

On Gender and the Creative Arts Therapies

Sandra Lynn Curtis

Concordia University

Author Note

Sandra Curtis, PhD, MTA, MT-BC, Department of Creative Arts Therapies, Faculty of Fine Arts, Concordia University, Montréal, Québec, Canada.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Sandra Curtis, Department of Creative Arts Therapies, Faculty of Fine Arts, Concordia University, 1455 de Maisonneuve

Bld West, Montréal, Québec, Canada. Email: sandi.curtis@concordia.ca

514-848-2424 ext 4679 (tel); 514-848-4969 (fax)

Keywords: creative arts therapies; gender; feminism; political activism

On Gender and the Creative Arts Therapies

It was with much anticipation that I awaited the “birth” of this special issue on *Gender and the Creative Arts Therapies*. This issue brings together the writings of creative arts therapists reflecting a diversity of ideas and frames of reference, yet sharing a common understanding of the importance of gender in our work and our lives. The hope for this issue was to create a space – a room of our own as it were – in which we could examine the rich complexity of gender and its meaning within a sociopolitical context; an examination of gender and its multiple interactions with race, socioeconomic status, sexuality, ability, and age. The reflections presented in the articles which follow certainly do not represent a monolithic view of this complex issue. The authors come from many different backgrounds and bring their own worldviews to their understanding of gender and what it means for creative arts therapists; as such, gender is explored through such lenses as feminism, critical race theory, disability activism, queer theory and sexuality studies.

Such an examination of gender is greatly needed in the creative arts therapies. Creative arts therapies’ work is often done without an understanding of gender and “without an understanding of the social, economic, and political contexts that influence what we along with our clients are up against and which constrain our best efforts” (Sajnani & Kaplan, 2012, p. 165). While earlier inroads have been made in such other disciplines as psychology and social work, this has only recently emerged in the various creative arts therapies (Curtis, 2013). A critical feminist understanding of gender has, however, been seen in a few recent publications in art therapy (Hogan, 1997 & 2003), in dance/movement therapy (Allegranti, 2009), and in music therapy (Curtis, 2000, 2007, & 2008; Edwards & Hadley, 2007; Hadley, 2006). This emergent trend has faced challenges including: Belief that there is no further need for feminism or anti-

oppression work; belief that work with clients is individual not political; and concern about negative connotations associated with the term “feminism” (Curtis, 2013; Hadley & Edwards, 2004). Yet the reality is that our sociopolitical context does not reflect equity; individuals within it have very different experiences of privilege or oppression depending on their social locations of gender, race, socioeconomic status, sexuality, and ability.

While on one hand this *Special Issue on Gender* may be late in coming, on the other hand its arrival is timely, following on the heels of an international conference on Gender, Health and the Creative Arts Therapies held in Montreal in 2012, a meeting of feminist music therapy researchers supported by the Canadian Institutes for Health Research (CIHR), and a recent Social Justice Issue of *Arts in Psychotherapy* (Sajnani & Kaplan, 2012). What those working in the area of social justice and those working in the area of gender have in common is an understanding that our work *is* political. We may meet our clients in therapy, but we bring with us our experiences and social locations of the outer world; we also, clients and therapists alike, return to that outer world.

Since our clients are either men or women and we therapists are either men or women, work around gender (and all the intersecting dimensions of race, class, sexual orientation, etc.) becomes not the work of some music therapists; it becomes an ethical imperative for all music therapists. (Curtis, 2013, para. 11)

Critical feminist understanding of gender contends that not only is our work as therapists political, our responsibility as therapists is to be political activists for social change in the community at large. We are held accountable to work to change lives in therapy, and to work to change the world.

References

- Allegranti, B. (2009). Embodied performances of sexuality and gender: A feminist approach to dance movement psychotherapy and performance practice. *Body, Movement and Dance in Psychotherapy*, 4 (1), 1731.
- Curtis, S. L. (2013). *Sorry it has taken so long: Continuing feminist dialogues in music therapy. Voices: A World Forum for Music Therapy*, 13(1). Retrieved from:
<https://normt.uib.no/index.php/voices/article/view/688/572>
- Curtis, S. (2007). Claiming voice: Music therapy for childhood sexual abuse survivors. In S. Brooke (Ed.), *The use of creative arts therapies with sexual abuse survivors*. (pp. 196-206). Springfield, IL: C. C. Thomas.
- Curtis, S. (2008). Songs of freedom: Music therapy for women survivors of domestic violence. In S. Brooke (Ed.), *Creative arts therapies and domestic violence*, (pp. 121 – 135). Springfield, IL: C. C. Thomas.
- Edwards, J., & Hadley, S. (2007). Expanding music therapy practice: Incorporating the feminist frame. *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, 34(3), 199-207.
- Hadley, S. (Ed.). (2006). *Feminist perspectives in music therapy*. Gilsum, NH: Barcelona Publishers.
- Hadley, S., & Edwards, J. (2004). Sorry for the silence: A contribution from feminist theory to the discourse(s) within music therapy. *Voices: A World Forum for Music Therapy*, 4 (2). Retrieved October 28, 2012, from
<https://normt.uib.no/index.php/voices/article/view/177/136>
- Hogan, S. (Ed.) (2003). *Gender issues in art therapy*. London: JKP.
- Hogan, S. (1997). *Feminist approaches to art therapy*. New York: Routledge.

Sajnani, N., & Kaplan, F. (2012). The creative arts therapies and social justice: A conversation between the editors of this special issue. Editorial. *The Arts in Psychotherapy, 39*, 165-167.

Sajnani, N. (2012). Response/ability: Imagining a critical race feminist paradigm for the creative arts therapies. *The Arts in Psychotherapy, 39*, 186-191.