

Reflection on masculinities: Men in art therapy

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ABSTRACT

This personal reflection draws on perceptions from two practical art-making sessions – held at The Internationalisation of Art Therapy Conference (Singapore) and the 21st Birthday ANZATA Conference (Geelong). The author presented a paper and facilitated in art making in which he set out to address the presence, social silence and visibility surrounding male art therapists in the profession. As a male art therapist he wondered are men seen only through the lens of their masculinities or are there other ways of seeing men in this field? He was particularly interested in the gross, subtle and transgressive processes acted out in the lives of men who are art therapists and the manner in which men see themselves. The paper uses images generated in the two contexts to illustrate emerging ideas on men who are art therapists.

INTRODUCTION

As a male art therapist I have often wondered are men seen only through the lens of their masculinities or are there other ways of seeing men in this profession? So I approached the convenor of the 21st ANZATA Conference and my abstract was accepted. The convenor asked whether or not I would ‘consider women attending also’ due to numbers of registrations and the absence of men.

I had hoped to have a space for men only to explore the question. As we know from Tavani (2007), art therapy has “always attracted more female students and practitioners than males” (as cited in Junge & Asawa, 1994). This reflective statement is emergent ideas around the ANZATA conference in Geelong 2009 and the Singapore conference in 2010. I asked the audience and workshop participants to make the ‘ideal male art therapist in clay’ and these illustrations inform the reflection.

The Geelong event had very few men in attendance but the convenor was eager to ensure the workshop was able to go ahead.

The Singapore workshop was very much populated with men. Of the group of ten participants nine were men; in Geelong the theatre auditorium was full with around 50 women with only four men in attendance. The space for sharing was qualitatively different and more open in Singapore.

The men arts therapists who came to the sessions both in Geelong and Singapore spoke of being very able to ‘read,’ or sense the verbal and non-verbal encounters they experience around their masculinities and this was at the crux of the session.

Their stories and the art works created in the two sessions provide us with some insights in to what is an extremely complex and contradictory reality. Being seen as men there is no incontrovertible monolithic notion of their subjectivities. No two men are the same. So there are a myriad of possibilities in representing the places of men in art therapy contexts. However, it is noteworthy that I have had a lifetime of experience to develop my personal measures of my knowing as

a 'man' and what I have experienced as a male art therapist.

Initially the work was for a 'men only group' but in Geelong it was intended for a lecture. During the session one colleague was heavily critical of my 'right' to wonder around how men belonged in art therapy – and asked why I had not been considering how 'women' belonged in art therapy. It was never a matter of women's oppression being addressed in my work – this was not the focus of the work being proposed. The manner in which men can belong in the community of art therapies was driving these sessions.

I asked the audience members to make the 'ideal male art therapist in clay' in Geelong. I asked the four men to talk to their art works in Geelong. Moments in that presentation I was questioned as to my purpose and authority as a man to do this work. One or two women colleagues asked after my right to do the work and the sense of privilege and entitlement that I had as a man. The goal of the workshops and presentations was never to silence women or to use my patriarchal or masculine 'authority and power' to suppress women's voices but the moments of challenge that did come from women illustrated that there needs to be occasion to address the relatedness of men and women in the profession and I would hope this is forthcoming in research.

The questions that surrounded the art making were deliberately chosen to critique notions of maleness and belonging in the profession of art psychotherapies. I wondered and still wonder are there ways of belonging and being for the men as art therapists and if this way of being is transferable to healing professions generally? I was eager also to hear if the decision to be an art therapist works within or around a reflection of the cultural norms of the men?

I wondered in both settings what could we men develop as statements *of the experience for and of men in art therapy* and the manner in which these men find themselves able to belong or not belong in the profession? Of interest was Junge, Asawa and Tavani's question as to "Whether this (call to men to be in art therapy) is genetically or culturally determined... women use their talents for nurturing. It is not surprising, therefore, that women with an artistic bent would choose to use their skills in working with people" (p.271). Tavani had piqued my curiosity as he goes on to state that "Many would agree with this explanation, which has led to (his) research question for the workshops: 'What is characteristic of the man who enters the field of art therapy?'" (p.271).

These images focus on the lived experience of the participants in two conference contexts. I wondered as I reflected on the time with the two workshops whether the men and women and their artworks can provide us with evidence for something, which isn't there in the more normative daily encounters?

There are many questions that drove the work of the two sessions and these are not necessarily fully answered in this reflection. I think from the outset we have to appreciate what happens in the lives of men who do elect to become art therapists.

Some core yet to be answered questions for me are:

- Do we need to consider the presence of men in art therapy?
- What is 'enacted' upon the men who come to art therapy as a profession?
- Is the presence or absence of men a process that has come about through professional of

societal and professional exclusion because of models of masculinity?

- Is there a subtle practice of 'inclusion' in the profession and are some men 'marked' as OK to be art therapists whilst others are not OK – is this because of their gender? Or is this around performance of selfhood as men?
- Is there a basis for men's 'belonging' that is un-negotiated? Are there assumptions around masculinity that are clearly influencing the decision to belong in the profession of art therapy?

In the workshops I recognised that the experience of the professional sense of self might constitute subtle discrimination and thus many acts or rituals go unnoticed at a collective level especially.

Can stories and art-making reflect the limitations of the social contracts of masculinities in art therapy and reflect on the context of the circumstance they work in? That said, have men developed a sense in which the intention of the action 'against them' or 'for them' is recognisable in the art therapy profession?

Is there a discourse being enacted and do men recognise the moments that they are being questioned on the basis of their masculinities?

The 'documentation' of their story using art was an occasion for the disparate influences on their being, becoming and belonging to be articulated. The tradition of telling the story to a researcher or group therapist is not new, but male art therapists have largely never been invited to speak out about their identity in Australia. Can we get together – men and women to create and 'perform' the telling of their tales as authentically as is possible? Or

is the telling of the stories of men so slippery as they move from revealing their hopes, and their aspirations?

Can I undertake ethnography as an art therapist, with myself as 'the art therapist – ethnographer-left-in'? Can the men's stories be based on the premise of inner authenticity and spontaneity and an interactive realism as they talk with me and the group as they make these art works?

Their personal re-orientation became both affective and subjective as they comment on their historical location in a place to express their sense of the self.

I want to wonder about celebratory and discriminatory practices as they might be identified in their stories. To see if patterns emerge from these unique stories that can form a quasi-theory of practice before I foreshadow any conclusive findings.

The notion of being one's self as a male art therapist needs to be examined more fully but is central to the masculinities question being explored in these two sessions. In these workshops the telling of the tales of men and their women allies recognised that the experience of the professional sense of self might constitute subtle rituals that go unnoticed at a collective level especially. In these two workshops the men's personal re-orientation became both affective and subjective as they commented on their historical location in a place to express their sense of the self and evoked many questions. Can these stories and the art making reflect the limitations of the social contracts of masculinities in art therapy and reflect on the context of men's work circumstance? Have men developed a sense in which the intention of the action 'against them' or



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From Geelong:

Figure 1: 'The ear to hold the space'.

Figure 2: 'Chromosomal Self XX or XY Ears and Wisdom and History'.

Figure 3: 'Wearing his heart so people can see it'.

Figure 4: 'The container for ideas to be explored. Symbols of self and selves held in space'.

From Singapore:

Figure 5: 'Moving from the brokenness and mending the self-completion and enlightenment'.

Figure 6: 'The container for many stories and layers. Colour and space together'.

Figure 7: 'Being Human – Empowered Human Being'.

Figure 8: 'Threads of Connectedness'.

'for them' is recognisable in the art therapy profession? Do men recognise the moments that they are being questioned on the basis of their masculinities?

The 'documentation' of the story using art was an occasion for the disparate influences on their being, becoming and belonging to be articulated. The tradition of telling the story to a researcher or group therapist is not new, but male art therapists have largely never been invited to speak out about their sense of their identity – in Singapore or Australia. Can we get together – men and women, co- create and 'perform' the telling of the tales of being a male art therapist as authentically as is possible? Can the men's stories be based on the premise of inner authenticity and spontaneity and an interactive realism as they talk with the group as they make these art works?

REFERENCES

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