

British Australian: Art Therapy, White Racial Identity and Racism in Australia

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I consider the implications of working as a White art therapist in Australia. I describe experiences during my final year of art therapy clinical placement which started a process of questioning my sense of belonging and the socio-historical context I was working in. I describe what comprised of the beginning stages of investigating my White racial identity and emphasise the importance of relevant literature and of making the invisible racism, prejudice and White privilege in Australia visible.

INTRODUCTION

How can a White Australian art therapist work effectively in a plural society without first having confronted the prejudices so seamlessly inherent in her upbringing and history? This paper delves into experiences of exploring White racial identity. I attempt to frame final year clinical placement experience within relevant theoretical framework and describe the attitudes, which were made visible to me through work with clients, within socio-historical context of Australia. I will describe how the White Racial Identity model assisted my process and the importance of recognising and exploring countertransference responses.

The British Australian

During my final year of study in the Master of Art Therapy program at University of Western Sydney, I took a closer look at the art therapy literature while working with young people from Polynesian or African heritage who were living in the Western Suburbs of Sydney.

In my final semester I continued along this track to complete my major study (Holloway, 2008) on racism and art therapy in Australia

where I expanded my research to encompass general mental health and social services literature to broaden my understanding of therapeutic work across cultures. I became consumed by the ideas, thoughts and feelings surrounding identity and working as a White trainee art therapist in Australia with 'other' cultures.

A fundamental roadblock I faced as a trainee art therapist was the lack of relevantly contextualised literature (literature written by art therapists working in Australia) that recognised and explained the process I was going through. The work with young people evoked strong feelings in me that were associated with belonging and rejection. This can be a common dynamic played out when working with young people, however there were more layers to the complex experience of sitting with a young person who diverged from the dominant White background, which I identify with.

The work with young people from non-White backgrounds inadvertently propelled me towards exploring my White identity and facing my own prejudice, racism and