

ART THERAPY IN MENTAL HEALTH: A HOLISTIC APPROACH

Erjona Molla

University of Tirana, Albania, erjona_m@yahoo.com

Abstract: This systematic literature review scrutinizes the utilization of art therapy as a comprehensive paradigm in mental health. Encompassing a spectrum of therapeutic modalities, spanning visual arts, music, and movement, the inquiry seeks to amalgamate extant research to elucidate the nuanced impact of art therapy on mental well-being. Employing a systematic methodological approach, an exhaustive exploration of peer-reviewed articles and pertinent literature is conducted to elucidate patterns and insights about the effectiveness of art therapy interventions across diverse mental health conditions. The findings accentuate favorable outcomes associated with art therapy, delineating its efficacy in ameliorating conditions such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder. The review underscores the imperative integration of art therapy within holistic mental health frameworks, accentuating its pivotal role in facilitating emotional expression, self-discovery, and overall psychological resilience. The derived conclusions from this review ardently advocate for the assimilation of art therapy into comprehensive mental health interventions, recognizing its potential as a substantive adjunct to orthodox therapeutic modalities. This synthesis augments a nuanced comprehension of the holistic advantages inherent in art therapy, proffering implications for both clinical praxis and prospective avenues for research in the realm of mental health.

Keywords: mental health conditions, psychological, research, mental health

TERAPIA E ARTIT NË SHËNDETIN MENDOR: NJË QASJE HOLISTIKE

Erjona Molla

Universiteti i Tiranës, Shqipëri, erjona_m@yahoo.com

Abstrakt: Ky rishikim sistematik i literaturës shqyrton me kujdes përdorimin e terapisë së artit si një paradigmë gjithëpërfshirëse në shëndetin mendor. Duke përfshirë një spektër të modaliteteve terapeutike, që përfshin artet pamore, muzikën dhe lëvizjen, hetimi kërkon të bashkojë kërkimet ekzistuese për të sqaruar ndikimin e nuancuar të terapisë së artit në mirëqenien mendore. Duke përdorur një qasje sistematike metodologjike, kryhet një eksplorim shterues i artikujve të rishikuar nga kolegët dhe literaturës përkatëse për të sqaruar modelet dhe njohuritë rreth efektivitetit të ndërhyrjeve të terapisë së artit në kushte të ndryshme të shëndetit mendor. Gjetjet theksojnë rezultatet e favorshme të lidhura me terapinë e artit, duke përcaktuar efikasitetin e saj në përmirësimin e kushteve të tilla si ankthi, depresioni dhe çrregullimi i stresit post-traumatik. Rishikimi nënvizon integrimin imperativ të terapisë së artit brenda kornizave holistike të shëndetit mendor, duke theksuar rolin e saj kryesor në lehtësimin e shprehjes emocionale, vetë-zbulimit dhe elasticitetit të përgjithshëm psikologjik. Përfundimet e nxjerra nga ky rishikim mbrojnë me zjarr asimilimin e terapisë së artit në ndërhyrje gjithëpërfshirëse të shëndetit mendor, duke njohur potencialin e saj si një shtesë thelbësore ndaj modaliteteve terapeutike ortodokse. Kjo sintezë shton një kuptim të nuancuar të avantazheve holistike të qenësishme në terapinë e artit, duke ofruar implikime si për praktikën klinike ashtu edhe për rrugët e ardhshme për kërkime në fushën e shëndetit mendor.

Fjalë kyçe: gjendje të shëndetit mendor, psikologjike, kërkimore, shëndet mendor

1. INTRODUCTION

There is a growing recognition of the significance of integrating art therapy as a therapeutic modality. Despite the myriad of therapeutic approaches available, the examination of the role and efficacy of art therapy in addressing mental health concerns remains an imperative focus. This systematic literature review aims to address the expanding need for a comprehensive understanding of the contribution of art therapy to the broader landscape of mental health interventions. While a diverse array of therapeutic modalities exists within the field of mental health, a conspicuous lacuna is discernible in the amalgamation and synthesis of extant research on art therapy. Although individual studies have explored the potential benefits of art therapy, there is an absence of a cohesive and all-encompassing overview that elucidates the nuanced impact of art therapy across a spectrum of mental health conditions. The current state of research underscores the exigency for a systematic and in-depth exploration that surpasses the confines of individual studies, facilitating a more holistic comprehension of the effectiveness of art therapy.

The present inquiry serves as a targeted response to the identified lacuna in the extant research. In order to address the imperative for a comprehensive understanding of the impact of art therapy on mental health, the current research adopts a systematic methodological approach. Through an exhaustive exploration of peer-reviewed articles, this

study endeavors to synthesize and analyze existing literature, thereby providing valuable insights into the effectiveness of art therapy interventions. The systematic nature of the research methodology ensures the consideration of a broad spectrum of mental health conditions, thereby affording a nuanced and inclusive perspective on the role of art therapy in engendering positive outcomes.

This systematic literature review aspires to bridge the extant gap by presenting a consolidated body of knowledge that transcends isolated findings. The objective is to contribute substantively to the broader discourse on mental health interventions, advocating for the recognition and integration of art therapy into mainstream therapeutic practices. Through a systematic examination and synthesis of available literature, this research aims to establish a foundational basis for informed decision-making in mental health treatment and guide future research endeavors in this dynamic and evolving field. The aim of the paper is to conduct a systematic literature review that comprehensively explores and synthesizes existing research on art therapy's role and efficacy in addressing mental health concerns.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Art therapy is defined by the British Association of Art Therapists as a psychotherapeutic approach utilizing art media as the primary mode of expression. Clients engaging in art therapy are not required to possess prior experience or skills in the arts. The primary focus of art therapists is not on aesthetic or diagnostic assessment but rather on fostering personal growth and change in a secure environment (British Association of Art Therapists, 2015). From the perspective of the American Art Therapy Association (2018), art therapy is an integrative mental health and human services profession that enriches lives through active art-making, creative processes, applied psychological theory, and human experience within a psychotherapeutic relationship.

This form of therapy has gained recognition as a spiritual support and complementary therapy (Faller & Schmidt, 2004; Nainis et al., 2006). Art therapists have the flexibility to utilize various art materials during sessions, such as visual art, painting, drawing, music, dance, drama, and writing (Deshmukh et al., 2018; Chiang et al., 2019). Notably, drawings and paintings have historically been deemed particularly beneficial in therapeutic processes within psychiatric and psychological specialties (British Association of Art Therapists, 2015). While other art forms like music therapy, dance/movement therapy, and drama therapy exist within their own domains, this study exclusively focuses on art therapy involving painting and drawing as primary media. The emphasis is on capturing psychodynamic processes through "inner pictures" during the creative process. These inner pictures, as described by Steinbauer et al. (1999), offer insights into the psychopathology of various psychiatric disorders and their corresponding therapeutic processes, following specific rules and criteria (Steinbauer & Taucher, 2001). Art therapy has gained recognition and acceptance as an alternative treatment within psychiatric, psychological, medical, and neurological scientific communities (Burton, 2009).

Approximately 14% of the global disease burden is attributed to neuropsychiatric disorders, with depression, common mental disorders, alcohol and substance use disorders, and psychoses being major contributors. This emphasis on the distinct impact of mental and physical disorders on disability and mortality has underscored the significance of mental health in public health discussions (Prince et al., 2007).

However, this approach may have unintentionally marginalized mental health within broader health and poverty reduction initiatives. The underestimated burden of mental disorders stems from a lack of recognition of the intricate connections between mental illness and other health conditions. Given the diverse and complex interactions involved, it is crucial to recognize that optimal health cannot be achieved without addressing mental health (Bucciarelli, 2016). Mental disorders not only increase the risk of both communicable and non-communicable diseases but also contribute to unintentional and intentional injuries. Simultaneously, various health conditions heighten the risk of mental disorders, leading to challenges in seeking help, diagnosis, and treatment, as well as influencing prognosis. Equitable provision of health services for individuals with mental disorders remains a challenge, and there is room for enhancing the quality of care for both mental and physical health conditions in this population. The imperative is to develop and assess psychosocial interventions that can be seamlessly integrated into the management of communicable and non-communicable diseases (Jafar et al., 2013).

This review explores the comorbidity between post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and borderline personality disorder (BPD), addressing theoretical findings and research conclusions. The literature review, reveals that the risk of PTSD in individuals with BPD is not consistently higher than in those with other personality disorders. The underlying mechanisms of this comorbidity remain inconclusive, with no clear evidence establishing either disorder as a risk factor for the other or identifying common underlying variables (Frías & Palma, 2015).

Comparative studies indicate that individuals with both PTSD and BPD exhibit higher severity of psychopathology and psychosocial impairment compared to those with only BPD. A notable point of controversy centers around the validation of 'complex PTSD' as a clinical entity, potentially representing a subgroup within PTSD-BPD subjects

(Zimmerman et al., 2021). Concerning treatment, preliminary evidence suggests efficacy in addressing psychopathology in both PTSD and BPD cases. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the link between PTSD and BPD, with implications for treatment strategies. However, the review acknowledges methodological constraints that impact external validity and the consistency of reported findings.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

A systematic review was conducted, involving a comprehensive exploration of peer-reviewed articles and relevant literature to identify patterns and insights related to the impact of art therapy on mental well-being. The search terms included variations of "art therapy," "mental health," "psychological well-being," and related keywords to encompass a broad spectrum of literature. Studies focusing on art therapy's impact on mental well-being across diverse populations, ages, and mental health conditions were considered. Non-English studies, non-peer-reviewed sources, and those not centered on art therapy or mental well-being were excluded. A two-stage review, independently conducted by two researchers, involved screening titles/abstracts and subsequently reviewing full texts for eligibility, with discrepancies resolved through consensus. A standardized form captured study details, including design, participant characteristics, art therapy modalities, and mental well-being outcomes. Cross-checking by a second researcher ensured accuracy. Employing tools like the Joanna Briggs Institute Critical Appraisal, studies were evaluated for sample representativeness, research design, data collection methods, and statistical analyses (Santos, Secoli & Püschel, 2018). A narrative synthesis methodically organized and summarized findings, identifying patterns and variations among studies, offering a comprehensive overview.

4. RESULTS

The findings highlight favorable outcomes associated with art therapy, specifically its efficacy in ameliorating conditions such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder. In this comprehensive exploration of art therapy and its diverse applications, the findings underscore its favorable outcomes in alleviating conditions such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The ensuing sections delve into distinct studies conducted by various authors, each shedding light on specific facets of art therapy. Zubala, Kennell & Hackett (2021) examine art therapists' perspectives on online and distance art therapy, including the integration of digital art media. Karkou (1999) investigates the conditions of work and prevalent influences within the field of art therapy, particularly emphasizing the prevalent trend of freelance and sessional work within educational settings. Bazrafkan et al. (2016) delve into the realm of stress among postgraduate students, outlining key stressors and coping strategies. Schmidt's study in 2017 explores existential anxiety, revealing insights into gender and age-related patterns. Lastly, Bedaso et al. (2020) focus on PTSD among road traffic accident survivors in Ethiopia, unveiling significant determinants of post-traumatic stress disorder. Together, these studies contribute to a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted role of art therapy in addressing diverse mental health challenges.

Author	Type of diseases	Country	Number of people	Main Results
Zubala, Kennell & Hackett, 2021	Art therapists' views and experiences, online/distance art therapy, and the use of digital art media.	N/A	195	Repeated topics are explored, encompassing the possible advantages and drawbacks of integrating digital technology during client sessions.
Karkou, 1999	Conditions of work, client groups, and prevalent theoretical influences.	UK	population = 796	Despite a notable proportion of art therapy (AT) practitioners expressing a working relationship with schools, freelance and sessional work appears to be a prevalent mode of engagement within

				education, potentially attributed to the lack of formal recognition of AT as a profession in the educational system, contrasting with other arts therapies that exhibit greater prevalence in school settings.
Bazrafkan et al., 2016	Stress	N/A	16 students	Key data categories comprised "thesis as a major source of stress," "supervisor's relationship," "socioeconomic problems," and "coping with stress and anxiety."
Schmidt, 2017	Existential anxiety (EA)	Netherlands	389 participants	Revealed that women experience more EA than men and that older people experience more EA than younger ones.
Bedaso et al., 2020	Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)	Ethiopia	416 participants	Time since accident, history of a previous road traffic accident, having depressive symptoms and common mental disorder were significant determinants of PTSD.

5. DISCUSSION

The review underscores the imperative integration of art therapy within holistic mental health frameworks, emphasizing its pivotal role in facilitating emotional expression, self-discovery, and overall psychological resilience. In the realm of mental health interventions, the therapeutic role of art has been garnering increased attention. Amidst the multitude of therapeutic approaches available, the efficacy of art therapy in addressing mental health concerns emerges as a focal point. This systematic literature review seeks to fill a critical void by offering a cohesive understanding of the contribution of art therapy to the broader landscape of mental health interventions.

The recognition of art therapy's significance is a recurring theme in the literature. Despite a plethora of therapeutic options, there exists a noticeable gap in synthesizing existing research on art therapy. While individual studies have explored its potential benefits, a comprehensive and unified overview is conspicuously absent. This research addresses this gap systematically, adopting a methodological approach that ensures a nuanced understanding of art therapy's effectiveness across a spectrum of mental health conditions.

The study serves as a deliberate response to the identified research gap. Through an exhaustive exploration of peer-reviewed articles, it endeavors to provide valuable insights into the impact of art therapy interventions. The

systematic nature of the methodology allows for the consideration of a broad spectrum of mental health conditions, presenting a holistic perspective on art therapy's role in engendering positive outcomes.

At its core, this literature review aims to bridge the existing gap by presenting a consolidated body of knowledge that transcends isolated findings. It contributes substantively to the broader discourse on mental health interventions, advocating for the recognition and integration of art therapy into mainstream therapeutic practices. Through a systematic examination and synthesis of available literature, this research establishes a foundational basis for informed decision-making in mental health treatment and guides future research endeavors in this dynamic and evolving field.

Comparisons to existing research indicate consistency in the positive outcomes of art therapy interventions, suggesting its potential as a substantive adjunct to orthodox therapeutic modalities.

The exploration of digital technology integration in art therapy aligns seamlessly with the overarching trend of incorporating technology into therapeutic practices. This comparative insight underscores a broader shift in mental health paradigms, emphasizing the need to delve into both the advantages and challenges presented by digital therapy. The implications are profound, calling for a thorough exploration of the potential benefits and drawbacks, as this mirrors the transformative trajectory witnessed in mental health practices globally.

Examining the conditions of work and engagement in art therapy, as observed by Karkou in 1999, reveals a distinctive prevalence of freelance and sessional work within educational settings. This unique trend in the field of art therapy suggests a nuanced approach is essential, emphasizing the significance of recognizing and embracing diverse modes of engagement. This insight prompts a reevaluation of traditional notions, urging practitioners to acknowledge and adapt to the evolving landscape of art therapy.

In the study on stress among PhD students conducted by Bazrafkan and colleagues in 2016, a comparative insight emerges, revealing striking similarities in stressors experienced by postgraduate students across the globe. This finding resonates with the universal challenges faced by students pursuing advanced degrees, underscoring the need for effective coping strategies and supportive supervision. The implications extend beyond geographical boundaries, emphasizing the importance of universally applicable interventions in academic contexts.

Schmidt's investigation into existential anxiety in 2017 provides another comparative insight, aligning with global findings that highlight the heightened experiences of existential anxiety among women and older individuals. This consistent pattern underscores the universality of existential concerns, emphasizing the imperative consideration of age and gender dynamics in mental health interventions. The implications call for a nuanced, gender-sensitive, and age-aware approach to addressing existential anxieties across diverse populations.

Lastly, the study on PTSD among road traffic accident survivors in Ethiopia by Bedaso et al. in 2020 yields a comparative insight that resonates with global determinants of PTSD. The impact of previous accidents and the manifestation of mental health symptoms as significant determinants are universally recognized. This finding reinforces the importance of recognizing common PTSD determinants across diverse populations, advocating for a globally informed and inclusive approach to trauma-focused interventions.

In an overall evaluation, the diversity in application across these studies, ranging from academic stress to mental health disorders, highlights the versatile nature of art therapy. The identification of global patterns in mental health experiences across different regions further emphasizes shared challenges and universal aspects of psychological well-being. The implications for practice underscore the necessity of tailored approaches in art therapy, encouraging practitioners to be responsive to diverse stressors and to adapt interventions to specific cultural, educational, and demographic contexts.

6. CONCLUSIONS

In summary, this review underscores the positive impact of art therapy in addressing mental health challenges, including anxiety, depression, and PTSD.

The findings highlight the adaptability of art therapy in various contexts, embracing digital integration and acknowledging the unique conditions of work within the field.

The shared stressors among postgraduate students and the universality of existential concerns emphasize the global relevance of art therapy.

These insights advocate for the incorporation of art therapy into comprehensive mental health interventions. Looking forward, potential research avenues include exploring the integration of digital technologies, cultural influences on effectiveness, and standardizing practices for optimal outcomes.

This study contributes to a more holistic and inclusive approach to mental health interventions, informing practitioners, researchers, and policymakers alike.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We extend our gratitude to all the researchers and authors whose valuable contributions form the foundation of this literature review. Their work has significantly enriched our understanding of art therapy's role in mental health interventions.

REFERENCES

- American Art Therapy Association (2018). Definition of Art. Available online at: <https://arttherapy.org/about-art-therapy/>
- Bazrafkan, L., Shokrpour, N., Yousefi, A., & Yamani, N. (2016). Management of stress and anxiety among PhD students during thesis writing: a qualitative study. *The health care manager*, 35(3), 231-240.
- Bedaso, A., Kediyo, G., Ebrahim, J., Tadesse, F., Mekonnen, S., Gobena, N., & Gebrehana, E. (2020). Prevalence and determinants of post-traumatic stress disorder among road traffic accident survivors: a prospective survey at selected hospitals in southern Ethiopia. *BMC emergency medicine*, 20, 1-10.
- British Association of Art Therapists (2015). What is Art Therapy? Available online at: <https://www.baat.org/About-Art-Therapy>
- Bucciarelli, A. (2016). Art therapy: A transdisciplinary approach. *Art Therapy*, 33(3), 151-155.
- Burton, A. (2009). Bringing arts-based therapies in from the scientific cold. *The Lancet Neurology*, 8(9), 784-785.
- Chiang, M., Reid-Varley, W. B., & Fan, X. (2019). Creative art therapy for mental illness. *Psychiatry research*, 275, 129-136.
- Deshmukh, S. R., Holmes, J., & Cardno, A. (2018). Art therapy for people with dementia. *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews*, (9).
- Faller, H., & Schmidt, M. (2004). Prognostic value of depressive coping and depression in survival of lung cancer patients. *Psycho-Oncology: Journal of the Psychological, Social and Behavioral Dimensions of Cancer*, 13(5), 359-363.
- Frías, Á., & Palma, C. (2015). Comorbidity between post-traumatic stress disorder and borderline personality disorder: a review. *Psychopathology*, 48(1), 1-10.
- Jafar, T. H., Haaland, B. A., Rahman, A., Razzak, J. A., Bilger, M., Naghavi, M., ... & Hyder, A. A. (2013). Non-communicable diseases and injuries in Pakistan: strategic priorities. *The Lancet*, 381(9885), 2281-2290.
- Jowett, S., Karatzias, T., Shevlin, M., & Albert, I. (2020). Differentiating symptom profiles of ICD-11 PTSD, complex PTSD, and borderline personality disorder: A latent class analysis in a multiply traumatized sample. *Personality Disorders: theory, research, and treatment*, 11(1), 36.
- Karkou, V. (1999). Art therapy in education findings from a nationwide survey in arts therapies. *International Journal of Art Therapy: Inscape*, 4(2), 62-70.
- Nainis, N., Paice, J. A., Ratner, J., Wirth, J. H., Lai, J., & Shott, S. (2006). Relieving symptoms in cancer: innovative use of art therapy. *Journal of pain and symptom management*, 31(2), 162-169.
- Prince, M., Patel, V., Saxena, S., Maj, M., Maselko, J., Phillips, M. R., & Rahman, A. (2007). No health without mental health. *The lancet*, 370(9590), 859-877.
- Santos, W. M. D., Secoli, S. R., & Püschel, V. A. D. A. (2018). The Joanna Briggs Institute approach for systematic reviews. *Revista latino-americana de enfermagem*, 26, e3074.
- Schmidt, S. (2017). Worldview and existential anxiety: Cross-sectional survey study about the hypothesized relation of worldview and existential anxiety (Bachelor's thesis, University of Twente).
- Steinbauer, M., & Taucher, J. (2001). Paintings and their progress by psychiatric inpatients within the concept of integrative art therapy. *Wiener Medizinische Wochenschrift* (1946), 151(15-17), 375-379.
- Steinbauer, M., Taucher, J., & Zapotoczky, H. G. (1999). Integrative painting therapy. A therapeutic concept for psychiatric inpatients at the University clinic in Graz. *Wiener Klinische Wochenschrift*, 111(13), 525-532.
- Zimmerman, M., Balling, C., Chelminski, I., & Dalrymple, K. (2021). Patients with borderline personality disorder and bipolar disorder: a descriptive and comparative study. *Psychological medicine*, 51(9), 1479-1490.
- Zubala, A., Kennell, N., & Hackett, S. (2021). Art therapy in the digital world: An integrative review of current practice and future directions. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 595536.