

RUNNING HEAD: Addressing Climate Change in Art Therapy

Addressing Climate Change in Art Therapy: An exploration of the intersection of eco-art therapy  
and environmental social justice

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### Abstract

This paper presents interviews with eco-art therapists concerning the intersection of climate change and art therapy, as well as personal artistic exploration of reducing waste in art practices. Climate change is more than the rising of sea levels and the destruction of animal habitats. Global health consequences as a result of air pollution and rising temperatures put vulnerable populations at risk. Beyond health issues, social consequences such as climate gentrification and climate classism creep into the fabrics of society as big powerful, profit driven corporations reek havoc on the environment. Environmental psychology indicates the need for humanity to be conscious of and intertwined with nature for the benefit of our mental health. The separation from nature is damaging to our mental health and the human driven destruction of the environment is creating more mental health concerns such as climate anxiety, PTSD from natural disasters, increase in aggression tied to temperature rises, and increase in suicide. Eco art therapists utilize humanities natural creative tendencies for therapeutic gain by encouraging connection to nature and creation from nature. From those interviewed, it appears eco art therapists are concerned about climate change and believe action needs to be taken. There is little overlap in research on the aspect of climate change as a social justice issue and increased need for education within the “traditional” art therapy field for being conscientiousness of our materials used in order to avoid contributing to the issue of climate change. From personal artistic reflection, I experienced emotions tied to climate anxiety, learned about some natural art making techniques, and considered therapeutic benefits this practice had on me, and would have with clients.

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## Introduction

When I was a child, I perceived climate change as out of my reach and my control. There was little I could do to reduce humanity's environmental impact except to take shorter showers and recycle. I remember learning about negative effects of cutting down trees in my fifth-grade class; then on my way to school, noticing construction of a target where there used to be a forest. I asked my dad why they would do that, and he said something like, "I'm not sure honey, it's how the world works. Maybe you can grow up to be a scientist and create better solutions." Well, after getting my only ever letter C grade in my high school chemistry class, I dismissed my ability to do anything about climate change.

I ended up becoming an artist, and now an art therapist. Two years ago, my eyes were opened to the devastating effects of trash on the ocean at an art show. "Did you know there will be more plastic than fish in the ocean by 2050?" said the artist in a slide show after the art display. She went on to ask, "Did you know only 9 percent of plastics made are recycled and most often are only recycled once?" What blew my mind most was the fact that plastic is not biodegrading but is breaking down into small pieces and inevitably entering our food system.

I became extremely interested in reducing waste in everyday life and discovering how people live "zero waste." I had never seen that in the culture I grew up in, but slowly became aware that plastic is integrated into every part of our lives, all food packaging, art supplies, daily living necessities like toothbrushes, water bottles, everything I touched was made from plastic. I struggled with the anxiety of knowing I couldn't incorporate these new habits into my chosen field of art therapy. I wrestled with questions like, why would reducing waste be important to other art therapists? Won't therapeutic benefits of materials and need for convenience outweigh the need to reduce waste? I saw reducing waste as a personal choice, like becoming vegetarian or

vegan. I now see it as social issue effecting every single person on this planet, in particular the most vulnerable.

### **Statement of Problem**

Therapists require a level of cultural competency to accommodate all types of cultures, religions, and family backgrounds in order to advocate for our clients and empower them to maintain the rights they deserve (ACA, 2017; Singh, Appling, & Trepal, 2020). As art therapists, from social justice theory standpoint, not only do we need to be aware of presenting issues and injustices in order to be empathetic for our clients, but we should definitely not be contributing to an issue causing injustice.

Art therapy requires materials in order to be effective. Production of material results in carbon emission and disposal of material generates waste. Every material I can think of, that I used in obtaining an art degree, or every material that I learned about the therapeutic properties of in obtaining an art therapy degree, came in plastic packaging and creates waste. Any kind of paint, adhesive, tape, clay, markers, pencils, pens, fabric, or pastels come wrapped in a shiny plastic covering.

### **Purpose of project**

I began to wonder how we as a field can grow consciousness of this issue and reduce our environmental impact. I wanted to learn more about eco art therapy in order to discover therapeutic benefits in working with nature, learn more ways to have sustainable art therapy practices, gain perspective on eco art therapist's view of climate change as a social justice issue, and search for beginning steps for "traditional" art therapists in addressing this issue within practice. In addition to the interview and research portion of this project, I wanted to personally and artistically reflect on my impact.

A year ago, I was doing my absolute best to reduce as much waste generation in my personal life as possible. In January of 2019 I decided not to throw anything away that was a single use plastic or nonbiodegradable for three months. What did that look like? Any waste that could not be mainstream recycled or composted, I kept. I ended up with one box of trash. I wanted to create art from the remains, the discards of my daily life, as a personal reflection and a public expression of frustration toward the systems in which we live that tell us this is okay.

### **Limitations**

This project is limited in the scope and reach of research, personal bias, and number of interviews done. In order to understand this topic further, I think it is important to gain understanding from more eco art therapists as well as traditional art therapists. It would be beneficial to conduct more interviews with “traditional” art therapists to gain perspective on their understanding of the intersections between art therapy and climate change as a social injustice.

Additionally, because I am passionate about this topic, I may hold bias in assessing balance and need for modern commercialized art materials and nature-based materials. I need to be aware of these biases when determining therapeutic benefit for the client, rather than choosing the sustainable option without consideration of the client’s needs.

### **Assumptions**

The main assumption of this project is that climate change will continue to be a problem affecting health, basic needs, and social rights of people globally. In turn, there is an assumption that something must be done to prevent that and assumes that every individual is in some way responsible for promoting change.

### **Operational Definition of Terms**

**Climate change.** NASA (2020) defines climate change as a “long term change in the average weather patterns that have come to define Earth’s local, regional, and global climates. These changes have a broad range of observed effects that are synonymous with the term.”

**Environmental justice.** The United States Environmental Protection Agency defines “environmental justice” as,

“the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies. This goal will be achieved when everyone enjoys: the same degree of protection from environmental and health hazards, and equal access to the decision-making process to have a healthy environment in which to live, learn, and work” (United States Environmental Protection Agency, 2020).

**Climate anxiety.** Climate anxiety is an “aspect of the wider phenomenon of eco-anxiety: it encompasses challenging emotions, experienced to a significant degree, due to environmental issues and the threats they pose” (Pihkala, 2019, p. 2).

**Climate gentrification.** Renovating housing or a district in order to conform to more “middle class taste” or making an activity or person more refined defines gentrification (dictionary.com). Gentrification is seen in many growing cities where long term residents are being pushed out by increased rents in order to build more profitable and “middle class” housing. Because it displaces communities and residents with long histories with those areas, it is a social justice concern (Marcuse, 2015). Climate gentrification is occurring in Miami as sea levels rise and higher land becomes more valuable (Ariza, 2018).

**Art therapy.** The American Art Therapy Association (2017) defines art therapy as “an integrative mental health and human services profession that enriches the lives of individuals, families, and communities through active art-making, creative process, applied psychological theory, and human experience within a psychotherapeutic relationship.” Art therapy is the process of using art within therapy as a tool or using art as therapy.

**Eco art therapy** Eco-art therapy increases creative response and therapist’s awareness to larger ecological systems as a source of healing for the client beyond the focus of primarily the individual, family, or culture. (Gage & Speert, 1995 as cited by Speert, 2016). Eco art therapists utilize nature as an environment while creating and encourage the creation of art from natural materials.

### **Literature Review**

There is a complacency in addressing the climate crisis and a denial in the need for change (Washington & Cook, 2011). COVID-19 has awoken the world to crisis and every country has taken fast action, with 16,301,736 cases and 650,069 deaths (World Health Organization, 2020). Governments are scrambling to create healthcare accommodations and policies to get the crisis under control, closing businesses, enforcing the use of masks in all public spaces, and encouraging social distancing measures (CDC, 2020). Yet, 7 billion people die annually from air pollution and the U.S government is enacting a 30 year plan to reduce carbon emission (House select committee on the climate crisis, 2020). There is a need for major cultural shifts to address impacts of waste consumption, commercialist production, and carbon emission (cite) and the mental health results of these practices.

This literature review will examine this paper's theoretical rationale, climate change as a social justice issue, mental health impacts of climate change, and art therapy in relation to climate change.

### **Theoretical rationale**

**Intersectionality theory.** This project utilizes an intersectionality theory perspective. Born from black feminism, intersectionality looks at overlap of social identities and oppression of power (Moradi & Grzanka, 2017). Climate change is heavily entangled with capitalism and other power systems within our economic systems that deepen the divide between socioeconomic statuses; thus, change to societal structure is needed to resolve both issues of classism and climate crisis (Park, 2015).

As a need grows to address social justice issues as a field, the integration of intersectionality into art therapy practice increases (Kuri, 2017). For art therapists to put intersectionality theory into practice, we need to implement the idea of self reflexivity and be aware of white theory (Kuri, 2017). Self-reflexivity is the continuous evaluating of one's own personal biases and culturally engrained societal constructs.

As therapists, our "focus can no longer be only on the psychological issues of clients" (Kuri, 2017, pp. 120). We need to call attention to how social and political dimensions of society affect the lived experience (Kuri, 2017). In doing so, the burden of the psychological issues is removed from the client and indicates a larger root cause.

### **Review of related research**

**Climate crisis.** Climate change is contributing to an increase in natural disasters and world health issues, which in turn create strain on food supply, economic systems, and social justices (WHO, 2020; APA, 2020; Scheirich, 2020). Changes in earth's climate have been

observed since the 20<sup>th</sup> century primarily as a result of human activity such as burning fossil fuels, “which increases heat trapping gas levels in earth’s atmosphere, raising earth’s average surface temperature...commonly referred to as global warming” (NASA, 2020).

**Environmental justice.** The World Health Organization (2020) indicates that air pollution contributes to 7 billion deaths annually worldwide. In 2018 new estimates reveal that 9 out of 10 people are breathing air with high levels of pollutants (WHO, 2020). Natural disasters are increasing in frequency and intensity as a result of climate change, including hurricanes, tornados, heat waves, and wild fires (Rattner & Newburger, 2019). Sea levels are rising in Miami and contributing to climate gentrification in which lower income residents, some descendants of slaves pushed there after the civil war, are being forced to leave as a result of rising rents or negligent landlords looking to sell for profit (Ariza, 2018). Climate intersects further with classism in construction of a natural gas compressor station in a historically black neighborhood (Ortiz, 2020).

**Climate change and mental health.** Climate anxiety, PTSD, increase in aggression, and increase in suicide have been identified by the American Psychiatric Association (2020) as mental health challenges resulting from climate change. Health effects from climate change manifest as both physical and psychological (Pihkala, 2019). There are direct and indirect effects. Direct effects include the mental health challenges as a result of a climate change influenced event like a heat wave or flood. Indirect effects on mental health include climate anxiety (Pihkala, 2010).

**Climate anxiety.** Psychological difficulties that may result in climate anxiety include adjusting to new circumstances then adjusting coping mechanisms and the process of accepting one's own ethical responsibility in concern to climate change.

**Art therapy.** Research indicates that art therapy benefits in treating mental health challenges through utilizing creative expression and manipulation of art material (Joseph, 2006; Gussak & Rosal, 2016). Climate anxiety and other mental health effects have presented themselves as a result of climate change. Literature review by Scheirich (2020), indicates there is a lack of research on the overlap of utilizing art therapy in treatment of the effects of mental health effects of climate change. However, eco art therapy utilizes nature in art therapy practices and indicates potential to treat climate anxiety with art therapy (Scheirich, 2020). Within the creative therapies field, climate change has been addressed by Seabrook (2020) in how music therapy should begin addressing the mental health effects of climate change with clients.

Additionally, one interviewer for this project, Heginsworth (2020) and his colleague Gary Nash, begin advocating for creative therapies to have a voice in the issue of climate change. Yet, there is no other known research on the role of art therapists and the art therapy field in addressing climate change as a social justice issue within practice through conscientiousness of material choice and awareness of environmental impacts on clients mental health.

**Eco art therapy.** Interaction with nature in the creative process for therapeutic benefit is advocated for in Eco Art therapy (Kopytin & Rugh, 2017; Speert, 2016) Kopytin and Rugh (2017) describe the importance of caring for nature, since we are a part of nature, in taking care

of it, we take care of ourselves. Inherently there is a therapeutic quality to caring for nature because it cares for us (Kopytin & Rugh, 2017).

## **Method**

### **Setting**

The interviews were conducted via zoom meetings or through email correspondence. This was due in part to the pandemic and distance between the interviewer and eco art therapists. I conducted the art exploration portion of this project within my home while quarantining.

### **Participants**

I interviewed four different eco art therapists, Dr. Pamela Whitaker, Ellen Speert, Ian Siddons Heginsworth, and Alexander Kopytin.

Dr. Pamela Whitaker is an art therapist living in Ireland who teaches at Belfast School of Art and runs community projects under the name of Groundswell. She is originally from Canada and has been the editor of the Canadian Art Therapy Association Journal. She has written, *Groundswell: The Nature and Landscape of Art Therapy in Materials and Media in Art Therapy* as well as, *The Art Therapy Assemblage in Art Therapy and Post Modernism*. I found Dr. Pamela Whitaker from her Groundswell project and the use of nature in art therapy practices.

Ellen Speert is the director of the California Center for Creative Renewal, is a board-certified art therapist, and a registered expressive arts therapist. Ellen is a past president of the San Diego Art Therapy Association and was the first United States representative of the Art Therapy International Networking Group. She has been in private practice in San Diego since 1981. I found Ellen from her article published by the American Art Therapy Association titled, *Eco-Art Therapy: Deepening connections with the natural world* (2016).

Ian Siddons Heginworth is a registered drama therapist in Exeter, Devon. He teaches an environmental art therapy course at the London Art Therapy Centre. He uses the locations, themes, cycles, and materials of nature as therapeutic media. He worked for 35 years in the National Health Service primarily employed in mental health and learning disability services. Now, he runs a private practice in a woodland area of Exeter as an environmental arts therapist. I came into contact with Ian through his website about environmental arts therapy.

Dr. Alexander Kopytin is a psychotherapist, psychiatrist, and professor in the psychotherapy department at Northwest Medical I. Mechnokov University. He is the head of the postgraduate training in art therapy at the Academy of Postgraduate Pedagogical training at St. Petersburg, and chair of Russian Art Therapy Association. He recently published with Madeline Rugh, *Green Studio: Nature and the arts in therapy* (2016) and *Environmental expressive therapies: Nature-assisted theory and practice* (2017).

## **Procedure**

**Interviews.** I asked the eco art therapists the following questions:

1. What makes you passionate about the environment and art therapy?
2. How do you incorporate the two?
3. What therapeutic benefits do you see in eco art therapy?
4. What are your thoughts on climate change as a social justice issue?
5. How are you as an art therapist addressing this issue? Within therapy? And logistically (through waste reduction and environmental consciousness of materials)?
6. If you don't think you are addressing it (either directly or indirectly), do you think it is important that we do?

7. How should art therapy proceed as a field in addressing climate change seeing as it is now a social justice issue?
8. What would be your biggest piece of advice for art therapist looking to be more environmentally conscious? For an art therapist looking to integrate nature into practice?
9. What are your thoughts on zero waste living?
10. What are your thoughts on Zero waste art therapy or artistry?

**Art exploration.** I wanted to maintain environmental consciousness while creating art from the trash collected. In order to do this, I used only compostable zero waste materials to create art from the trash in order to not create more trash in the long run. To do this, I used homemade recipes for salt dough to act as a sculpting agent, homemade glue made from flour, sugar, and water as an adhesive, and thread to connect trash. I originally considered only doing photography in order to not create any new trash. However, I felt it was important to experiment with and learn about sustainable art creation methods, and feel the emotional effects of making art from my own trash. I then documented the process on social media to share with the public. It is available to view on Instagram @3monthsoftrash.

## Findings

### Interviews

**Interview one: Dr. Pamela Whitaker.** Processing bereavement through community engagement and interaction with the garden was one therapeutic benefit Dr. Whitaker explained during our zoom call. Pamela spoke with excitement about community engagement and “expanding accessibility of art therapy.” Through receiving grants, Pamela has created garden projects all throughout Belfast. She involves the community in the creation of these gardens and

encourages the production of art from the plants within them. Community care comes from maintaining the garden, the release of dopamine when foraging, and the community events they plan as celebrations within the garden. To recognize and support local traditions, Dr. Whitaker has worked with the community to organize traditional Irish celebrations.

Dr. Whitaker and I discussed how encouraging the use of natural materials and reconnection with nature inadvertently aids climate change. In addition to Groundswell's therapeutic qualities for community members, through using sustainable and natural materials, Groundswell is not contributing to waste and is increasing knowledge of ecology among the community.

**Interview two: Ellen Speert.** Ellen entered the interview with interest, stating that she had not heard of anyone looking into the overlap of art therapy and climate justice thus far. Ellen described her beautiful garden with succulents and fruit trees, stating there are metaphors all around the garden that can be related back to therapy and our lives. The compost may be a place someone goes when processing grief and the loss of life, and a place to remember that loss evolves into space for new life.

When asked about addressing climate change within practice, through material choice or with clients, Ellen describes using as many materials from nature as possible and always looking for a use for something before throwing it away. Ellen described collecting rainwater to use for painting and asking clients not to run the faucet while washing the brushes, but to fill up a bowl. She even described showing a visiting artist leading a workshop how reusable cloths could be used instead of large quantities of paper towels. We discussed how these are small things, but they are often not thought about in our current culture, where everything can be bought and then thrown away. She expressed not fully knowing what the field of art therapy could do in response

to climate change as a social justice issue, except to incorporate more teachings on ecology in traditional art therapy courses, in order to understand more fully its importance, and our impact.

When discussing the concept of “zero waste,” Ellen said it was something she “wished everyone thought about.” However, she described a balance that must take place in art therapy in which modern commercialized materials are offered alongside natural materials, in order to provide choices for the clients. She also brought up a good point about needing to have the option for clients to get rid of something that triggers them, or they need to symbolically release from their life. In that way, art therapy could not be zero waste. However, we discussed alternate ways the client could discard something without putting it in the landfill, like safely burning (non-toxic materials), or observing its natural decomposition.

**Interview three: Ian Siddons Heginsworth.** Ian got back to me via email due to living with poor internet connection in between his boat and the woods. I could already tell he believes what he writes about living within nature. Ian expresses that therapy is about learning yourself and we cannot do so without nature, because we are a part of nature. Working with nature allows us to discover our “natural selves” (personal communication, June 24, 2020). Like Ellen, he wrote of rich metaphors seen in nature in sensory elements, color, texture, meaning, life and death, that align with therapeutic goals. He describes nature as the “ultimate teacher” who helps us to move closer to feeling (personal communication, June 24, 2020).

In concern to climate change as a social justice issue, he described the shifting balance between the masculine and feminine within eco art therapy. Our masculine is outward focused and “enables us to think of the outer world and to plan, strive and achieve our goals” (personal communication, June 24, 2020). The feminine is inward focused and “allows us to receive and feel all that comes back to us and its main concern is the business of love in all of its many

guises” (personal communication, June 24 2020). Because our culture as a whole is more encouraged toward masculine traits to “avoid, numb or distract feeling” and “focus on the positive and deny the shadow,” there is a corrosive effect to everything that would require the integrity of the heart, “parenting, education, health care, societal and sexual equality, religion, rite of passage, elderhood, and of course our relationship with the natural world” (personal communication, June 24, 2020). The purpose of the masculine is to think not to feel and thus results in seeing Nature as primarily a resource to “further its own ends” (personal communication, June 24, 2020).

He indicates that art therapy addresses this issue through “enduring relationship between soul and soil,” which brings inherently a protective nature, a deeper love that results in the realization of the nature’s protection over us and thus the need to protect nature. Logistically, within his eco art therapy practices he uses only woodlands, which requires no management of the natural processes. He also indicated that art therapists are recognizing and addressing climate change (Routledge, 2020).

When asked how traditional art therapists can incorporate more natural materials into practices, he said to “have the courage to take practice outdoors” (personal communication, June 24, 2020). Finally, he indicates zero waste living is “essential” and had not previously heard of zero waste artistry.

**Interview four: Alexander Kopytin.** Alexander responded to my inquiry with willingness and interest. He believes “that creative arts can play a great role in changing perception of the living environment, the Earth as well as our perception of ourselves as ‘ecological’ subjects” through this we develop more environmental consciousness and sustainable ways of life (personal communication, July 15, 2020). Eco art therapy increases

health through learned therapeutic skills and self regulation. We can increase client's ecological knowledge through waste reduction and conscientiousness of materials. Additionally, eco art therapy involves, according to Theodore Rozak, the attunement to "aspects of human experience, in particular, those related to our biological history and our 'ecological unconsciousness'" which can be actualized to support "perception of ourselves as 'ecological subjects'" or our eco-identity.

When asked about climate change as a social justice issues, he stated, "if you mean that people have such a fundamental need and right as to live in the 'healthy,' beautiful and unchallenged environment I believe that both we and future generations have such a need and right" (personal communication, July 17, 2020). He also points out that there is a balance between economic growth, care for the environment and social well-being are interconnected and "must be guaranteed" (personal communication, July 17, 2020).

Alexander also stated that "zero or at least reduced waste art therapy and artistry must be our demand," emphasizing the seriousness of this issue and the responsibility of art therapists and artists to recognize our impact.

**Interview themes.** Themes seen in the interviews include: the use of nature in art to create metaphors for therapy, the need for increased awareness and education of climate change among art therapists and clients, and the need for reduced waste in the practice of art therapy.

### **Personal Arts Exploration**

**Personal climate anxiety.** When I finally came back to this box that had been sitting in the attic for a year, I felt nervous about the prospect of sharing it with the world. Upon reflection, I identified that the nervousness was rooted in shame. I felt like I was laying out all my dirty laundry for my friends and family to see. Combing through the trash, handling it, I saw the

permanent echo of everything I consumed during those three months. It's uncomfortable. Is it because I have grown a consciousness for the impact of waste that I did not have before? Would other people not feel this way cataloging and handling their trash? I feel ashamed for contributing to a global existential crisis. I looked at many of the items and felt guilty for not having the discipline to choose the zero waste option.

As I have exchanged habits and learned about reducing waste, one of the biggest things I have learned is that it's not the most convenient option. I feel passionate and curious to learn, but it does take time. For instance, 4 hours to bake bread instead of buying it at the store or grating bar soap for thirty minutes for homemade laundry detergent instead of ordering it from amazon. There are a million layers to the problem, in order to avoid being overwhelmed by what I have now identified as my own climate anxiety, I need to remember that my choices are not the only part of the problem.

**Perspective as an art therapist.** From an art therapist's point of view, as I was making art from these daily discards that would sit in the landfill for hundreds and hundreds of years, I grappled with the concept of permanency in art making and our "throw away" culture. I considered how permanency in art might translate to a desire for control over our lives, and assurance that we have visual impact. However, I found it powerful to experiment with biodegradable art materials like glue made from sugar, flour, and water, and know it may not more than a day or two. Was the process worth it if I could not keep the art? I tell my clients the process is more important all the time and encourage them to get rid of their art in the end if they choose, after all it should be their choice. However, this process made me consider how important it is to sit with what you have made and think about why you wish to keep it, or why you wish to get rid of it.

I considered our “throw away” culture and how it may translate beyond just trash. When we consume something, buy food with packaging, clothes on a rack, furniture at the store, we can so easily get rid of it. Before commercialism made everything within convenient reach, literally through the tap of a button, people had to make everything themselves. I think we have lost some inherently therapeutic benefits of living that way. It takes problem solving skills and patience to create something from what you already have. Additionally, there is a sense of purpose, pride, and understanding that comes from creating with your own hands from materials you know the origin of. I feel like I am relearning skills that our culture has left behind. Beyond being easy on your wallet and good for the environment, there are clearly some benefits to mental wellbeing in creating art in a more sustainable way. At least, I experienced them.

**Advice from a zero waste artist.** Marissa Jacobs is an artist blogger who shares how to reduce waste in art making. She owns her own company where she does workshops with children and teaches them to create paint and paint brushes from foraging then shows them how to paint with these materials. Marissa also works for the Audubon society and National Geographic in environmental educational related roles. I met Marissa via zoom to discuss how she reduces waste in her art life.

Marissa and I acknowledged together that the “zero” in “zero waste” is a bit subjective because overall impact on the climate has to be considered above - in the moment - waste production. For example, a glue that Marissa suggest, a natural, non toxic, package free (free of plastics or nonbiodegradables) glue, is shipped all the way from Italy. Does the carbon emission from the delivery of the package negate the benefit of using package free and non-toxic glue, or would it be less time consuming and have the same impact to buy modern Elmer’s glue at the store? We decided the solution would be to make your own, with corn starch and other

ingredients, but then discussed where those products were shipped from and the packaging that they may come in. Clearly there is a lot to think about. In order to break it down for myself as an artist and other art therapists, I asked Marissa for advice on all modern main stream art therapy materials: glue, tape, paint, brushes, pastels, markers, and three dimensional material. Her main advice was to look into how things were made and where they came from, then ask yourself if you could make it yourself. Reusing and reducing is a good place to start too. Marissa stated that, “start where you are and learn from there... like any thing else, zero waste is a muscle you build” (personal communication, July 22, 2020).

### **Discussion**

From this combination of interviews and personal exploration, I learned there is use of nature in art therapy for the benefit of clients, however there is a need for increased conversation concerning the overlap of art therapy and climate change as a social injustice.

Thinking of waste consumption in a culture where it is normal and acceptable to generate waste threatens our comfort and convenience. We feel powerless, and as a result, many of us sit in denial and do nothing (Washington & Cook, 2011). I can say for me personally, learning more about the environmental issues sometimes makes me wish I was oblivious to them in order to lessen the burden and anxiety I feel surrounding them.

### **Limitations**

Again, limitations of this project include limited number of interviews done and amount of research done as well as personal bias. If there was more time to conduct the interviews, I would have liked to interview more eco art therapist and traditional art therapists, as well as more zero or reduced waste artists. I think the perspective of traditional art therapists on climate change would be important to understand in order to begin advocating for and encouraging the

reduction of waste in art therapy practices, and the implementation of teaching on the educational level for art therapists. Interviewing reduced waste artists and eco art therapists could help us to relearn how to reduce waste in practice, what materials are non toxic and low waste, and gain problem solving skills surrounding waste in art therapy.

### **Implications and recommendations**

For myself, I am recommending the continued search for knowledge on eco art therapy, environmental issues and impacts, reduced waste artistry, and exploration of where this fits into my identity as an art therapist. If I end up working in a hospital or any institutional setting, my material choices may be limited by that setting to items I can sanitize or use with more convenience. However, I still wish to do as much as I can, even if that is something small like reusing plastic cups for painting or collecting paper scraps. I hope to continue to explore making my own materials, including painting with egg yoke and pigment, and dyeing fabric with plants, in order to bring more of these practices into use with clients.

My recommendations for other art therapists would be to evaluate the use and consumption of materials in their practice as well as their own understanding of climate change and the intersection of nature and mental health.

### **Future development**

For future development, I would recommend having groups of people do this artistic exploration with trash collection, but for shorter amounts of time. It could be done specifically with art therapists, collecting everything they would throw away in one week that is not recyclable or compostable. Then with the remains they would create art using only non toxic, reduced waste art practices. This could raise awareness within the community, increase

communication surrounding the topic and help art therapists learn from personal exploration, the therapeutic benefits of creating with natural art materials.

In addition, it would be useful to continue investigating how other cultures perceive climate change and corresponding impacts of mental health in order to broaden scope of research and reduce my own personal bias in the collection of data.

### **Conclusions**

While completing this project I have felt overwhelmed, anxious, excited, passionate, and curious. Zero waste is a new culture trend that is actually revisiting previous ways of living before commercialization and mass production. On this journey, I find myself learning about art therapy, the psychology of our connection to earth, science and sustainability, cultural trends, as well as environmental destruction and social injustice results of human activity. At the same time, I find hope in the interest of other art therapists and the passion shared during the interviews of these wonderful eco art therapists. If we all commit to learning more and have the willingness to change, we can make a difference and find emotional and mental health benefits along the way.

## Resources

- American Art Therapy Association (2017). Definition of Art Therapy. Retrieved from <https://arttherapy.org/about/#:~:text=DEFINITION%20OF%20ART%20THERAPY,experience%20within%20a%20psychotherapeutic%20relationship.>
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