

# The practice continuum: Conceptualising a person-centred approach to art therapy

Theresa Van Lith and Patricia Fenner

## ABSTRACT

In this article the authors explore the notion of a continuum of practices to conceptualise a person-centred approach to art therapy in Australia. This approach initially developed out of the authors' experiences of work in psychosocial rehabilitation settings. It was substantiated as a framework through an audit of the arts-based practices of two psychosocial rehabilitation organisations. The authors propose that the framework may reflect some other therapists' experiences of work in youth and adult settings and that in presenting it here they may extend a discussion of how we define and understand therapeutic practice in the local Australian context. The continuum comprises a spectrum of art practices to which the therapist brings a psychological orientation and intention. The psychological mindedness which is brought to all stages of the continuum may not however be evident to non-art therapist practitioners who are more accustomed to the roles of teacher or artist. This can lead to misunderstanding about the work that art therapists do. The framework may have applicability to practices beyond the psychosocial context.

## INTRODUCTION

Art therapists are valued for their ability to assist clients in bringing new perspectives to life through making meaning from art-based forms (Smitskamp, 1995; Karkou & Sanderson, 2006). Nevertheless, the means by which art therapy facilitates these insights can be complex, and the various components involved in the process misunderstood. Public misperceptions of how art therapy works can impact negatively on the art therapist, as well as on subsequent communications with other health professionals. This can lead to confusion and frustration amongst some therapists looking to find a suitable language to define what it is they do and can lead to a lack of confidence and even defensiveness about their profession.

We have experienced art therapists using terms such as 'art facilitator' to describe their work in order to reflect the values of a work

environment which, for various reasons, may not readily accommodate the term 'therapy'. However, generic terms such as 'facilitator' can lead to a lack of appreciation for the psychological nature of the work as well as for the years of training, qualification and clinical expertise being utilised in these art-making engagements. Conceptualisations of the work that are limited to the terms art-as-therapy or art psychotherapy, may in turn also lead to misunderstandings amongst colleagues in relation to the complexity and flexibility involved in art therapy practice.

Some uneasiness surrounding the definition of art therapy is also being felt and discussed in Europe and the United States (Vick & Sexton-Radek, 2008). Through their comparative studies Vick and Sexton-Radek identify a need to expand current theoretical and philosophical definitions to embrace the current range of applications of art therapy practice. In response