

Book review

Art therapy and postmodernism: Creative healing through a prism

Edited by Helene Burt

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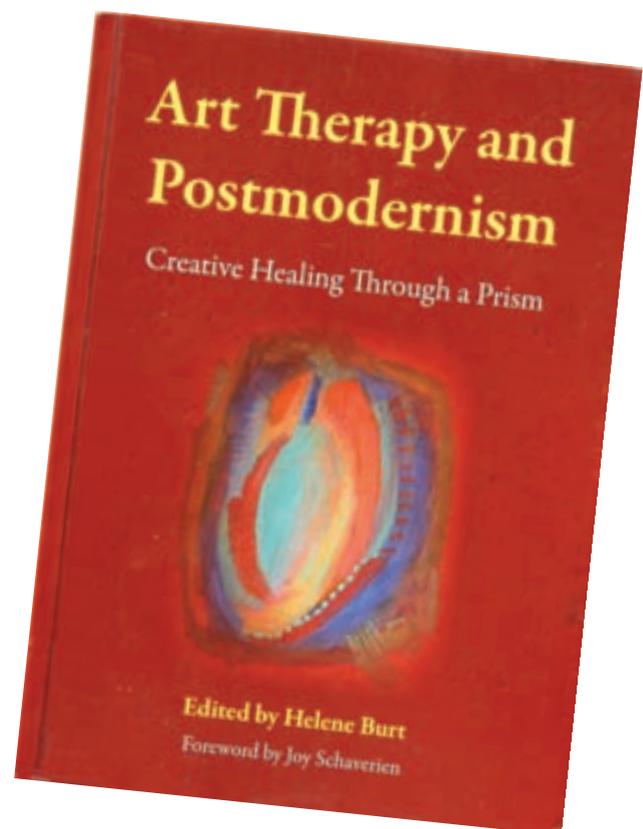
Reviewed by Bronwen Gray

Although we have been living in a postmodern world for more than 30 years, it is fair to say that art therapy has been slow to embrace postmodern theories. This is reflected in the small amount of literature which discusses their relationship. This book is an attempt to make clear how art therapists are rising to the challenges that postmodernity offers, both in practice and through their research. The book is divided into sections that deal with, respectively, postmodern art therapy with specific client populations, art therapy in community settings, research and epistemology.

Burt's opening chapter gives a concise if not plotted history of the rise of postmodernism, making clear how the theories shift us into a model of work that is politically motivated. Inherent is an understanding of postmodernity as interested in social justice, shifting the focus of therapy away from medical models of healthcare delivery to a process of co-creation between client and therapist within a social context.

By embracing a social justice approach (or, as we often refer to it here in the Asia-Pacific region, a human rights approach to art therapy), the emphasis is placed on diversity and states of marginalisation, with an interest in empowering clients to take charge of their present and future.

The first five chapters, which discuss postmodern art therapy practice, make links to other theories that are either complementary to postmodernism, or which currently sit under the postmodern umbrella. In their chapters, Coulter, Vellet and Lala each speak of the



work they have undertaken with different marginalised communities. They all rely heavily on the narrative approach of White and Epston, a well-established and accepted form of postmodern therapy in which the idea of externalisation is one of the essential ingredients of the art therapy process.

Burt and Hogan have some insightful comments to make with regard to feminism and postmodernity, pointing out the complexity of the two theories which share much in common, but at times still sit together uncomfortably at the therapy table. Hogan uses her work with new mothers to highlight her theories making it clear how the personal will always be political.

The second section of the book focuses on some of the ways art therapists work *in* communities. Although it may not be obvious from the outset, the distinction between Section 2 is an emphasis on working *in* communities, whereas the previous section was about working *with* identified communities in traditional therapeutic settings. However, including chapters from only three authors makes the section seem limited as to how and why working in communities is a valid way of working within the profession. Whilst the case studies are interesting, the approaches described have already been covered in Kaplan's book, *Social action and art therapy*, which is not a text with postmodern leanings. As a result it remains unclear how the projects described in these three chapters strengthen the postmodern claims the publication aspires to elaborate on. To cement the link between community-based art as a form of therapy and postmodernity, something more is needed to progress the dialogue.

Section 3 of the book discusses a number of different approaches to art therapy research. However, the research, whilst varied, does not always make its links to postmodernity clear, which I would have thought should be an essential ingredient given the title of the book. Nevertheless, taking the approach that anything phenomenological might fit under the postmodern umbrella, the case studies are varied and interesting. Nanis' research on art therapy for cancer symptom management provides a constructive approach to researching in a postmodern fashion, whilst acknowledging the influence that the highly modernist medical model of research plays in the legitimisation of different ways of knowing.

Bird's research on language and translation in art therapy starts to unpack concepts such as reflexivity and social constructivism, acknowledging that the researcher's biography helps shape the research, which is carried out from a particular standpoint – a concept central to postmodernity.

Burt (who weighs in with a hefty three chapters in the publication) discusses

her research into women recovering from childhood sexual abuse, again making clear the importance of conducting therapy and research within a social context. By witnessing the personal we come to understand one person's experience of the world. By witnessing a number of stories we learn something about the values and culture our world propagates.

The final section deals with art therapy theory and epistemology. Like Section 2, it is thin compared to the other sections, but it does provide for some interesting reading cementing what art therapy needs to look like under a postmodern construct. Goebel-Parker's chapter on Reggio-inspired research paints a clear picture of this vision. By placing the key characteristics of a modernist approach next to a postmodern approach, it is easy to see what the differences are. And for those who do not locate their work within a postmodern framework, there will be surprise at how much postmodern practice is now embedded in our profession.

In conclusion, this book is a good starting point for any art therapist interested in understanding postmodernity and what it means in practice for our profession. At times I was left wondering how the chapters related to postmodern theories and I would have appreciated a stronger emphasis being placed on therapeutic work that is being undertaken in communities, as it is in the fringes that challenges to the status quo make it possible for new ways of being to be brokered. It is here that the work of the therapist focused on the healing of cultural wounds resounds so strongly with postmodern thinking, so for me this was an opportunity lost. Again, whilst the section on research was interesting, I could not concur that it all represented research that is postmodern in its leanings, only that it is current and qualitative. What I did like very much about this book is that postmodern thinking challenges art therapists to cease practicing their profession behind closed doors without any great concern for the wider world, and instead to start making art that acknowledges that the world matters.