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To cite this article: Tzafi Weinberg (2018): Gaining Cultural Competence Through Alliances in Art Therapy With Indigenous Clients (La compétence culturelle et son acquisition grâce à des alliances avec des clients autochtones en art-thérapie), Canadian Art Therapy Association Journal, DOI: 10.1080/08322473.2018.1453214

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/08322473.2018.1453214

Published online: 25 Apr 2018.

Article views: 6

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Gaining Cultural Competence Through Alliances in Art Therapy With Indigenous Clients (La compétence culturelle et son acquisition grâce à des alliances avec des clients autochtones en art-thérapie)

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ABSTRACT
Non-Indigenous art therapists who work with Indigenous clients must carefully consider Indigenous culture as part of their practice. The historical mistrust of Indigenous people toward non-Indigenous health-care providers creates challenges in providing therapeutic support. Non-Indigenous art therapists cannot participate in Indigenous traditions without prior knowledge of the people they work with that is specific to their history, acknowledging the realities of intergenerational trauma, and the barriers to the circle of caring that is traditionally modeled within the family and the community. Furthermore, as an ethical imperative it is essential for non-Indigenous art therapists to partner with an Indigenous mentor or clinical supervisor. There are successful examples of Indigenous-focused art therapy programs that will be highlighted, with the aim of promoting culturally responsive approaches to art therapy practice.

RESUMÉ
Les art-thérapeutes non autochtones qui travaillent avec des clients autochtones doivent considérer soigneusement la culture autochtone comme faisant partie de leur pratique. La méfiance historique des peuples autochtones envers les prestataires de soins de santé non autochtones crée des défis en matière de soutien thérapeutique. Les art-thérapeutes non autochtones ne peuvent participer aux traditions autochtones sans une connaissance préalable de l’histoire des personnes avec lesquelles ils travaillent et ils doivent reconnaître les réalités liées au traumatisme intergénérationnel et les obstacles au cercle de soins traditionnellement érigé au sein de la famille et de la communauté. En outre, un impératif éthique essentiel est que les art-thérapeutes non autochtones s’associent à un mentor ou à un superviseur clinique autochtone. Des exemples réussis de programmes d’art-thérapie axés sur les Autochtones seront mis en évidence dans le but de promouvoir des approches culturellement adaptées dans la pratique de l’art-thérapie.

Introduction: The importance of knowledge, local culture, and history

Consciousness is Personal
We all interpret reality through our own “lens.”
Our individual reality is also Collective.
Our "cultural locatedness"…Our identity(s)
Influence our perceptions. (Graveline, 1998, p. 90)

In Manitoba, where I live and work, Indigenous people compose 17% of the population, while Indigenous children, aged 0 to 14, represent 85% of young people in foster care based on 2011 statistics. Indigenous foster children are living in one of the three following settings: a) in a skip-generation family, that is with one or two grandparents and without a parent present; b) with other relatives, such as an older sibling, an aunt, an uncle, or a cousin; or, c) as foster children in private homes placed with either Indigenous or non-Indigenous foster families (Statistics Canada, 2017). I have several years’ experience as an art therapist working with Indigenous foster children who have had traumatic childhood experiences. My goal is to help these foster children build a secure sense of attachment with their biological or foster families, as well as to their communities and cultures. In this article, I will explore the following: a) the importance of knowing the client’s local culture and background; b) building resiliency through cultural and social attachment; c) art therapy with Indigenous people; d) the implications to my practice; and e) my conclusions.

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Although many art therapists work from attachment theory and trauma-informed methods, neither of these orientations, by themselves, are enough when working cross-culturally with Indigenous children in the Canadian foster care system. Part of recognizing and respecting Indigenous cultures is to know their history. When dealing with children who have experienced trauma and loss, I need to consider their intergenerational history. According to Brady (2015), historical trauma is generated by extensive events occurring across a population that cause significant collective distress, executed by out-of-group members with intentionally destructive aims, and transmitted across generations.

The history of European colonization has impacted generations of Indigenous people in North America and across the globe, and its oppressive results persist today. After years of helping European settlers adjust to the “New World,” Indigenous people were subjected to a process of assimilation that began in 1850 and continued into the late 1990s, with Indigenous children forced into residential schools (Partridge, 2010; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015a) that hoped to “Christianize and civilize” (Partridge, 2010, p. 46). Indigenous children were separated from their families and traditional cultures, and were prohibited from speaking their language or practicing their ceremonies (Muirhead & de Leeuw, 2015; Partridge, 2010). When they returned to their communities as adults they felt alienated from their cultural traditions, often becoming isolated and unable to fit into either Indigenous or mainstream societies (Partridge, 2010).

The generations of Indigenous children taken from their homes and communities by the government’s child welfare authorities form a critically important context for understanding the foster experience of today. Often, Indigenous children during their formative years were removed without warning, as an act of “welfare” and were fostered or adopted out, mostly into non-Indigenous families. Child welfare studies have described the long-term psychological effects of this practice, suggesting that many Indigenous children grew up in a “cultural vacuum” (Menzies, 2007, p. 371) that carried over into subsequent generations. It was only after the 1970s that Indigenous peoples, through the National Indian Brotherhood of Canada, were able to challenge and reduce federal control over Indigenous education (Partridge, 2010).

The Canadian government’s social policies produced collateral damage in the form of trauma and attachment difficulties for many individuals, as well as identity, parenting, and family system issues. Moreover, many residential schools operated from a system of punishment and abuse that over time normalized social conditions, such as systemic racism, which continued to oppress Indigenous people (Menzies, 2007). These systemic injustices and their impact were addressed by a Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015b) report, which included 94 recommendations to proactively promote Indigenous languages, cultures, histories, and identities.

This tragic legacy of violence, abuse, and loss needs to be acknowledged by non-Indigenous people through increasing their awareness and understanding of Indigenous forebears’ experiences. The need for cultural safety, humility, and skilled competencies on the part of any therapist who works with Indigenous peoples is critical. Indigenous authority, input, and control are also essential, so that the community is involved in the support and care of its children. Partridge (2010), an Indigenous social worker, asserts: “Although the assaults on the first peoples of this land have been devastating and intergenerational … it is with pride that we celebrate the resilience and tenacity of the holistic well-being of Aboriginal peoples. We are still here” (Partridge, 2010, p. 33).

**Resiliency through cultural and social attachment**

The circle is both a symbol and archetypal form that illustrates an Indigenous worldview, showing how life evolves within its deep connection to the natural world (Partridge, 2010). In many First Nation cultures, relationships are ideally viewed as taking place within a circle of caring for one another. Thus, traditionally children are to be cared for as part of an interdependent, extended family structure. This value has been compromised for many Indigenous families whose generational experiences with the residential school system, and resulting alienation from their communities and traditions, continue to exert an influence on parenting and family life (Gerlach, 2008). Taking children from their homes created anguish and upheaval and broke the circle of caring; subsequently, the children became lost. Therefore, it stands to reason that returning to cultural roots may mend
the circle and help in the healing of both individuals and the Indigenous community as a whole. According to the Health Council of Canada (2011), rebuilding pride in one’s culture is good medicine.

The Indigenous peoples’ way of connecting and interacting with all forms of life with respect and free will promotes their strengths (Vivian, 2013). In my practice, there are foster children being raised by their grandparents, who participate in sweat lodge ceremonies and culturally relevant activities (see Figure 1, Figure 2, and Figure 3). According to Ivanova and Brown (2011), this is a way to strengthen the family’s relations and connections to Indigenous traditions. As cited in Vinkle (2012), Indigenous knowledge involves physical, spiritual, emotional, and mental aspects of life. Spirituality is presented and interwoven into daily experience, along with gratitude to the creator.

The Indigenous worldview of relational, collectivist, and communal ideas can assist Indigenous foster children to feel more secure, and can help build resiliency for their communities. However, there could be disparities regarding beliefs, language, and traditions between the Indigenous foster families and their foster children; for instance, differences between those who live on the reserve and those living in an urban area (Bird, 2015). There are also non-Indigenous foster families that enter into the circle of caring. From my experience, many take their foster children to activities promoting Indigenous culture, which often take place in local Indigenous community centers. Additionally, Bird (2015) asserts that it is important that social agencies choose foster parents who are skilled and committed to work with foster children from different cultures. Therefore, to achieve a trans-cultural care system, it is important to develop cultural competencies that serve as a foundation for an effective and ethical practice (Brady, 2015). The term cultural competence refers to the provider being able to apply the care, knowledge, sensitivity, and skills in an appropriate manner to interactions with foster children (Srivastava, 2007). The values of Indigenous cultures, communities, and spiritual traditions need to be transferred to foster children and adapted to their current

Figure 1. Bow and arrows created by six-year-old Indigenous foster child (male).

Figure 2. Ax created by six-year-old Indigenous foster child (male).
life, all the while taking into account the social and political realities that exist within the world-at-large.

The value of the arts for Indigenous well-being

In traditional Indigenous communities, the arts are integral to daily life. Indigenous people may be involved in activities such as feasting rituals, dancing, and beading, as well as in cultural expressions of ceremonial practices, identity, and lineage. The processes associated with creative arts are perceived as protective factors that support individuals and communities from illness (Archibald & Dewar, 2010; Muirhead & de Leeuw, 2015). The Aboriginal Healing Foundation developed a proposal entitled “Art and Wellness: The Importance of Art for Aboriginal Peoples’ Health and Healing” (Muirhead & de Leeuw, 2015). The mission of the organization was to promote self-determination and cultural revitalization as a means of healing inter-generational trauma and legacies of sexual, spiritual, mental, and physical abuse (The Aboriginal Healing Foundation, n.d.). The proposal for art and wellness underscored the significance of Indigenous cultural pride and the importance of creating community connections with respect to expressive arts programs involving art forms such as singing, dancing, carving, ceremonial rituals, basket making, knitting, and weaving. Muirhead and de Leeuw portrayed ways of using art as a holistic approach to healing, highlighting cultural expression as vital for identity, communication, support, and revitalization. As artworks are visible and tangible, they demonstrate the skills and achievements of the artist, strengthening self-confidence and pride (Figure 4).

Archibald, Dewar, Reid, and Stevens (2012) assert that the combination of traditional healing, spirituality, and expressive arts offers holistic support. “Traditional Native healers or shamans draw upon a vast body of symbolism passed down through the centuries … Myths, prayers, songs, chants, sand paintings, music, etc., are used to return the patient symbolically to the source of tribal energy” (Archibald, Dewar, Reid, & Stevens, 2012, p. 32). These authors mentioned several programs that helped promote the idea of resiliency for Indigenous people, such as dance workshops for youth, theatre activities, drumming, and singing. These programs helped participants gain confidence and pride and created new social connections that were more beneficial than counseling.

Another study, conducted by Nadia Ferrara (1999) explored emotional expression, specifically with the Cree and Naskapi people. She affirms how artworks and dreams are both a sacred and spiritual experience. In her study, participants shared their dreams during a traditional and ceremonial ritual. The study indicated how the sacredness of personal expression is often beyond words and best shared through rituals, customs, and rites of passage.
In my practice, I witness Indigenous children and adolescents depicting their biological or foster family both verbally and non-verbally. Art making helps to express their desire to unite with their family. Even Indigenous adolescents who present with low energy and depression frequently become animated after the process of art making. Some of these youth were able to forget about their concerns during the creative process, as art making offered both distraction and catharsis (De Petrillo & Winner, 2005).

Sand play is another artistic technique, which encourages communication. In my studio I have sand trays, which my clients can use for the creation of narrative scenes that indicate their life stories and emotions. Using natural archetypal symbols such as sand and water connects and grounds people to the earth (Labovitz-Bolk & Goodwin, 2000; Steinhardt, 1998). Tactile sensations associate to body, mind, and spirit. Sand play can facilitate regression to an early stage of child development that can lead to emotional reparation. The sand tray is a safe and contained space where clients can recreate both their inner and outer worlds, enabling them to develop self-confidence and feelings of autonomy (Figure 5). I have observed that when foster children are moved between different homes, they tend to relocate their play objects from tray to tray or between different containers. They also bury toys, which may be linked to expressions of grief and loss.

### Art therapy with Indigenous people

As many Indigenous people utilize traditional arts and find them essential to their life and well-being (Archibald, Dewar, Reid, & Stevens, 2010), art making as a relational form of therapy may find acceptance within their communities. However, according to Hocoy (2002) “art therapy cannot be assumed to be a universal construct” (p. 141). This awareness can prevent the imposition of dominant cultures on excluded social groups. Additionally, art therapists cannot themselves provide their clients with traditional Indigenous healing techniques; however, they can involve an Indigenous healer, or medicine person, with the client’s permission (Vivian, 2013).

The following contributions offer innovations for Indigenous-focused art therapy and have enriched my own art therapy practice:

1. The Indigenous Canadian Healing Movement, which began in the 1980s, worked initially with alcohol dependency, and then mental health concerns connected to residential school experiences (Hill, 2008). Effective programs addressed decolonization by recognizing and removing non-Indigenous imposed social stereotypes. This movement proclaimed the necessity of returning to the healing traditions of Canadian Indigenous cultures.

2. Archibald, Dewar, Reid, and Stevens (2012) conducted a research study with 10 First Nations participants (ages 20–50), focused on building trust and resiliency through creative arts. They concluded that residential school survivors missed the act of playing as children, therefore games and creative expression allowed participants to regain a sense of imagination and bodily freedom, dispersing traumatic sensations through physical reverie.

3. Vivian (2013), an art therapist of Inuit heritage, created an Indigenous art therapy model that features the Medicine Wheel as a practice for healing. The medicine wheel engages a person physically (through art materials), spiritually (through connections with nature), emotionally (through creative expression), and mentally (through mindfulness). It is not an authoritative model, but an open and trusting relationship, in which the art therapist also learns from their client. During the art-making process the art therapist serves as a guide and companion. Vivian (2013) also integrates art psychotherapy and existential art therapy into her approach.

4. Graveline (2014) presents an Indigenous art therapy practice called HeART that also incorporates the Medicine Wheel as its core. This model consists of four elements: a) respectful

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**Figure 5.** Sand tray of a 14-year-old Indigenous foster child (male).
relations (becoming an empathetic role model); b) embracing spirituality (traditional ceremonies); c) valuing interdependency (being open to collective wisdom); and d) acknowledging the need to walk our talk (deepening and sharing the therapist’s personal journey).

5. Tayler Schenkeveld (2017), a Métis researcher, integrates the Indigenous Seven Sacred Teachings into art therapy sessions used by Indigenous people as an educational and healing tool. The teachings include values of respect, love, courage, honesty, wisdom, humility, and truth. This method helps Indigenous clients reconnect with their culture, and with the construction of their cultural identity.

6. I have developed an ecologically focused art therapy practice inspired by Monica Carpendale (2008), founder and director of the Kutenai Art Therapy Institute (KATI). I believe an environment-focused approach aligns with Indigenous beliefs that affirm everything in nature is related. I continually integrate and use nature symbols and objects in my practice, and encourage Indigenous children to relate to their environment through the use of natural art materials (Figure 6). Carpendale is currently collaborating with a working group of Indigenous individuals, settler allies, art therapists, KATI faculty members, and community members to develop the Groundwater Initiative, an Indigenous-centered art therapy education program that will address decolonization and reconciliation. “KATI is committed to upholding the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the Calls to Action as outlined by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada” (Kutenai Art Therapy Institute, n.d.). This initiative will support both the training of Indigenous art therapists and further cultural consciousness within the profession of art therapy.

Art therapy with Indigenous people must acknowledge their philosophies, beliefs, and cultural practices while dismantling stereotypes and reframing the negative impact of colonialism (Sasakamoose, Bellegarde, Sutherland, Pete, & McKay-McNabb, 2017). A non-Indigenous art therapist can trigger resistance, as their identity can represent inequality rather than a pathway to resilience. Hence, it is important for non-Indigenous art therapists to gain understanding by actively experiencing the Indigenous worldview, through seeking the advice of an Indigenous Elder or community leader. Presentations and workshops through professional conferences and educational institutions, as well as participation in Indigenous traditional ceremonies, provide additional opportunities to learn more about Indigenous cultures and the reconciliation process. Art therapists need to connect with Indigenous peoples’ history and trauma in order to better understand their worldview. The following considerations for practice aim to address non-Indigenous professionals’ cultural understanding.

**Practice implications: Outsider and ally**

**Gain Consciousness**

Question your Past and Present perceptions
What did you know … Do you know now? (Graveline, 1998, p. 91)

As a therapist it is important that I am aware of the history of oppression that my Indigenous clients have endured. I empathize with the anguish and pain of the trauma and destruction of the Indigenous peoples’ culture and family systems. Growing up as a Jew in Israel, my experience of intergenerational trauma relates to war situations and contains feelings of being persecuted and tortured, along with the fear, helplessness, and isolating experiences of becoming a refugee. However, as an art therapist I can be viewed by my Indigenous clients (and their family members) as an outsider, implicitly and explicitly, because I have different traditions, worldview and accent. Alison Gerlach (2008) observed that non-Indigenous professionals working with Indigenous families may represent the dominant society; therefore there is a potential conflict due to the historical mistrust of non-Indigenous health-care providers.

I feel the resistance that Indigenous people transmit to me consciously and unconsciously; I want to be an ally, but people are suspicious of me. Mulling over these subjects has led me to recognize that learning about

![Figure 6. Branch, feathers, and paint created by 12-year-old Indigenous foster child (female).](image-url)
Indigenous society through cultural training, dialogues with Indigenous Elders, and community visits, can enhance my role as an ally. Fostering relationships with Elders has potential for more learning and understanding, as they are both community advisers and healers.

In my practice, specifically over the last two years, I initiated dyadic art therapy sessions for foster children and their caregivers. These sessions involved either non-Indigenous or Indigenous foster parents, biological parents or grandparents. According to Plante and Bernèche (2008) the use of art expression, as non-verbal communication, can bring parent and child closer together encouraging affective attachment. I noticed that children in dyadic therapy cooperated better with art activities. I assumed this was related to a more structured session, to the caregiver’s encouragement, or to the child’s wish to please the caregiver. In addition, the interaction within the dyad helped children to be physically close to caregivers through games and art activities.

Furthermore, communicating with Indigenous grandparents helped me develop a better cultural perspective and understanding of the children’s art and behavior. Moreover, support from my Métis mentor, Dr. Fyre Jean Graveline, who shared her life story with me developed my understanding of the Indigenous peoples’ challenges and strengths. For non-Indigenous therapists it is essential to work in collaboration with an Indigenous mentor, co-therapist, or clinical supervisor for cultural-specific guidance and to inform insights related to client behavior and vocabulary affiliated to Indigenous cultures. This collaboration contributes to the trust and connection the art therapist builds with Indigenous clients.

In Manitoba, art therapists usually work with a foster child who comes to appointments with a driver who is not part of the foster family. The foster family is not involved in the child’s therapy. The participation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous foster parents, biological parents or grandparents in art therapy could provide these caregivers with the knowledge, experience, and confidence to help their foster children. Supporting caregivers in art therapy will enhance trust, communication, and nurturing. Caregivers can help make a positive change in the foster child’s well-being by gaining new skills for managing tough situations and experiencing new ways of communication through expressive arts. Moreover, the dynamics of the dyadic therapy session can also foster secure attachment and problem-solving skills. Involving caregivers in Indigenous foster children’s therapy aims to bring a greater focus to the children’s cultural considerations. There is still a lack of research available on this topic, and in some cases foster children may still prefer individual sessions.

Conclusion: Art therapy and reconciliation

Given the history of colonial subjugation of Indigenous communities, art therapists cannot presume cultural competence based on the premise of shared affinity to the arts in line with Indigenous traditions. Art therapists who work with Indigenous people need to experience their culture in order to build trust and create safety. It is also important to value Indigenous family and community life and sensitively amalgamate these aspects into the therapy session, along with ongoing communication with the caregivers of children. The integrated approach of the Medicine Wheel is a model that can demonstrate cultural acceptance and openness. It is important that the Medicine Wheel be presented by an Elder or Indigenous representative as a way of developing cultural competence. Ethical practice is enhanced by non-Indigenous art therapists working with Indigenous mentors. There can be questions of appropriation that arise when integrating Indigenous cultural practices into art therapy, which also requires knowledge and guidance.

Art therapy can contribute to the reconciliation process with Indigenous people. The creation of art as a personal vehicle of expression, which is common to both Indigenous cultures and the art therapy profession, could be the basis of increasing understanding and building relationships. However, more research needs to be undertaken about cultural competence in art therapy in collaboration with Indigenous art therapy practitioners.

My hope is that readers have recognized the significance of cultural understanding required to approach work within Indigenous communities. Non-Indigenous art therapists must appreciate the strengths and resilience of the Indigenous peoples in the face of historical injustice. Specialized art therapy training programs should be developed to qualify Indigenous art therapists and develop greater cultural competence among non-Indigenous art therapy practitioners. This article is calling on art therapists to be part of the reconciliation process leading to transformative social inclusion of Indigenous peoples in Canada.

Your heart knows what is good
Your heart knows what is bad
For you, not for everyone
Everything is connected
(Vivian, 2013, p. 44)

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to my Métis mentor Dr. Fyre Jean Graveline, who enhanced my understanding of Indigenous history and culture. I also acknowledge my adviser at Mount Mary University, Dr. Lynn Kapitan, who guided me through culturally considerate writing.

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