

Illuminating voices: Perspectives on professional identity

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Abstract

Art therapy was formally recognised in Australia and New Zealand as a profession in 2006, yet there is a lack of public understanding and recognition about the diverse work art therapists do. This paper describes research into the perspectives of thirteen professionally registered art therapists who live and work in Australia. Qualitative research methodology was used to examine perspectives on professional practice within a range of employment sectors. Although derived from a small and limited sample, the findings identify notable differences in the nature of, and the degree to which, the art therapists view themselves as being professionally recognised, including assumptions by employment sectors about the qualifications which are required to practice. The research discusses the diversity of practitioners and the complexity of recognition by others which is complicated by divisions within the profession. The paper concludes that the professional identity formation of art therapists is an ongoing and dynamic process.

Keywords

Art therapy, qualitative research, identity, diversity

Introduction

What constitutes a 'mental health profession' in Australia today is not universally agreed upon by practitioners who work in the field (McDermott & Meadows, 2010), particularly in the newer, applied professions such as art therapy. Art therapy was formally recognised as a profession by the Federal Government in 2006 (ABS, 2011), yet there is a dearth of public understanding and recognition of the diverse work art therapists do. Westwood and Linnell (2011) have documented the influences Australia's colonial history has had on the shape of the country's mental health services. These historical influences have resulted in psychotherapy and arts therapies being marginalised and situated outside the mainstream mental health services. Woodcock's (2011) documentation of the history of art therapy in New Zealand shows that it echoes that of Australia, with educators from the UK, USA and Canada influencing some aspects of

its evolution, particularly in the mid twentieth century and in the early days of challenge and the struggle for survival. In South Africa, another country where art therapy is an emergent profession, Berman (2011) writes of the initial struggle for professional recognition and identity that characterised the establishment of the profession.

Formal recognition of the profession in Australia does exist but recognition in practice is a different story for some Australian art therapists who are currently working. This research paper considers and discusses three major findings from an ongoing qualitative PhD study that investigates the nature of the art therapy encounter from multiple perspectives, including those of professional art therapists and of young clients.

The PhD investigation was partially initiated when the researcher was employed in the role of a casual counsellor (but paid as a casual teacher) in public high schools after