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# An Exploration of Community Mural Making in the Context of Art Therapy and Social Action: A Literature Review

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An Exploration of Community Mural Making in the Context of Art Therapy and Social Action:

A Literature Review

Capstone Thesis

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Art Therapy

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### Abstract

This literature review examines and discusses the various aspects of mural making in the context of both traditional art therapy and social action art therapy. The goal of this literature review is to explore and examine the therapeutic benefits of the artistic medium of mural making within the context of art therapy. In the context of traditional group art therapy, research indicates that mural making can assist in developing social and communication skills, conflict resolution skills and result in a sense of accomplishment and enhanced self-esteem. Including a brief introduction and history of mural making in America, key themes were discovered throughout the research that lend insight to how murals may aid in individual and collective healing, identity development, as well as aid in social change by serving as a dialogical performance piece, offering opportunities for open discussion and reflection. The murals, themselves, possess the power of imagery and metaphor that may also aid in individual and collective healing and serve as a tangible representation of expression. Mural making, as a community art project, was found to create opportunities to foster community, enhance a sense of belonging and social awareness, and create connection to others, self, and place.

*Keywords:* art therapy, mural making, social action, social change, community

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Mural making and wall art dates back as early as prehistoric cave times in which symbols were used to paint elaborate narratives on walls (Testa & McCarthy, 2004). The word *mural* has its roots in Latin, meaning “pertaining to a wall,” (EUDict dictionary, 2005) and is a universal art form that can be found all over the world. As a form of public art, murals can enhance a public space and lead to feelings of community and connectedness, bringing to light various political, social, or cultural issues that may be present in a community through the use of imagery (Stevenson, 2016). Murals have been used for varying purposes throughout history including, “sources for enhancement of cultural and political issues, for inspiration and reflection, and for connecting communities to their cultural heritage” (Rossetto, 2012, p. 19).

Through art therapy, mural making can bring a traumatized community together through the collective healing process. Art therapy is a form of psychotherapy that can be used in a variety of settings, often focusing on goals such as personal growth, creating meaning, conflict resolution, working through trauma and achieving an overall increased sense of well-being. According to Malchiodi (2012), “art therapy is based on the idea that the creative process of art making facilitates reparation and recovery and is a form of nonverbal communication of thoughts and feelings” (p. 1). The therapeutic process involves expression through the arts in order to facilitate change, which can be done on both an individual level or in a group setting. As art therapy allows opportunities to engage in a wide variety of art mediums, the creative possibilities are endless. This literature review focuses on the use of mural making in art therapy.

Mural making, used in the context of traditional art therapy, can have many therapeutic benefits, especially when done in collaborative group settings. One of the main goals of creating

a mural in the field of art therapy is to foster and develop a sense of community and identity within a group of individuals (Testa & McCarthy, 2004). The process of creating a mural, from start to finish, can lead to enhanced self-esteem, and can contribute to the development of social, communication, and problem-solving skills (Stevenson, 2016). The mural itself, when completed, can enhance a space or public atmosphere, contribute to one's connection to place, and create opportunities of open discussion with its audience (Stevenson, 2016). This literature review explores and further discusses the use and benefits of collaborative mural making in group art therapy settings where the group itself is viewed as the community in which the mural is being created.

A community can be and look like many things, whether it be a classroom, a work place, a therapy group, a town, a city, or even a country. Community can be defined as “a process of people coming together around common problems, discovering their common value, and developing their sense of solidarity” (Cockcroft, Weber, & Cockcroft, 1977, p.72). “It is not a homogeneous entity but a complex network of complex individual members, including art therapists,” (Golub, 2005, p. 17). While murals can be a form of public art that can be commissioned and painted by a single individual artist for the purpose of decorating a space, the research chosen for this literature review focuses on the creation of murals within communities involving the participation of its community members.

The creation process of a mural that involves a community can be viewed as a community art project that involves both the artist and those in the community who choose to participate. While community art projects and community mural making don't neatly fit into the confines of traditional art therapy, there are opportunities for therapeutic benefits, which can aid in individual and communal development as well as offer a space for collective healing. The

therapeutic benefits of community mural making will be examined from a psychotherapeutic stand point. Literature has shown that participation in these community art projects may promote positive psychological and social outcomes (Madyaningrum & Sonn, 2011). The literature covers many historical and political aspects pertaining to murals, which will briefly be discussed, but the main focus of this literature review aims to examine the therapeutic benefits of collaborative mural making in the context of the community in which it is created.

Madyaningrum and Sonn (2011) assert that, “community art is a form of cultural practice in which art is produced and used by local people within their communities as an instrument for social change” (p. 358). As established, mural making within a community can extend beyond traditional art therapy and traverse into the realm of social action, overlapping art therapy and social action. This has its therapeutic benefits on both an individual and communal level when public issues are attended to. While traditional art therapy fundamentally aims to cultivate inner change and personal reflection on an individual level, social action generally strives to examine situations and positions of power, privilege, and oppression, while working to facilitate outer, societal change (Kaplan, 2005). Social action art therapy is participatory, engaging both individuals and communities of people in a collaborative process of some kind. Art making is ideally focused on and used as a vehicle in which communities can have the opportunity to “name and understand their realities, identify their needs and strengths, and transform their lives in ways that contribute to individual and collective well-being and social justice” (Golub, 2005, p. 17).

This literature review also examines social action in art therapy and how participating in community art, specifically mural making, can lead to collective and individual healing, enhanced sense of belonging, and create opportunities for change, discussion, and reflection

within a community. This literature review focuses on how the use of mural making as a community art project can serve as a tool for empowering marginalized individuals and communities of people by giving a voice to the otherwise silenced and providing space and access to an empowering art form of self-expression and representation. The research conducted for this literature review is relevant to the field of art therapy because it examines the use of mural making in art therapy as well as aims to explore how art therapists can align their work with a larger social and cultural purpose by doing community-based work through the application of social action art therapy.

From a theoretical standpoint, Relational-Cultural Theory can be a useful lens through which to view this research. According to Jordan (2010), Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) is “built on the premise that, throughout the life span, human beings grow through and toward connection. It holds that we need connections to flourish, even to stay alive, and isolation is a major source of suffering for people, at both a personal and cultural level” (p. 1). Connection through art making, both to oneself and to others is a key theme discussed throughout this literature review. Furthermore, Relational-Cultural Theory “calls attention to the need to alter the sociopolitical forces of disconnection that create significant pain for people” (Jordan, 2010, p. 1). As developing relational skills and growth-fostering relationships are the core of this theory, RCT provides a theoretical framework that views connection as an essential component to growth (Jordan, 2010). Group art therapy, community art projects, and social action art therapy can offer a place to come together through the arts, with the potential for individuals to move from isolation to connection.

## **Literature Review**

This literature review is broken into two main areas of focus. The first section discusses the use of mural making in the context of traditional art therapy and the therapeutic benefits that may occur in a group therapy setting. The second section discusses the use of mural making as a community art project and how this art form can be used in social action art therapy. Each section ties together applicable theory and case studies found throughout the research in order to gain a broad understanding of mural making, its history and uses, and its relevance to the field of art therapy.

### **Mural Making in Traditional Art Therapy**

Art therapy is a psychotherapeutic process in which self-expression is facilitated by means of various art materials and mediums. Traditional art therapy can happen in both individual or group settings. Because mural making in the context of art therapy is a collaborative group art project, the case studies and research in this literature review pertain to group settings and group dynamics in the therapeutic process. As mentioned above, an art therapy group can constitute as its own community, offering opportunities for connection, individual and group development. Another definition of Community comes from the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (2011). Community can be defined as “a unified body of individuals” (def. 1) such as “a group linked by a common policy” (def. 1, e). Group therapy or group art therapy can be viewed as an opportunity for individuals to come together as a unified and cohesive group invested in a common goal – to participate and engage in a therapeutic setting that fosters self-expression, the development of interpersonal skills, and offers a safe place to work through trauma. Further, Kapitan, Litell, and Torres (2011) refer to the use of the term



‘community’ in art therapy as “the surrounding social environment of the individuals and group with whom art therapists practice” (p. 65).

According to Malchiodi (2012), “group interactive psychotherapy focuses on the actions, reactions, and characteristic patterns of interaction that constrain people in their everyday lives” (p. 354). In a group therapy setting, individuals are faced with interacting with others and are offered opportunities to learn about themselves as well as their patterns of interactions that may cause conflicts when relating to others. Group therapy offers a chance for individuals to explore belief systems and take responsibility for their own participation, growth, and learning along side other group members (Malchiodi, 2012). While these aspects occur in verbal group therapy, they can also take place in a group art therapy setting through the use of art materials. Art making can serve as a catalyst for exploration, especially non-verbally, and the use of image can be a powerful tool for expression. Collaborative group art therapy settings offer individuals opportunities to learn how to work together, resolve conflicts, work through trauma, develop social and communication skills, and most of all, express themselves in a safe therapeutic space (Malchiodi, 2012).

Slayton (2012) proposes in one study that certain challenges may exist and arise within group art therapy. Such challenges exist when individuals struggle to engage in the pro-social behavior within the group. Because group therapy can mirror a community experience, the conclusion is made that those individuals may have lacked such experiences and never developed this skill in their lives. One of the main goals of group art therapy is to cultivate cohesion among the group of individuals and foster a productive and creative environment through art making in order to develop pro-social behavioral skills that are critical to real world functioning (Slayton, 2012). In reference to Yalom, Slayton (2012) also points out that by “using

the therapy group as a social microcosm for the world at large” (p. 180), there are many ways to impact social change. One example is to assist individuals in finding their potential to thrive. According to Slayton (2012), “thriving human activity may lead to creative and productive action, which can build the best communities,” (p. 180).

**Case study 1.** In one study, Slayton (2012), discusses her work facilitating an art therapy group with adolescent males. The power of imagery and the act of construction within the art therapy group are considered to be highly important in this particular group process. The value of imagery is often used as a tool in psychotherapy, as a way for humans to organize and make sense of their experiences, helping to construct narratives in our brains. As part of the therapeutic process, it is observed that “the sharing of relatively specific imagery between patient and therapist may increase the likelihood that the content of their ‘theories of mind’ will overlap, a result that is likely to create an increase in empathy” (Singer, 2006, p. 52). This is an interesting and important observation because it implies that empathy among group members can be cultivated within the group art therapy setting by allowing imagery to be viewed and discussed, which can also happen through designing and painting a mural within group therapy. Slayton (2012), points out that in regards to working with trauma survivors, this is an important skill to nurture and may additionally assist clients with affect regulation.

Although this study doesn’t discuss mural making, the use of imagery was observed to play an important role in group processing. This observation makes an important connection between the use of imagery through art and collaborative group settings. The next three case studies discuss the findings of mural making in art therapy, as the images chosen for each mural have a metaphorical significance linked directly to the purpose of the art therapy group and the cathartic expression of the group as a whole.

**Case study 2.** One qualitative case study done by Testa and McCarthy (2004) describes a small group of preadolescents in a psychiatric inpatient facility. Over the course of 12 weekly group art therapy sessions, a collaborative painting of a memorial mural about the September 11<sup>th</sup> attack on the World Trade Center was created. According to Testa & McCarthy (2004), painting the mural provided a framework for the group that served as a safe space for discussion of group members' feelings about painful separations, feelings of loss, and their history of multiple trauma. The participants consisted of three male inpatients participating in an art therapy group, ages 11-12, at an inpatient facility in New York City. Each of the three children had experienced multiple, cumulative traumas and were specifically selected for this art therapy group. "Reactions to acute trauma may include withdrawal, disruptive behavior, inability to pay attention, insomnia, irritability, anxiety, anger, confusion, and depression" (Testa & McCarthy, 2004, p. 39). It was found that the art therapy group dedicated to painting a mural provided a safe and mutually supportive environment, which created opportunities for conflict resolution. This allowed individuals to gradually reconstruct the psychological effects of trauma through connection, collaboration, as well as individual and group identity development. According to this study, although occasional group interventions were necessary, "there was an overall absence of the disruptive behavior and variable concentration that often typify verbal group therapy with preadolescent boys" (Testa & McCarthy, 2004, p. 39). As the group began to develop, a sense of safety was created, and participants began to openly discuss feelings surrounding the 9/11 attack. The group provided the container and safety for self-expression, while the painting of the mural symbolized a visual metaphor for the expression of images and feelings. "Painting and mural making help organize narratives about trauma and its representation in a child's internal world" (Testa & McCarthy, 2004, p. 40). The creation of the

mural also enhanced group members' senses of self-efficacy and earned them positive recognition. Reflection on the mural making process itself, as well as its interpersonal effect, increased the group members' mutual attachment and their tolerance for their own traumatic memories. The study offers insight into the group members' struggles and successes as they work through personal struggles and begin to express their feelings and develop individual and group identities.

**Case study 3.** Another case study done by Stevenson (2016), describes the process of creating a collaborative group mural during four separate art therapy groups in a geriatric inpatient psychiatric hospital setting. The therapeutic benefits of mural making in a group art therapy setting outlined in this study include: opening opportunities for discussion, creating a sense of community, enhancing the physical environment, and increasing self-esteem (Stevenson, 2016). Designing and painting the mural provided a space to bring individuals together focusing on a common goal, while having the opportunity to feel connected to others and develop social and communication skills. Each participant was sixty years of age or older with diagnoses that included dementia, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and schizoaffective disorder. Treatment plans for individuals with these diagnoses included goals focusing on active participation with peers, development of social and communication skills, increasing self-esteem, and promoting understanding, awareness, and community (Stevenson, 2016). The collaborative group mural was designed to address each of these treatment goals in a creative and artistic manner. Abstract thinking skills were developed by learning to be flexible and creative in how each step of the project related to the final product, from planning, to color mixing, to the completion of the mural. As it was critical for the group to work together during the entire process, active communication, social, and mediation skills were exercised. During this case

study, it was found that by the completion of the mural, individuals were able to willingly engage with one another as creating the mural provided many social opportunities (Stevenson, 2016). A sense of pride and accomplishment was also fostered along with increased sense of self-esteem as the individuals were proud of the finished product, which added to the aesthetics of the environment.

**Case study 4.** In Brooklyn, New York, a 19-year-old African American boy, Timothy, was shot and killed by a police officer. A fourth case study describes an art therapy group surrounding topics of loss and grief. The art therapy group was specifically for students who knew the teen and was conducted as a means to explore feelings that arose as a result of the event. The art therapy group was funded by a grant and took place at The Wynne Center in New York City. During these art therapy sessions, a mural was created in order to memorialize Timothy, process feelings of grief, loss, and anger, and come together as a community to honor Timothy's spirit. According to Summer (2007) "the mural would be a bridge from rage and anger to calm and resolution" (p. 122). During the mural making process, students were encouraged to take risks, explore uncomfortable topics, and develop problem solving skills as they worked together to create a symbolic art piece in the form of a mural. It was found that "as the students worked, they connected with each other on an intimate and supportive level" (Summer, 2007, p. 123). The therapeutic space offered a safe haven for students to interact, be creative, and form positive connection. This study concluded that mural making had promoted conflict resolution and communication among students, as well as offering a space for a cathartic experience that promoted growth, increased self-esteem, empowerment, and independence (Summer, 2007). The art therapy group provided a setting for students to safely and openly express and process feelings of grief and loss.

**Therapeutic benefits of mural making in group art therapy.** These case studies indicate that there are therapeutic benefits of mural making in the context of group art therapy. Mural making can be adapted and used in various group settings with a range of populations of varying abilities, from children to older adults. The group art therapy setting offers a safe place for individuals to process emotions, work together, and develop problem solving and communication skills. In the cases of the preadolescent inpatient group and the art therapy group honoring Timothy's spirit, art therapy offered a therapeutic safe space to explore topics such as grief, loss, and anger while relating to others (Summer, 2007). Creating a mural is a collaborative experience in which group members must learn to work together in order to complete the task at hand. The mural itself provides a visual and permanent symbol for the group's process and expression. Individual and collective healing can also occur through this process when a group collectively processes a trauma. According to Testa and McCarthy (2004), "the art therapy group process was the essential mechanism for therapeutic healing. The mural itself gave the children a voice and a means for self-expression that allowed others to respond to their ideas" (p. 41). Participants were able to create and communicate powerful messages through the use of mural making in order to rebuild trust and heal.

In the three cases that discussed mural making in group art therapy, a sense of accomplishment and increased self-esteem was noted upon completion of the mural. In the case of the inpatient facilities, the murals were painted directly on to a wall in a public space. These murals provided opportunities for open discussion between patients and staff members about the art and process and promoted communication, community, and connection among these individuals (Stevenson, 2016). In the case of Timothy's Mural, it was painted on a wooden panel and a community ceremony was planned upon completion. However, due to unfortunate

bureaucratic complications, a ceremony was never held for the mural project and the non-profit that hosted the art therapy program shut down a year after completion of the mural (Summer, 2007). Despite the fact that the students never received public recognition for their mural project, Summer (2007) writes, “to these students it wasn’t about praise for the product but about the process. Exposure to art therapy, working collectively, and creating memories was something that would linger” (p. 129).

### **Mural Making as a Community Art Project**

In this section of the literature review, mural making is discussed in the context of social action art therapy. When created in the form of a collaborative, community art project, mural making can foster a sense of community, assist in individual and collective healing through the power of image, and aid in social change (Finley, Vonk, & Finley, 2014; Golub, 2005; Hocoy, 2007).

**Brief overview of murals in America.** “Community art is a form of cultural practice in which art is produced and used by local people within their communities as an instrument for social change” (Madyaningrum & Sonn, 2011, p. 358). Painting murals in America, as a form of public art and an aid in social change, dates back as early as the Great Depression in the 1930’s under Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal programs. The murals were funded by the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) as a means of creating long lasting records of the aspirations and accomplishments of people in America (Greaney, 2004). In present times, contemporary mural arts initiative programs and mural art movements have taken place in major cities such as Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Boston, and New York City, and have served as the perfect platform for community collaboration and expression in these urban setting. “Mural projects mobilize communities to articulate dreams, express frustrations, and most importantly, consider strategies

for change” (Greaney, 2002, p. 7). Thus, offering many therapeutic benefits that extend far beyond the confines of traditional art therapy. Expression, in and of itself, can be therapeutic and cathartic for both individuals and communities alike. As collaborative projects can inspire entire communities of people to come together for a common purpose, they can also foster connection to place, creating tangible communal bonds. “Those who work on and with murals, whether conceptualizing, painting, or organizing participants for their production, believe that the sociological possibilities for murals are endless” (Greaney, 2002, p. 8).

Several examples of these mural arts projects include The City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program, The Los Angeles Murals, The Groundswell Community Mural Project in NYC, and Boston’s Mural Crew Program. Each of these arts initiatives are heavily tied to public policy and urban planning as the evolution of mural art has transformed over decades of spontaneous political protests to programs sponsored by municipalities (Greaney, 2002). The purpose of these mural programs and art initiatives varied but have several common underlying motives. The imagery of the murals was often politically charged, promoted civic dialogue, and the collaborative process brought communities of people together. In addition, many of these mural projects recruited underserved, at-risk youth through programs such as the Neighborhood Youth Corps program, which paid former gang members to work on and paint murals. According to Greaney (2004), “the city [of Los Angeles] and the muralist ambassadors galvanized young gang members to use the streets not for social warfare, but for telling their stories, calling for peace, and visualizing a way out of street life through the development of artistry and creativity” (p. 24). Although this is in regard to urban planning and public policy, the basis of these programs is essentially rooted in the arts and can be viewed as a form of art as therapy in which the



reconstructing of narratives and self-expression takes place through an artistic medium and creative process.

Greaney (2004) further discusses the potential benefits of mural art programs and their political strategies to reach underserved youth. Many arts programs began to outline objectives that work toward the benefits received by at-risk youth. Some of the outlined goals included: opportunities to develop positive relationships, improve or increase self-esteem, pride, discipline, commitment, responsibility, and attitudes towards the future, and increase prosocial behavior and reduce alienation from others (Greaney, 2004). In regard to youth-based mural art programs, Rogovin's study found the following:

The experience gained through mural painting – the process of discussion, planning, and collective creativity – are an exceptional learning opportunity for students. Mural projects teach many skills at the same time, including social, as well as creative and technical. They teach responsibility to others, to the project and to the public. Students will learn about themselves through working with others. They also enjoy the sense of doing something for the people who will see the mural. Students will learn sensitivity to people by seeking a theme that will be meaningful to others. In the process of doing a mural, the student, perhaps for the first time, will have a role in creating or changing his or her environment (as cited in Greaney, 2004, p. 32).

Many of these opportunities to learn, grow, and express oneself align with the theory of art as therapy, in which the process of creating art can be therapeutic in itself and thus have other positive therapeutic benefits that follow as a result (Greaney, 2004).

### **Social Action Art Therapy**

As previously discussed, social action art therapy can be viewed as form of participatory, collaborative art making in which communities of people can be given opportunities to transform their lives and contribute to both collective healing and social justice (Golub, 2005; Hocoy, 2007). Social action art therapy is less about the individual and more about the “shared power of the community for the benefit of the community” (Golub, 2005, p. 17). In this case, art can be used as the vehicle to achieve these goals. According to Hocoy (2007), social action art therapy can be defined as the awareness of the “interconnectivity between the individual and the collective, between a person’s suffering and social imbalance, and as an active commitment to personal and social transformation through advocacy for those aspects of individuals and society that are disenfranchised” (p. 31).

Frostig says, while present in arts activism, active community participation and collaboration to confront and work to change sociopolitical systems is often absent in traditional art therapy practice (as cited in Rossetto, 2012). Social action art therapy offers a framework that can tie these both together, bringing community activism and collaboration to the therapeutic space to address oppressive systems and the underlying areas of dysfunction. In order to ethically practice art therapy as social action, art therapists must have the awareness of dominant cultural views and must acknowledge how they are embedded in practice (Rossetto, 2012). According to Talwar, Iyer and Doby-Copeland (2004), practicing art therapists must take into consideration “culture, race, ethnicity, gender, religion, historical experiences, sexual orientation, disabilities, socioeconomic status, education, political views, lifestyle, and geographic region,” (p.44) because of the very diverse and multicultural demographics of America in this day and age.

According to Hocoy (2005), “doing clinical work that is cognizant of the societal implications is social action, and the being politically active is doing therapy” (p. 11). These are interrelated processes. Through the lenses that recognize that interconnectedness to ourselves and the world around us is inherent to being human, the division between the individual and society fade away. This is especially true when looking through a relational-cultural framework that emphasizes the importance to connection and growth-fostering relationships (Jordan, 2010). Hocoy (2005) strongly asserts that doing work in a therapeutic setting and doing social action work are so entwined that one inevitably necessitates the other. According to Kapitan, Litell, and Torres (2011), “when practiced in community, creative art therapy may assist not only in bringing people together but also in realizing the true goals of social action, strengthening the capacity of people to discover better ways to meet their needs and impact their reality” (p. 72).

**Art therapists as social activists.** What affects the individual, goes on to affect the society. In order to address the sufferings of an individual, the problems of societies as a whole must be examined (Hocoy, 2005). Hocoy (2005) asserts that, “what makes the art therapist also a social activist is an awareness of the interconnectivity between individual and collective, between a person’s suffering and social imbalance, as well as an active commitment to personal and social transformation through advocacy for those aspects of individuals and society that are disenfranchised” (p. 12). Art therapists cannot make any lasting changes if they are not committed to social advocacy on a societal level outside of the therapeutic space. They must examine and address their own power and privilege in society while making a conscious effort in rectifying social disparities. According to Hocoy (2005), “political neutrality and therapeutic passivity serve only the omnipresent forces of oppression and injustice” (p. 12).

When an art therapist commits and chooses to also become a social activist, they give priority to the members of society that are marginalized and voiceless and offer space for expression, allowing their voices to be heard loud and clear. According to Jordan (2010), “the effects of privilege, marginalization, and cultural forces are seen by Relational-Cultural Theory as central to psychological development” (p. 23). Both inside and outside the therapeutic space, art therapists have the opportunity to “challenge destructive ideologies and myths, minimize power differentials, and seek wholeness in fragmented relationships” (Hocoy, 2005, p. 12). Multicultural sensitivity and awareness and knowledge of societal structures are crucial key components to this aspect of art therapy. As art therapists begin to consider how to take on work that is aligned with a larger social and cultural purpose, “awareness of cultural paradigms and of the underlying philosophies that drive them is important, particularly for those art therapists who are working with culturally diverse populations” (Rossetto, 2012, p. 25). Having this awareness, may provide art therapists the opportunity to practice conscious activism through community-based therapeutic arts. In support of multicultural sensitivity and awareness, Hocoy (2005) emphasizes that it is critical for art therapists to address internalized oppressive dynamics and be very careful not to transmit or reinforce them during practice.

**Collective healing and the role of image in social action art therapy.** Image plays an important part in both art therapy and social action. In fact, the two are linked through the power of image and through the use of metaphors. The use of image is often at the core of art therapy because of its versatility. It can be used as a means of expression of emotions, fears, symbols or metaphors, or to communicate messages non-verbally. According to Landau, Meier, and Keefer (2010), “metaphor is not merely a decorative linguistic device; instead, it is a cognitive tool that people use to grasp the abstract concepts that lie at the center of their social life” (p. 1058). When

used in social action art therapy, the power of image can be an effective way to tap into the collective unconscious, which represents universal themes originating from the unconscious inherent structures of the brain of all humans. “The image is regarded as having the potential to mediate between the individual and the collective” (Hocoy, 2005, p.7). Through the use of symbolic forms, images hold a unique power through which one can connect with and understand the world. Carl Jung proposed the concept of archetypal imagery, which is an “expression of a universally recurring theme that transcends time and culture” (Hocoy, 2005, p. 8) This, in turn, offers a connection to the collective unconscious. Such awareness of a shared struggle or experience can serve as the basis for the need for social justice. In short, social action is grounded on the connection between personal and collective suffering and “the image has the unique ability to bring to consciousness the reality of a current collective predicament, as well as the universality and timelessness of an individual’s suffering” (Hocoy, 2005, p. 7). Through the use of image, personal and collective wounds can be healing while also serving as a call to address unjust systems of oppression. In addition, according to a study done by Archibald and Dewar (2010), findings include emerging themes such as connection/reconnection to culture, identity development, and community building that proved to be healing through the use of expressive arts. This aligns with the notion that through the use of image and art making, collective healing can occur through expression of shared experienced.

**Mural making and social action.** Community mural making can be viewed as a form of social action art therapy because “by viewing the self as interconnected instead of isolated, the importance of culture and community in art therapy becomes far more significant” (Rossetto, 2012, p. 24). As culture plays an active role in relational processes that shape human experiences, it can be said that relational development is interconnected with social and cultural

identities (Jordan, 2010). These experiences are not isolated, but interconnected, which is also supported by Relational-Cultural Theory (Jordan, 2010). Community mural making encourages creativity and expression, both individually and communally. It calls for responsible conscious action as well as offers opportunity for personal transformation, community development, and political expression. “Community mural making is best practiced from a holistic perspective that encourages therapists, counselors, artists, and youth to look closely at themselves as conveyers of deeper and more socially significant meanings” (Rossetto, 2012, p. 24). As previously pointed out, through the use of image in art therapy and social action, an important connection is drawn between the individual and society. “The image can serve as a call for individual and collective action to address marginalized aspects of human potential” (Hocoy, 2005, p. 8). This can be seen through the example of the Mexican muralists movement that took place in the early 1900’s heavily relied on the use and power of image, bringing awareness to a collective predicament and serving as a means of solidarity and empowerment (Hocoy, 2005).

Community participation, cultural awareness, and immersion are critical to the practice of social action and art therapy. Rossetto (2012) points out that, according to her research, “the subtle power of art and community involvement allows participation in both the critique of cultural systems and the creation of new cultural values” (p. 24). This implies that individuals are able to participate in actively understanding the cultural systems in which they live in, and work to co-create change within their communities. Engagement in these cultural practices, including community mural making and art therapy, can help community members strengthen and deepen their relationship to society and their community while concurrently engaging in social action.

**How murals can aid in social change.** As a public form of art, murals can also offer the opportunity to serve as “dialogical performances” that can aid in social change (Finely, Vonk, &

Finley, 2014). In one study, Finely, Vonk, and Finley (2014) use critical arts-based research inquiry as a methodology to explore a mural-making project and its implications as a dialogical performance piece. “Dialogical performances are the ongoing conversations that occur among communities of individuals” (Finely, Vonk, & Finley, 2014, p. 622). Finely, Vonk, and Finley (2014) go on to describe the design and production processes for creating a community-based mural with students who are enrolled in The At Home At School program. This is an arts-integrated educational project that enrolls underserved and marginalized students in after school and summer learning programs. The mural project examined in this study was done in collaboration with a non-profit organization, Urban Abundance, to create the Garden to Table mural project. The mural was designed to be 16 feet by 4 feet with a theme of Food Justice. It is comprised of four panels, each individually themed as well; healthy eating, community food systems, urban gardens, and food heritage. The project brought about a variety of discussion topics which include content about food and nutrition, aspects and meaning of community and collaboration, learning about urban farmer’s markets, food banks, etc. The participants in this project identify and confront systemic oppressions through the artistic process and the product is useful as a dialogic performance piece to discuss such topics, which in turn, aids in social change (Finely, Vonk, & Finley, 2014). In the context of this mural, the ongoing conversations were held among marginalized students, educators, community activists, and the audiences of the mural project, the public. The process is just as important as the product in this case and the mural can only be used as a dialogical performance piece if opportunities are made for open dialogue with the audience so that they can participate in and respond to both the discussions surrounding the art piece and the visual representation of the art itself (Finely, Vonk, & Finley 2014). This aids in social change by sparking important conversations surrounding oppressive

systems while participants challenge audience to become engaged and collectively fight for change.

### **Fostering Community Through Art Making**

Research suggests that there are several ways in which collaborative art projects, such as mural making, can foster connection and community among a group of individuals (Madyaningrum & Sonn, 2011; Slayton, 2012; Stickley, 2010). Key themes that surfaced throughout the research include identity development, enhanced sense of belonging and social awareness, and connectedness to one's community, to others and to the physical location of their community (place attachment/creative place making). Circling back to Relational-Cultural Theory (Jordan, 2010), the importance of relationships is emphasized through community art projects such as mural making. Relational-Cultural Theory "seeks to lessen the suffering caused by chronic disconnection and isolation, whether at an individual or societal level, to increase the capacity for relational resilience, and to foster social justice" (Jordan, 2010, p. 23).

"Art can be used to reinforce values of the group, raise questions about current social conditions, and construct an image of social change" (Milbrandt, 2010, p. 9). As this is the case, art therapists have the unique ability to offer opportunities to empower individuals to address circumstances in which the health among communities of people is impaired. Slayton (2012) asserts that there is a direct link between creating art among vulnerable groups of people and building health among communities.

**Identity and belonging.** "A strong sense of identity is developed in a culture where one feels a sense of belonging," (Stickley, 2010, p. 30). Further, a sense of belonging to a group is achieved when individual members feel valued by other group members. Parr (2006), reported that a sense of belonging to a community can be cultivated through the use of community arts.



“Embodied spaces of art-making, for example, enable participants to learn about themselves, and to experiment with communicating feelings or work through difficulties that they encountered in other aspects of their everyday lives” (Parr, 2006, p. 156). By using art as a relational practice, individuals might gain a sense of belonging to each other and to their community. According to Stickley (2010), research suggests that community engagement through the arts may aid in fostering an individual’s need for social belonging. “Such relationships may help to create a sense of social identity that is ultimately positive for the person” (Stickley, 2010, p. 31).

Participating in community arts allows opportunities for individuals to explore new relationships and new opportunities in a safe place, thus, assisting in the development of a sense of social and personal belonging (Stickley, 2010).

**Community awareness.** Madyaningrum and Sonn (2011) explore the meaning of participation in a community art project from the perspective of those who experience it and how community can be fostered through participation. According to Madyaningrum and Sonn (2011), it was found that “participation means coming together and the findings [of the study] highlight the potential of community arts projects for promoting the creation of new relationships and new stories about community” (p. 358). Through this process of research, three themes emerge of how the participants viewed their participation in community art projects. These themes consisted of engaging in pro-social behavior and creating social connections, challenging stereotypes and redefining them, and lastly, providing an opportunity to give voice to those otherwise silenced (Madyaningrum & Sonn, 2011).

Madyaningrum and Sonn (2011) discuss Freire’s (1972) concept of conscientization, and Campbell and Jochelovitch’s (2000) theory of social psychology of participation. These theories view participation as a social achievement rather than a social state and this encompasses

developing a community's critical awareness about its members (Campbell & Jochelovitch, 2000; Freire, 1972). It is argued that community awareness is developed based on the interaction of three social psychological elements: social identity, social representation, and power (Madyaningrum & Sonn, 2011). According to Campbell and Jochelovitch (2000), these three concepts are linked through actively participating in a community art project. This facilitates community awareness because it provides an opportunity for "a community to state and negotiate identities and social representation which are, in turn, shaped and constructed by the material and symbolic power relations in which they are located" (p. 267-268). As observed in this study, participation in a community art project becomes meaningful because of its ability to foster individual and social awareness about social identities and social realities (Madyaningrum & Sonn, 2011). This research is drawing the conclusion that similar observations can be made through community mural making, as this is a form of a community art project.

**Connectedness.** Haedicke and Nellhaus explain, "The value and meaning of community art for a local community is often linked to its ability to reignite people's ties with their local or traditional cultural heritages that have been dismissed because of the increasing domination of global culture," (as cited in Madyaningrum & Sonn, 2010, p. 364). With a history of colonization and the globalization of dominant culture, the loss of a community's connection to cultural roots may be perpetuated, along with a sense of loss for tradition, culture, and connection to place. According to Madyaningrum and Sonn (2010), individuals in their study valued the participation in a community project that put on performances based on the history of their community because of its ability to highlight marginalized groups of people, cultures and local histories that had not been represented, thus giving a voice to the silenced. While the stories being told are important, the value and meaning of participation was also placed on the process of togetherness

and interactions across social groups with other people in the community. Creating connections was an important aspect in developing community solidarity and establishing, or re-establishing a connection to place, cultural roots and traditions. The coming together aspect of a community project enables participants to challenge both the ways in which they view others and themselves. “This opportunity, in turn, can stimulate positive personal changes that bring confidence and pride” (Madyaningrum & Sonn, 2011, p. 366).

### **Discussion**

Through extensive research covering topics that weave together art therapy, mural making and social action, this literature review explored the different uses and implications of mural making in a wide variety of settings with various populations. As art therapy can serve as a tool for self-discovery, it can also serve as a tool for connection, collaboration, and identity development, both as an individual and as a group. As discussed above, mural making in the context of traditional group art therapy can have many therapeutic benefits and could be used with many different populations. It was seen through the various case studies, that the art therapy group provided a space to come together through the art, process, and build trusting relationships between therapist and other group members. This is a significant finding and observation for when working with traumatized or marginalized populations that may not have had the space to be vulnerable and develop growth-fostering relationships. Because group art therapy implies that there is more than one participant, it offers individuals the opportunity to connect with others who may have had shared experiences as well, which allows for the individual to move from isolation and disconnection to connection and relationship to other.

Mural making can also be translated to community work on a larger scale, offering connection to something that is greater than the individual, cohesion, and connection to

community. Art making, through various mediums can produce deep exploration of identity development as well as serve as a tool for discovery and healing. Artistic metaphors can be brought to life and reveal insights to experiences. Collaborative art making can be useful for integrating cognitive, aesthetic, and intersubjective insights as they emerge (Chilton & Scotti, 2014). Collaborative art making, including the experiential aspect, may aid in both individual and community identity development, in addition to moving from abstract to concrete expression. This literature review discussed the power of image and its ability to bring to consciousness individual, universal, and collective themes and sufferings. In the context of social action art therapy, mural making can provide such a vehicle while also responding to injustice. The process of creating the mural can offer personal/collective healing as well. Through the use of artistic metaphors and imagery, individuals and communities are given the opportunity to process complex emotions in community with others, thus bringing about healing through expression and shared experiences. Again, moving from isolation and disconnection into connection, which is at the root of Relational-Cultural Theory (Jordan, 2010). This was seen in the research done throughout the various case studies and community art projects.

Because murals can also be thought of as a democratic form of public art, people and/or communities come together to collaboratively create something for the purpose of sending some sort of message and eliciting a response from its viewers. Murals provide opportunity for both the creators of the mural and the viewers of the mural to participate in an empowering experience by serving as a dialogical performance piece. Participation in creating a mural for this purpose may allow of opportunities to identify and confront systemic oppressions through the artistic process (Finely, Vonk, & Finley, 2014).

Throughout the research it was found that community could be developed and fostered specifically mural making. Themes that were evident among research showed that some benefits of community art making in the form of mural making could include individual and group identity development, enhanced sense of belonging and social awareness, and feelings of connectedness.

Throughout this literature review the main focus was placed on the artistic medium of mural making, its collaborative aspects, and the use of imagery and metaphor through art. These key themes found in the research show that mural making in the context of art therapy is beneficial. Through the research it is evident that creating a mural, whether in the context of traditional art therapy or as a community project/social action art therapy, has many therapeutic benefits that extend to its participants and can be used in a wide variety of settings.

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In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

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