2015; Kaimal & Arslanbek, 2020; Weinberg, 2018).

Although there is an increased focus on incorporating traditional arts practices, there is scarce knowledge on how to use these rich traditions and knowledge clinically, culturally and ethically in art therapy. There is also the need for guidelines on how to approach such practices respectfully without the risk of appropriation. Considering the limited research on the health implications of traditional artistic practices, our study aimed to examine the role of traditional and Indigenous forms of visual artistic practice in promoting psychosocial well-being and how it can inform the profession of art therapy.

Methods

We aimed to gather the knowledge from fellow art therapists on the use of Indigenous and traditional artforms in therapeutic spaces. We position ourselves as art therapists with heritages influenced by Turkey, India, and the United States. We bring our diverse worldviews, knowledge, and personal history to this research. Operating from a cultural humility framework, we recognize the need for ongoing learning and are grateful for the perspectives of the interviewees who generously shared their knowledge and experiences with us.

Study design

We used grounded theory methodology (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to approximate a framework for identifying therapeutic potentials, individual and community benefits and risks of involving culturally significant art practices in art therapy. Indigenous artforms were defined as artforms that serve as visual markers directly connected to a specific community, history, and geographic location. Traditional artforms were defined as artforms that have existed over centuries but are not necessarily tied to a specific community. For example, we considered knitting as a traditional practice but not as an Indigenous artform. We aimed for sensitive use of the terms Indigenous, Aboriginal, or traditional which depended upon the interviewee's identity preference. Approval for this study was obtained from Drexel University's Internal Review Board (IRB).

Participants

Twenty-one art therapists and expressive arts therapists were recruited from across the globe for semi-structured interviews. Since a limited number of art therapists work with Indigenous and traditional cultures, forms and materials, criterion sampling as part of purposive sampling was appropriate for this research. We recruited participants who were trained in art therapy or expressive arts therapy, and worked with Indigenous and traditional communities, or used traditional materials, artforms and artistic and cultural practices. As English was our team's shared language, we chose English speaking participants only, to ensure we communicated correctly with our participants and were able to apply inter-coder agreement. Fig. 1 outlines the demographic

Demographic	US	Canada	South America	Asia	Australasia
Country residing during the interview	N=7	N=6	N=2	N=3	N=3
Gender	Female N=19	Male N=2			

Fig. 1. Demographic information of the participants.

locations of participants.

Procedures and data collection

A recruitment e-mail was sent out to a small number of art therapists who we identified through their publications and presentations on the use of traditional and Indigenous artforms in art therapy. Then, we asked interviewees to identify other art therapists that may qualify to participate in this study. We reached out to suggested individuals who fit the criteria, and conducted twenty one interviews with participants who consented to the study. While some participants had extensive experience with working with Indigenous and traditional communities, some others had experiences for a limited duration in one particular setting. We aimed for saturation and continued data collection until we acquired sufficient data to describe categories and their dimensions (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). All interviews were conducted via Zoom platform over a period of four months between September- December 2020 and the duration of interviews varied between 20 and 50 min.

We used a semi-structured interview guide prepared for this study after a careful review of the literature and the authors' prior experiences of using traditional arts practices in their own clinical practice. The guide included questions about participants' backgrounds, experiences with traditional and Indigenous arts, views, cultural considerations, and concerns. Subsequently, verbatim transcriptions were prepared and cross-checked against the recorded interviews for all of the participants by two researchers. (See Appendix A for interview guide).

Data analysis

All transcripts were deidentified, assigned a participant serial number and uploaded on Dedoose© (a qualitative data analysis software) for coding and analysis. The data were coded in several phases following the method of grounded theory steps through systematic, iterative analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). A priori codes were established based on literature and new codes were added based on review of the data as per the initial open coding process (See Appendix B: Codebook). Threats to validity were addressed by establishing inter-coder agreement, peer scrutiny and debriefing, memo writing, iterative coding, and regular team meetings to distill findings (Shenton, 2004). To the extent possible, we tried to minimize any idiosyncratic interpretation of the data and we discussed our biases. The first phase included open coding, wherein line-by-line coding of the transcripts was carried out to develop categories and subcategories. Once consensus was reached on initial codes, they were refined further into axial codes to identify connections between the categories as to explain the ways in which traditional and Indigenous artforms are situated, understood, practiced, and adapted in art therapy. From this iterative process of constant comparison of codes and categories, as well as memo-writing and diagramming, emerged a schema of an ecological model of traditional and Indigenous art practices for mapping the contributions and role of Indigenous and traditional artforms in art therapy. Selective coding allowed connecting the concepts and categories onto the visual representation of the natural habitat as the relationships between them unfolded. The tree/ natural habitat provided an illustration for these findings to be elaborated in the form of a framework for Indigenous and traditional artforms in art therapy.

Results

Based on our interview analysis, we proposed an ecological model of Indigenous and traditional arts practices that is informed by four themes. Reflecting on our interview responses, we will share our final model and findings around the four themes that emerged through this research.

Ecological model of Indigenous and traditional arts practices: interconnectedness between individual, family, community, and culture

Our findings led to four themes: 1) Indigenous and traditional art-forms are deeply embedded in the cultures from which they emerge. 2) Although not always, Indigenous and traditional practices are often familiar and relevant to the client who have cultural resonance with the artistic practice. 3) There are distinct media qualities which make traditional arts more suitable in certain settings and for certain therapeutic goals. 4) The qualities mentioned above make Indigenous and traditional art practices suitable to address historical trauma, explore cultural identity and increase connectedness to one’s roots: to identity, family, community, culture, and history, which can lead to a strengthened support system, processing of transgenerational trauma and increased confidence in cultural identity.

We proposed an ecological model for Indigenous and traditional arts, which we used a tree analogy to describe the interconnected network of individuals, family, culture, community, social environment, spirituality, systems of knowledge and artistic practice (See Fig. 2). We have identified the interrelatedness of the land, culture, community, and family through a detailed analysis of interview transcripts and our own notes. We liken the Indigenous and traditional art forms to the fruit of a deeply rooted tree of culture. This fruit is given life and continuously nourished by interrelated socio-cultural influences. As illustrated in the tree analogy, roots represent systems of knowledge; the tree is rooted in

the land, the belief systems, ancestral systems of knowledge, and history. The trunk is the cultural worldview; it is what keeps the tree standing, such as community and cultural experts. The branches are the various Indigenous and traditional communities, practicing distinct cultural rituals and art making. The fruits are the art products generated through this confluence; plucking this fruit without understanding the complex web that nourished it, may carry the risks of disconnection and appropriation. In this analogy, there are also mediators who enjoy the fruits and spread the seeds of the tree. These mediators are likened to birds, squirrels, or bees, spreading the seeds of the fruit to continue regrowth. We consider art therapists who learn, carry, and spread the artform consciously as professionals as acting in this role of the mediators. Finally, we liken outer impacts on this ecological system, such as colonialism, to draught or storms that challenge the natural environment of the tree.

History and practice of the art form is deeply rooted in the culture

Throughout history, art practices were used for spiritual ceremonies and other daily practices. They were familiar to people in the community, and were deeply connected to nature, personal and community wellness, rituals and storytelling, and community connectedness. These practices and art forms were used to pass down local knowledge, such as dot paintings being used to help people navigate. Rooted deeply in the culture and land, these visual practices may carry other significance for the culture and its people than self-expression or esthetic appreciation. As one interviewee stated:

Aboriginal people, when we do dot painting, we’re not actually trying to make a picture, it is a map. We are recording something that we need to remember such as where the honey ants are. They (dot paintings) are really crucial for survival.

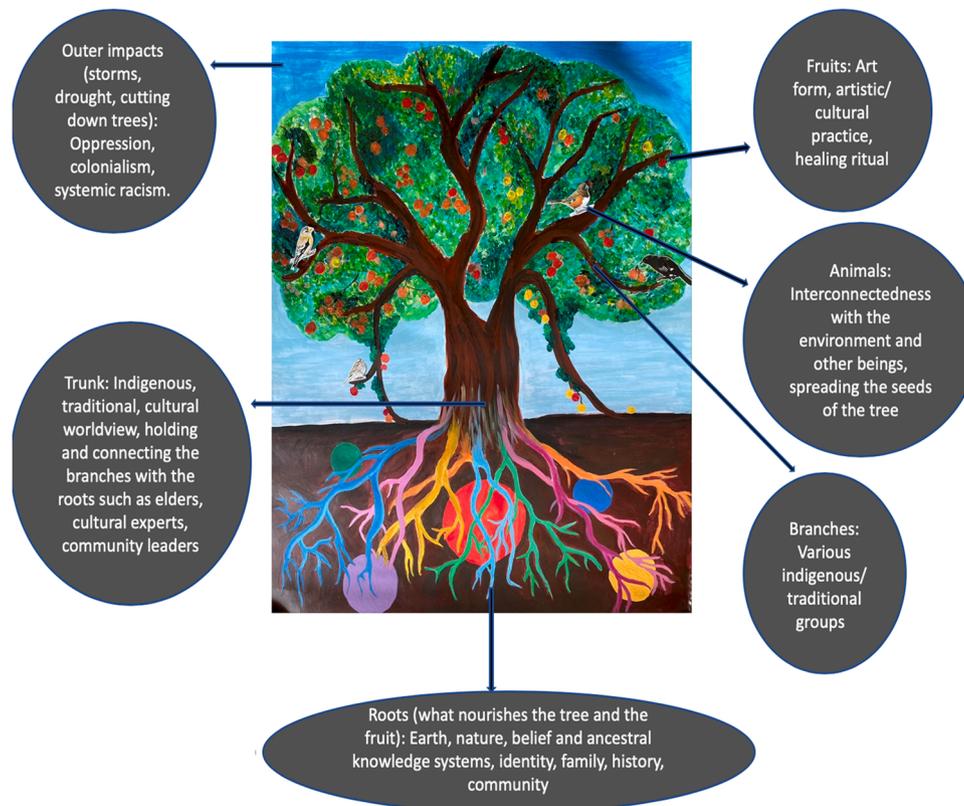


Fig. 2. Ecological model of indigenous and traditional arts practices (interaction and interdependence between roots, trunk, branches, fruits, outer impacts and animals). Artwork used in this figure is created jointly by authors.

Indigenous arts practices are often created as a community and are intertwined with spirituality. In some communities, creating art represents “being in line with the creator or the divine” as an interviewee noted. The visual, musical, or embodied arts practices represent the connection between the divine and the community, which makes these practices sacred. In some cultures, art making was created during life cycle ceremonies such as quilts for coming-of-age ceremonies or when mourning the death of a loved one. One of our interviewees explained how quilts are used for ceremonies:

Somebody had passed away and I conducted a quilt ceremony where the family come up and they put it around the mom and the dad because they lost their son. And it means ‘your community is here for you. Your family is here for you. Your Creator is here for you.’.

As seen in these two examples, culture-specific visual practices carry great spiritual and cultural significance to the community. They are rooted deeply within the culture, and require knowledge, sensitivity, and responsibility for the therapist to use them in clinical or community art therapy settings.

Traditional and Indigenous art forms may be familiar to clients who learn the artform at an early age

Traditional and Indigenous art forms are perceived as familiar, especially if they were learned from family members, community, or formal education. Culture specific images may be more accessible or meaningful to some clients that were exposed to them at an early age. Indigenous practices have also been identified by some art therapists as helping with their own personal healing journey. Some found that traditional materials connect them with their family, community, and culture:

I have always integrated clay (in art making). I think that it is a way that I connect with my roots, with my culture, with my country. I always go and buy clay from the land that we are from. And it’s all Indigenous people. I have had interesting conversations of how we really feel and believe that the land is alive, and the clay is alive. It’s a way to feel that connection with who we are.

Findings suggest that therapists feel inclined to use these materials and practices only if the client voiced that they have cultural resonance and feel ready to explore these materials. Assuming client’s background and introducing materials and directives based on therapist’s own assumptions may lead to stereotyping and appropriation. Having said that, responsible and informed use of familiar and safe materials can help clients integrate elements of historical wisdom, explore cultural identity and bridge to a dialog on difficult topics.

There are distinct therapeutic (physio-psycho-socio-spiritual) qualities of traditional art media

Therapists used some of the traditional art media such as embroidery, knitting or needlework for specific therapeutic goals in art therapy such as closure, mindfulness, sharing memories or to raise awareness through using craft. Traditional art practices such as embroidery, quilting, sewing, or knitting were identified as tactile, emotionally grounding, tangible, comforting or focusing. Several interviewees underscored that rhythmic quality to such media, such as the rhythm of passing the needle through the cloth are comforting for their clients. One of our interviewees also said that making embroidery helped relieve physical discomfort with some of her clients. In addition to specific therapeutic qualities, certain media and artforms may be more convenient to use in a particular landscape or may be portable and accessible. For instance, in certain geographic areas, accessing needlework materials, and finding a space to practice it were identified as easier than

accessing conventional art materials such as acrylic paints. Furthermore, needlework group projects such as quilts are easier to carry around, compared to group murals which can only be observed where they are created. Craft activities cultivated community support in group settings through socialization and storytelling: “One thing that I find universal is that craft tends to allow people more socialization, more storytelling. Craft often relates to family and culture. It opens a discussion in the room in an organic way to share their connection”. Similarly, traditional arts practices such as knitting allowed people to connect with each other in the group through sharing memories:

At various times, once we started doing the work (knitting), people started telling stories about their moms or their grandmas. It gave people a way to connect with each other and also connect with their biological families they were no longer a part of, and I think also connect to the community.

As seen in these examples, crafts are suggested to cultivate socialization and connection with client’s family, community, and each other in a group environment.

Engaging in Indigenous and traditional arts holds the potential to address historical trauma, explore cultural identity, and reconnect

In certain Indigenous and traditional communities, arts are integral parts of the daily cultural practices that were passed down through generations. However, there have been disruptions to this dynamic cultural practice. Colonialism and cultural oppression have caused these rich practices to go underground and even be forgotten. Certain communities have experienced traumatic events such as involuntary residential schools, which had damaging effects on the well-being of children and communities. Forced adoptions have caused attachment disruptions and disconnection between individuals and their familial and cultural heritage.

It was almost like a cultural genocide. They (children) were taken away from the attachment with their parents. What we now have is a disconnection; the parents who are parenting their children today were never parented because they were raised in a residential school, (they were) abused, not able to keep their arts, not able to keep their language.

Today, people still struggle with stereotypes of Indigenous identity and ongoing systemic racism. Art therapists identified the shame associated with being an Indigenous person due to colonization, which led some of their Indigenous clients to deny their cultural identities. Indigenous therapists expressed their feelings of guilt for not embracing their Indigenous identity enough. Therapists voiced the impact of the residential school era and how its transgenerational effects are still very much alive for many people. They highlighted that art therapy creates opportunities for reconnection with cultural teachings, stories and the land that were forgotten due to cultural disconnection caused by residential schools. Some art therapists who identify as Indigenous used Indigenous art forms in art therapy to empower their clients who either directly or transgenerationally experienced the cultural genocide. Similar processes regarding colonialism and cultural oppression have occurred in various parts of the world. Art therapists stated that art exhibitions and cultural celebrations can be a way to both cultivate cross cultural understanding and respect, as well as encourage solidarity and support:

There is opportunity to see similarities in how colonization affects different Indigenous people. There is the history and context in Canada, the United States, South America, Australia, Europe... Through art exhibitions, we are able to create these communities of

not just solidarity, but these communities where we relate to each other, build networks and support each other to grow and to heal.

Using traditional arts as a part of art therapy decolonizes the Western idea of therapy, as it centers around knowledge and practices relevant to the client's background. Through using traditional arts in therapy, clients may connect with their personal and cultural history, explore and address trauma and grief caused by colonialism and cultural genocide. Engaging in discussions and making collective art around issues that effected the community can also help individuals process grief and find empowerment. Traditional arts may help connect individuals who feel disconnected from their culture. Art making along with a culturally competent and sensitive art therapist may help explore cultural roots and lead to increased connectedness with one's cultural identity. An interviewee explained the significant connection between traditional art and identity as follows: "If they can get excited about this traditional art, then they get more connected to their past. So, that becomes healing, and it becomes an attachment."

Therapists working with Indigenous clients emphasized that connecting with forgotten historical knowledge and cultural symbolism cultivates identity, promotes self-awareness, and self-confidence. Generations impacted by the residential schools did not know the traditional art forms and their significance in relation to their Indigenous identity. They are now able to connect with elders and learn about designs which helps them claim their identity. Traditional arts are also identified as encouraging dialog within the group about their families and communities. Discussions that share community connections improves inter-generational communication and transfer of knowledge, and make people feel "grounded to who they are" as one of our interviewees mentioned. Using Indigenous and traditional art forms in art therapy could also have impacts such as feeling safe and culturally validated. Communities who were impacted by systematic cultural oppression may benefit from exploring these practices in a culturally safe environment.

Discussion

This study pursued a better understanding of Indigenous and traditional art forms as they relate to the modern profession of art therapy. We sought to study the role of Indigenous and traditional forms of visual artistic practice in promoting health and psychosocial well-being. Using interviews and observations of artistic practice, we examined whether and to what extent art making has had a therapeutic role in human lives and how it can inform the modern profession of art therapy.

Reflecting on our ecological model and tree analogy, if the art therapist is to use the *fruit*, that is, the traditional art practice in art therapy, we recommend that the therapist questions where that fruit comes from: what are the branches, the trunk and the roots that gave life to that fruit? What are the risks, and benefits of plucking this fruit off the tree? As art therapists, how do we carry the ethical responsibility of being the ones to spread the seeds of this fruit?

Traditional art practice, art product, and the community are all inter-related and embedded in the culture, land, and its history. This could be one reason why Indigenous art practices are often created within and as a community. In a communal setting, using traditional art practices can act as a catalyzer to support reclaiming identity and address trans-generational trauma and healing (Quayle & Sonn, 2019). In various parts of the world, there is great loss associated with colonialism and its transgenerational effects. Children who were separated from their families and communities lost the right to maintain and hand down their cultural identity (Clark, 2000). Trauma and grief caused by experiences of colonization and violence are still prominent in Indigenous communities (Evans & Sinclair, 2016). Residential schools disrupted the family and community structures, diminished cultural identity; interrupted parenting abilities (Lafrance & Collins, 2003; Rice & Snyder, 2008). Art therapists in our study shared that using local Indigenous knowledge and practice in art therapy taps into decolonizing therapy, which aligns

with the literature suggesting that it is imperative to focus on local knowledge and experience to create a decolonizing framework (Quayle & Sonn, 2019).

Creativity and arts are embedded in Indigenous cultures as they are incorporated in rituals, ceremonies and are intertwined with spirituality (Smith, 1999). Thus, arts practices may be valuable modalities to promote engagement with Indigenous identity, which as a result may enhance self-esteem and improve cultural identity (Duran, Duran, Heart, & Horse-Davis, 1998). Promoting spaces where storytelling, rituals and ceremonies can be incorporated support re-constructing identity. Indigenous stories were used to pass down local beliefs, values, and wisdom inherent to the cultures (Smith, 1999). Restoring these stories may help revitalize connection between the land, culture, and its people, as well as increase intergenerational communication. Using traditional and Indigenous art practices that have cultural resonance helps to process intergenerational trauma and grief, as well as explore topics such as identity, community, culture, historical trauma and attachment (Whyte, 2018). Today, Indigenous artistic practices, as well as languages and traditions are being reclaimed (Edwards, 2020). Reclaiming identity and learning what is forgotten can be a powerful endeavor for cultural healing (Archibald & Dewar, 2010). In line with the literature, some of our interviewees highlighted that reclaiming Indigenous arts practices helped their personal healing journey.

In addition to promoting cultural healing and reconnection to cultural identity, traditional art practices also help individuals connect with their family members, community, and personal history. For instance, an interviewee underlined that knitting in a group setting encouraged stories about clients' childhood and personal life, which opened a way to connect with each other as a group, as well as their families and community. Reflected in the literature, exploring culture-specific materials and imagery in art therapy may help clients feel connected with their family and community (Garlock, 2016; Moon, 2010). Literature also shows that traditional and communal arts practices bolster community belonging and cultural identity, encourage social participation, promote empowerment, and build resilience (Lu & Yuen, 2012; McHenry, 2011). Through positive engagements with historical knowledge and cultural symbolism, clients and therapists experience cultural validation which may improve overall mental health and wellness (Whyte, 2018).

Some therapists use traditional practices and art forms for therapeutic goals such as closure, mindfulness, sharing memories or to raise awareness about contemporary social and political issues. It has also been noted in art therapy literature that practices including knitting, embroidery, quilting, or beadwork can be repetitive and rhythmic, offering soothing (Garlock, 2016) or grounding (Collier, 2011) qualities. Some interviewees identified these qualities as meditative, helping clients with emotion regulation. Using traditional art/craft materials and practices that are relevant to client's culture may evoke feelings of pride. In previous literature, traditional artforms such as textile have been shown to cultivate a sense of mastery, satisfaction, and achievement (Garlock, 2016). In line with the literature on art therapy and textile arts (Garlock, 2016), art therapists in our study identified craft activities as promoting a sense of community in group settings. Some art therapists said that using traditional crafts have helped clients talk about difficult topics such as sexual abuse, which may be due to the relaxing and grounding nature of the materials. Another rationale for using traditional materials and forms is the accessibility of certain art materials, especially in areas where conventional art materials are scarce or irrelevant. Thus, art materials that are accessible and familiar to the community may be a viable option to ensure sustainable and culturally relevant practice (Bonz et al., 2019). Our study indicates that Indigenous and traditional arts practices should best be implemented by art therapists who identify with or have a commitment to the community they serve and understand the dilemmas and difficulties of Indigenous identity and community to avoid misrepresentation (Smith, 1999). How therapists will embed themselves in this interrelated web of community and history, and how they disseminate the information/ experience

outside that community are key considerations to ensure culturally safe and ethical practice. There are important considerations to be made regarding the use of art practices or products outside their original context. Using the artform outside its context can cause mistrust in the community against outsiders looking to learn the indigenous art practice. One of our interviewees shared the reservations of a local artist she talked to, about passing on traditional knowledge to outsiders:

(Speaking about a local artist), She would say, 'I don't feel comfortable sharing this (the indigenous art practice) because in the past, we would teach people how to do it and they would ensure us that they won't sell this work (outside the community) and then they would sell it. She was very concerned about that.

To ensure ethical use of traditional practices outside the original setting, consulting with the community and determining how and in which context the art practice will be used and shared is needed (Fitzpatrick et al., 2016). Another ethical consideration is about the perception and use of the art style and products. As one of our interviewees shared, art practices such as x-ray or dot paintings were not perceived as art in the Aboriginal communities as we understand it in the Western context. They were not produced for esthetic appraisal or for self-expression, but rather they served a pragmatic or ceremonial purpose, crucial for physical and cultural survival of the community. Indeed, Hoco (2002) underlines that many Euro-American concepts about art and imagery do not apply cross-culturally.

Expecting individuals to create certain art forms based on their Indigenous and traditional identities may also lead to a static and stereotypic understanding of identity and culture, while many traditional and Indigenous communities have multi-layered cultural identities (Huss, 2011). When traditional communities are exposed to modernization, they may embody a combination of cultural patterns, thus, the individual may navigate between ancestral and modern cultural knowledge (Huss, 2011). One of our interviewees explained this navigation between Western foundations and traditional knowledge with the concept of "the two eyed seeing". The two-eyed seeing is a concept proposed by the Aboriginal elder, Albert Marshall, which offers an integrative perspective between Western knowledge and Indigenous ways of knowing (Bartlett, Marshall, & Marshall, 2012). Our interviewee explained how she understood this concept to inform her practice as an art therapist:

Two-eyed seeing was a concept that was proposed by Albert Marshall. The idea was that we have these two eyes and one eye looked at the strength of Western approaches. So that might be Western theories and education. You gather strength from that side. Then through the other eye, you look at the strength of indigenous ways of knowing. You look at your ceremonies and stories that are already part of the community and the culture. For me the framework that I use is to be able to look at art therapy with both eyes open, to use these Western foundations with traditional practices.

It is imperative to acknowledge that culturally diverse communities may use a variety of art materials, forms, subjects, and practices. For example, in the modern context, Aboriginal artists use their cultural artforms to express and manifest their political struggles, identification with the land, and communicate their cultural identity with the non-Aboriginal world (Venbrux, 2002). When therapists are informed about how the culture-specific art practices have emerged and developed over time, they will be better equipped to make ethical decisions in introducing and using these art practices with their clients.

Clinical and ethical implications

Using Indigenous and traditional artforms in art therapy requires serious ethical considerations and cultural adjustments. We believe

there are distinct issues and concerns to be contemplated by art therapists before deciding to engage in Indigenous and traditional arts within art therapy. These include being self-reflexive, respecting the land, knowledge, and traditions; incorporating culturally significant people such as elders or community leaders; and making sure materials, concepts and ideas are familiar and meaningful to the client. Several interviewees named the importance of trusting the healing components of the community values and accommodating the local traditions in art therapy.

Being aware of one's own positionality, and consistently engaging in self-reflection is key in establishing a trusting relationship through which the therapeutic work will grow. Engaging in self reflexivity avoids cultural harm to the community (Kapitan, 2015; Talwar, 2010). Asking why and in which terms a traditional artform can be brought to the therapy room can help the therapist identify the purpose, importance, and risks of using traditional arts in art therapy. As a therapist from a different cultural or educational background than the Indigenous client, it is important to avoid situating the client into the incorrect stereotypical assumptions (Kapitan, 2015). Some art practices may be sacred, or they may carry spiritual significance in their symbolism. Using them out of their context, may result in appropriation. Art therapists who use traditional media with a client in their clinical practice often share similar cultural backgrounds with the client, thus have intuitive knowledge; or have learned about the culture through extended exposure to the specific community. Art therapists who used certain traditional forms in their art therapy clinical practice voiced that they learned these skills and forms from their family and cultural environments, from other therapists, through self-explorations, in school, through their clients or through a visit or exposure to a different culture.

Although some traditional art practices are shared between cultures, such as needlework, some other traditional art practices are very specific to a particular community. Indigenous nations may have art practices that are distinct to a community, shaped by the land, and culture, thus, it is important to introduce the Indigenous art practices carefully. Cultural authorization from the elders and the community to do art therapy work is critical when entering communities as an outsider (Evans & Sinclair, 2016). It is imperative to invite local experts such as elders of the community to guide the ceremonial processes in which art therapy is embedded. As an interviewee voiced, "the families need someone from within their own community to guide them, not me (the therapist)." Art therapists have stated that acknowledging the value of elders' contribution to the art therapy process, receiving their feedback, and respecting their knowledge is imperative. Elders and other community mentors provide guidance to the art therapist and bring local Indigenous wisdom of the culture to be part of the art therapy process (Weinberg, 2018). This might potentially help individuals in the group trust and engage with art therapy. Moreover, acknowledging the importance of local wisdom and allowing the ritualistic practices of the culture and land to enter the art therapy process can improve cultural strength and pride for participants, leading to better treatment outcomes.

As we discussed earlier, it is important for the therapist to not assume a client will be familiar with an art practice solely based on their cultural background. Some clients may not be familiar with the art practice even if they identify as a member of the community where the art practice emerged. Moreover, there may be shame associated with the use of artform due to history of cultural oppression, thus not every client may want to engage in exploring specific artforms, or even be treated by people from their community (Whyte, 2018). Understanding where the client is at in terms of their cultural identity and their readiness to engage with it, is a key consideration when introducing traditional art forms or materials. Bringing culturally significant materials alongside conventional materials provides the flexibility to the client to choose what they would like to engage in. Providing this flexibility, and not imposing specific art materials is especially important when working with clients from communities with a history of cultural oppression: some art therapists underlined that client who have disconnection with

their cultures due to historical trauma may refuse to acknowledge their cultural heritage, making traditional materials less relatable for them.

Finally, as other mental health professions, art therapy too, can be a catalyzer of ethnocentric values that are unfit for diverse communities (Sue et al., 2013; Talwar, Iyer, & Doby-Copeland, 2004). The embodied and non-verbal qualities of art making do not grant exemption to our field from the risks of trying to fit culturally diverse clients into the colonial Western idea of what therapy is. When we use Indigenous and traditional materials and practices in the clinical field, one may assume that these risks are mitigated, based on the cultural compatibility of the materials. However, on the contrary, culturally relevant practice requires extensive knowledge and sensitivity. It is crucial that the therapist understands the layered political, social, and historical stories in relation to the artform, and their client. This puts a great responsibility on the therapist who utilizes these art practices. Ensuring that multicultural knowledge, skills, and awareness are thoroughly integrated in the art therapy curriculum is crucial to prepare art therapy students who may later serve culturally diverse communities (Kapitan, 2015).

Limitations

There are several limitations of this study that need to be mentioned. Although we reached out to international art therapists working in various settings, the majority of the art therapists who participated were from USA, Canada or Australia. Thus, we mostly discussed the Indigenous and traditional practices from these areas. The scope of this pilot study did not include resources for translation. Therefore, we conducted all our interviews in English, which again limited the diversity of participants. Some art therapists did not respond, or declined to interview, stating that they preferred not to give any information that does not lead to direct benefit of their communities. Their decisions may be informed by the history of exploitation of Indigenous and traditional communities by researchers, and history of appropriation of cultural arts practices by art therapists, leading to a rightful mistrust. Because of that, we were not able to capture some potentially significant points of view that could have enhanced this research. Finally, although both the researchers and interviewees that helped construct this research came from distinct culturally diverse societies, our findings and interpretations are representative of the cases we encountered, thus are not generalizable.

Funding

This research was funded by Drexel University in the form of research fellowships to Asli Arslanbek and Bani Malhotra.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Asli Arslanbek: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Project administration. **Bani Malhotra:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Visualization. **Girija Kaimal:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Project administration, Funding acquisition.

Declaration of interest

None.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank our interviewees that have generously shared their insights and made this research possible.

Appendix A. Supporting information

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found in the

online version at doi:10.1016/j.aip.2021.101879.

References

- American Art Therapy Association. (2011). Art Therapy Multicultural/ Diversity Competencies. Retrieved from <https://arttherapy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Multicultural-Competencies.pdf>.
- Archibald, L., & Dewar, J. (2010). Creative arts, culture, and healing: building an evidence base. *Pimatisiwin: A Journal of Aboriginal and Indigenous Community Health*, 8(3), 1–25.
- Bartlett, C., Marshall, M., & Marshall, A. (2012). Two-eyed seeing and other lessons learned within a co-learning journey of bringing together indigenous and mainstream knowledges and ways of knowing. *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences*, 2(4), 331–340. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13412-012-0086-8>
- Basto, E., Warson, E., & Barbour, S. (2012). Exploring American Indian adolescents' needs through a community-driven study. *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, 39(2), 134–142. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2012.02.006>
- Bonz, A. G., del Carmen Casas, S., & Arslanbek, A. (2019). Conflict and displacement: finding the space for creativity. *Art Therapy Practices for Resilient Youth* (pp. 337–358). Routledge.
- Cameron, L. (2010). Using the arts as a therapeutic tool for counselling – an Australian Aboriginal perspective. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 5, 403–407. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2010.07.112>
- Campanelli, M. (1996). Pioneering in Perth: art therapy in western Australia. *Art Therapy*, 13, 131–135. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07421656.1996.10759209>
- Carew, C. (2018). The Moccasin Project: Understanding a Sense of Place Through Indigenous Art making and Storytelling (Unpublished doctoral dissertation), Lesley University. https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/expressive_dissertations/58.
- Clark, Y. (2000). The construction of Aboriginal identity in people separated from their families, community, and culture: Pieces of a jigsaw. *Australian Psychologist*, 35(2), 150–157. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00050060008260337>
- Cohen, R. A., & Agosin, A. (2013). Common Threads: a recovery programme for survivors of gender based violence. *Intervention: Journal of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Conflict Affected Areas*, 11(2), 157–168.
- Collier, A. F. (2011). The well-being of women who create with textiles: Implications for art therapy. *Art Therapy*, 28(3), 104–112. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07421656.2011.597025>
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). Basics of qualitative research. *Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*. Sage publications.
- Duran, E., Duran, B., Heart, M. Y. H. B., & Horse-Davis, S. Y. (1998). Healing the American Indian soul wound. *International Handbook of Multigenerational Legacies of Trauma* (pp. 341–354). Boston, MA: Springer.
- Edwards, A. (2020). When knowledge goes underground: cultural information poverty, and Canada's Indian Act. *Pathfinder: A Canadian Journal for Information Science Students and Early Career Professionals*, 1(2), 19–35. <https://doi.org/10.29173/pathfinder14>
- Evans, M., & Sinclair, A. (2016). Containing, contesting, creating spaces: leadership and cultural identity work among Australian Indigenous arts leaders. *Leadership*, 12(3), 270–292. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715015620463>
- Fitzpatrick, E. F., Martiniuk, A. L., D'Antoine, H., Oscar, J., Carter, M., & Elliott, E. J. (2016). Seeking consent for research with Indigenous communities: a systematic review. *BMC Medical Ethics*, 17(1), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12910-016-0139-8>
- Garlock, L. R. (2016). Stories in the cloth: art therapy and narrative textiles. *Art Therapy*, 33(2), 58–66. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07421656.2016.1164004>
- Gómez Carlier, N., & Salom, A. (2012). When art therapy migrates: the acculturation challenge of sojourner art therapists. *Art Therapy*, 29(1), 4–10. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07421656.2012.648083>
- Haslam, M. (2005). Modernism and art therapy. *Canadian Art Therapy Association Journal*, 18(1), 20–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08322473.2005.11432268>
- Hocoy, D. (2002). Cross-cultural issues in art therapy. *Art Therapy*, 19(4), 141–145. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07421656.2002.10129683>
- Homer, E. (2020). Embroidering pieces of place. In L. Leone (Ed.), *Craft in Art Therapy: Diverse Approaches to the Transformative Power of Craft Materials and Methods*. Routledge.
- Huang, K. Y. (2021). Toward an indigenization process: art therapy practice in the Chinese cultural context. *Art Therapy*, 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07421656.2021.1919007>
- Huss, E. (2011). Bedouin women's embroidery as female empowerment: Crafts as culturally embedded expression within art therapy. In *Materials and media in art therapy: Critical understandings of diverse artistic vocabularies* (pp. 215–229). Taylor and Francis.
- Huss, E., & Cwikel, J. (2005). Researching creations: applying arts-based research to Bedouin women's drawings. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 4, 44–62. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690500400404>
- Huss, E., Kaufman, R., Avgar, A., & Shouker, E. (2015). Using arts-based research to help visualize community intervention in international aid. *International Social Work*, 58(5), 673–688. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872815592686>
- Iyer, M. (2021). Integrating traditional crafts within clinical practice: a cross-cultural group case study. In L. Leone (Ed.), *Craft in Art Therapy: Diverse Approaches to the Transformative Power of Craft Materials and Methods*. Routledge.
- Jhaveri, K. (2021). Healing roots of Indigenous crafts: adapting traditions of India for art therapy practice. In L. Leone (Ed.), *Craft in Art Therapy: Diverse Approaches to the Transformative Power of Craft Materials and Methods*. Routledge.

- Junge, M. B. (2016). History of art therapy. In D. E. Gussak, & M. L. Rosal (Eds.), *The Wiley Handbook of Art Therapy* (pp. 7–16). John Wiley & Sons.
- Kaimal, G., & Arslanbek, A. (2020). Indigenous and traditional visual artistic practices: implications for art therapy clinical practice and research. *Frontiers in Psychology, 11*, 1320. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01320>
- Kapitan, L. (2015). Social action in practice: shifting the ethnocentric lens in cross-cultural art therapy encounters. *Art Therapy, 32*(3), 104–111. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07421656.2015.1060403>
- Lafrance, J., & Collins, D. (2003). Residential schools and Aboriginal parenting: Voice of parents. *P*, 104–125.
- Leone. (2021). *Craft in Art Therapy: Diverse Approaches to the Transformative Power of Craft Materials and Methods*. Routledge.
- Lu, L., & Yuen, F. (2012). Journey women: art therapy in a decolonizing framework of practice. *The Arts in Psychotherapy, 39*(3), 192–200. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2011.12.007>
- McHenry, J. A. (2011). Rural empowerment through the arts: the role of the arts in civic and social participation in the Mid West region of Western Australia. *Journal of Rural Studies, 27*(3), 245–253. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2011.03.001>
- Moon, C. (2010). *Materials & Media in Art Therapy: Critical Understanding of Diverse Artistic Vocabularies*. New York, NY: Taylor & Francis Group.
- Muirhead, A., & De Leeuw, S. (2013). *Art and Wellness: The Importance of Art for Aboriginal Peoples' health and Healing*. National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health.
- Napoli, M. (2019). Ethical contemporary art therapy: honoring an American Indian perspective. *Art Therapy, 36*, 175–182. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07421656.2019.1648916>
- Park, S., Lee, H., Kim, S., & Kim, Y. (2020). Traditional Korean art materials as therapeutic media: multicultural expansion through materials in art therapy. *Art Therapy, 1–9*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07421656.2020.1729077>
- Potash, J. S., Bardot, H., & Ho, R. T. (2012). Conceptualizing international art therapy education standards. *The Arts in Psychotherapy, 39*(2), 143–150. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2012.03.003>
- Potash, J. S., Bardot, H., Moon, C. H., Napoli, M., Lyonsmith, A., & Hamilton, M. (2017). Ethical implications of cross-cultural international art therapy. *Arts in Psychotherapy, 56*, 74–82. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2017.08.005>
- Quayle, A. F., & Sonn, C. C. (2019). Amplifying the voices of Indigenous elders through community arts and narrative inquiry: stories of oppression, psychosocial suffering, and survival. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 64*(1–2), 46–58. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12367>
- Rice, B., & Snyder, A. (2008). Reconciliation in the context of a settler society: healing the legacy of colonialism in Canada. In Brant Castellano, Marlene, Archibald, Linda, & Mike DeGagne (Eds.), *From Truth to Reconciliation Transforming the Legacy of Residential Schools* (pp. 43–61). Ottawa, ON: he Aboriginal Healing Foundation.
- Rubin, J. A. (2009). *Introduction to Art Therapy: Sources & Resources*. Taylor & Francis.
- Shenton, A. K. (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for Information, 22*(2), 63–75. <https://doi.org/10.3233/EFI-2004-22201>
- Smith, L. T. (1999). *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. New York: Zed Books Ltd.
- Sue, D.W., Sue, D., Neville, H.A., & Smith, L. (2013). *Counseling the culturally diverse: Theory and practice* (6th ed). John Wiley & Sons.
- Talwar, S. (2010). An intersectional framework for race, class, gender, and sexuality in art therapy. *Art Therapy, 27*(1), 11–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07421656.2010.10129567>
- Talwar, S. (2015). Culture, diversity, and identity: from margins to center. *Art Therapy, 32*, 100–103. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07421656.2015.1060563>
- Talwar, S., Iyer, J., & Doby-Copeland, C. (2004). The invisible veil: changing paradigms in the art therapy profession. *Art Therapy, 21*(1), 44–48. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07421656.2004.10129325>
- Venbrux, E. (2002). The post-colonial virtue of Aboriginal art. *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie, 223–240*.
- Warson, E. (2012). Healing pathways: art therapy for American Indian cancer survivors. *Journal of Cancer Education, 27*(1 Suppl), S47–S56. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13187-012-0324-5>
- Warson, E., Taukchiray, W., & Barbour, S. (2013). Healing pathways: American Indian medicine and art therapy. *Canadian Art Therapy Association Journal, 26*(2), 33–38. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08322473.2013.11415584>
- Weinberg, T. (2018). Gaining Cultural Competence Through Alliances in Art Therapy With Indigenous Clients (La compétence culturelle et son acquisition grâce à des alliances avec des clients autochtones en art-thérapie). *Canadian Art Therapy Association Journal, 31*(1), 14–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08322473.2018.1453214>
- Whyte, M.K. (2018). Walking on Two-Row: Assessing Acculturative Identity through Material Interaction, An Indigenous Arts-Based Heuristic Inquiry.