

Explorations of context: An interview with Ephrat Huss

Fiona Gardner talks to Professor Ephrat Huss

Abstract

Fiona Gardner interviews art therapist and academic Professor Ephrat Huss from Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel. The conversation explores Ephrat's experiences of the arts therapies in Israel, and the work she presented in her keynote address and masterclass at the inaugural conference of ANZACATA, at Murdoch University, Perth, Western Australia, in December 2018. Drawing from her background as an art therapist and social worker, Professor Huss discusses the importance of an integrated theoretical approach in art therapy and the valuable contribution that social theory makes to contemporary art therapy practice.

Keywords

Social context, dynamic therapy, applying theory, social work, feminism, Israel

Introduction

I met Ephrat at the ANZACATA conference at Murdoch University in December 2019, having the opportunity to enjoy both her masterclass and keynote address. It was a pleasure to follow up this connection with a Skype interview to discuss Ephrat's work further.

Fiona Gardner: *In Perth you spoke of the importance of context and social systems, and their effect on how we view our work. As a way of beginning, I wonder if you could share a little of the theoretical lens that you bring to your work as an art therapist?*

Ephrat Huss: I was one of those people who took forever to develop professionally. I started as a fine artist; my first degree was in fine arts and I felt that it wasn't exactly my world. It was a bit like Goldilocks and the three bears: I was looking for the right seat, and then I continued to art therapy. Because in those days – because I am quite old – in those days it was very, very dynamic; it was taught in a very dynamic way in Israel. I loved that, but when I went out to work with families with violence, families living in poverty with violence, I found the dynamic lens wasn't enough, it wasn't enough for the child to ventilate. I had to understand the system and I had to understand the levels of oppression the system was experiencing, and how I could change something in the system, empower the system.

So then I felt that my dynamic art therapy wasn't enough, and I moved to do my doctorate in social work. I worked with Bedouin women, very impoverished, marginalised Bedouin women, who are similar to the Indigenous populations in Australia. There, also, I felt it was more important to try and co-produce knowledge with them rather than do art therapy on them. So then I tried to look at art as a way of excavating silenced voices and silenced experiences in an indirect way that wasn't threatening to people without power. In other words, maintain the cultural boundaries. Because it was using metaphors and symbols, and I tried to understand the women's strengths and the way they were resisting the deep poverty and marginalisation they were experiencing. On many levels – international levels and also inside their own culture, from the men inside their culture, etc.

FG: *So the process of your training and the course of your experiences brought this significant shift, from focusing on the intra-psychic and the individual to the broader social context?*

EH: Yes, then I opened an art therapy training program for social workers. They already had the systemic thinking and they had community work. I felt that we were building a new body of knowledge, that they were meeting my knowledge and I was meeting their knowledge, and a kind of social art therapy was coming out of this.

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