



Art Therapy Interventions for Syrian Child and Adolescent Refugees: Enhancing Mental Well-being and Resilience

Anies Al-Hroub¹

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Abstract

Purpose of Review This critical review primarily aims to conduct a comprehensive assessment of recent studies conducted within the past 3 years, with a specific focus on the use of art therapy within Syrian child and adolescent refugee populations. The central objective of this inquiry is to explore the impact of art therapy interventions and provide critical insights into their effectiveness in enhancing the mental well-being and resilience of these young refugees.

Recent Findings Recent research conducted within the past 3 years highlights the effectiveness of art therapy as an intervention strategy within Syrian child and adolescent refugee populations. These studies emphasize that art therapy offers a safe and supportive space for these young refugees to express emotions, process trauma, and improve their psychological well-being. It has shown promise in mitigating trauma-related challenges and fostering resilience among this group of refugee populations. Furthermore, art therapy plays a crucial role in preserving cultural identities and has proven to be versatile and adaptable to various artistic modalities. These findings underscore the potential of art therapy as a valuable tool for supporting the mental well-being and resilience of Syrian children and adolescent refugees, warranting further exploration and integration into their care and support programs.

Summary Recent studies on the use of art therapy within Syrian child and adolescent refugee communities reveal its potential as a powerful intervention strategy for enhancing mental well-being and resilience in this vulnerable population. The review identifies six key themes, highlighting the therapeutic benefits and versatility of art therapy. As we move forward, these findings offer promising future directions for research and practice in art therapy with this specific group of refugees, emphasizing the need for continued exploration and integration of this approach in supporting Syrian child and adolescent refugees.

Keywords Art therapy · Syrian children and adolescents · Refugees · Mental well-being · Resilience · Intervention · Critical review · Trauma · Cultural identity

Introduction

In recent years, the field of mental health care for refugee populations has witnessed a transformative shift, recognizing the vital role of art therapy in promoting psychological development and resilience. Art therapy, a creative and expressive therapeutic modality, has emerged as a powerful tool in addressing the unique mental health needs of child and adolescent refugees [1••]. This critical review article aims to delve into the impactful and evolving realm of art

therapy interventions for refugees, focusing on their contribution to enhancing mental well-being and resilience.

The primary aim of this critical review is to provide a comprehensive assessment of recent studies conducted within the last 3 years, focusing on the utilization of art therapy with Syrian child and adolescent refugee populations. The central focus is on exploring the impact of art therapy interventions, offering critical insights into their effectiveness in bolstering the mental well-being and resilience of Syrian child and adolescent refugees. Three questions guided this critical review article: first, how does art therapy contribute to the psychological development and resilience of Syrian child and adolescent refugee populations? This question delves into the core of the art therapy experience for these refugees, investigating how creative expression through various modalities facilitates psychological growth

✉ Anies Al-Hroub
aa111@aub.edu.lb

¹ Department of Education, American University of Beirut, P.O Box: 11-0236, Beirut, Lebanon

and the development of resilience in the face of adversity. Second, what are the common themes and findings across recent studies in this field focused on Syrian child and adolescent refugees? To comprehend the evolving landscape of art therapy within this specific refugee context, this question seeks to identify recurring themes and findings, offering a synthesis of the collective knowledge generated in recent years. Third, how can the insights from these studies inform future directions for art therapy with Syrian child and adolescent refugees? As we strive to enhance the efficacy and cultural sensitivity of art therapy interventions for this specific population, this question underscores the practical implications of research findings.

Critical Review

The critical review of recent studies on art therapy interventions for refugees reveals several common findings and themes that shed light on the significant impact of art therapy on mental well-being and resilience within Syrian child and adolescent refugee populations. This analysis delves into these findings, providing insights into the transformative potential of art therapy in addressing the mental health needs of Syrian child and adolescent refugees. Six main common themes will be discussed based on the current research findings on art therapy with Syrian child and adolescent refugees.

Theme 1: Art Therapy as a Healing Tool for Syrian Refugee Youth

Art therapy has emerged as a potent healing tool for Syrian refugee youth, offering them a therapeutic means to address the profound psychological challenges resulting from displacement and trauma. Feen-Calligan and colleagues (2020) [2] emphasized the transformative potential of art therapy in aiding the psychological well-being of this vulnerable demographic. Syrian refugee youth, having endured the harrowing experience of displacement and its associated psychological burdens, have found solace and healing through art therapy interventions. This particular study examined the real-world application of art therapy with Syrian refugee youth in the USA. The findings revealed that art therapy significantly contributes to the alleviation of trauma-related symptoms among these youth. Through various artistic modalities, such as drawing and painting, participants were able to externalize and process their emotions, ultimately leading to an improvement in their mental well-being.

Moreover, the adaptability of art therapy in different circumstances becomes evident in a recent study by Feen-Calligan and others (2023a) [3•]. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, which added further layers of stress

and uncertainty, art therapy continued to be an effective healing tool for refugee youth. This research underscores the resilience and versatility of art therapy, emphasizing its role in helping youth cope with challenging situations. A systematic review study of eight recent research studies by Annous and colleagues (2022) [1••] evaluated the empirical evidence concerning art therapy's effectiveness in treating PTSD symptoms in traumatized refugee children and youth. Although considered promising, art therapy presently falls under the category of interventions with insufficient evidence. This classification highlights the necessity for further methodologically sound experimental studies to strengthen the evidence base for art therapy's role in reducing PTSD symptoms among refugee populations worldwide.

In these findings, it is noteworthy that research on art therapy's effectiveness with diverse refugee populations, such as Korean-Ukrainian refugees [4], and in various settings, such as the France-UK border [5], corroborates the potential of art therapy as a healing tool. While not all studies explicitly mention Syrian refugees or youth, their findings underscore the broader therapeutic applicability of art therapy, which can be extended to Syrian refugee youth facing similar challenges.

Theme 2: Art Therapy in the Context of Trauma and Mental Health

Recent research delves into the role of art therapy in addressing the mental health needs of refugees, particularly focusing on trauma-related symptoms, anxiety, and depression. It explores the therapeutic potential of art as a means of alleviating psychological distress among refugee populations. Zadeh and Jogia [6•] conducted a comprehensive literature review that centers on the impact of art therapy on the mental health of refugees. This theme emphasizes the crucial role that art therapy plays in alleviating trauma-related symptoms, including anxiety and depression, among individuals who have experienced forced displacement and other traumatic events. Feen-Calligan et al. [2] further illustrated the effectiveness of art therapy in addressing the mental health needs of Syrian refugee youth. Through art therapy interventions, these young refugees experienced a reduction in symptoms related to trauma, anxiety, and depression. The creative process provided them with a means to externalize and process their emotions, ultimately contributing to improved mental well-being.

The relevance of art therapy in the mental health context extends to crises and challenging situations. Feen-Calligan et al. [3•] have exemplified how art therapy continued to positively impact mental well-being, even during the COVID-19 pandemic. This virtual approach showcased the adaptability of art therapy in providing emotional support and reducing distress, emphasizing its versatility in addressing

mental health concerns. Additionally, Feen-Calligan et al. [7••] combined art therapy with photovoice techniques. This approach empowers participants to share their stories and perspectives, enhancing their sense of agency and resilience. The study demonstrates that art therapy contributes to the development of coping mechanisms, enabling refugee and immigrant adolescents to navigate the challenges of resettlement effectively. It underscores the value of creative approaches in facilitating emotional well-being.

These findings align with the broader research on art therapy's role in addressing trauma and mental health concerns (e.g., anxiety, distress, self-confidence, despair), as demonstrated by studies done on other refugee populations [4, 8].

Theme 3: Resilience and Coping

The experience of displacement, trauma, and resettlement places immense psychological burdens on refugee populations. However, art therapy has emerged as a powerful tool for promoting resilience and coping among these communities. Recent research explored how creative interventions empower refugees to navigate adversity and develop effective coping mechanisms.

Khatib and Potash [9] demonstrated the remarkable efficacy of art therapy, specifically visual journaling, in fostering resilience among Syrian refugee populations. Visual journaling provides refugee children and youth with a constructive outlet for expression and empowerment. This form of art therapy allows refugees to externalize their emotions and experiences creatively, ultimately contributing to their resilience in the face of profound challenges. Moreover, Feen-Calligan et al. [7••] emphasized the transformative impact of art therapy on resilience and coping among refugee adolescents. The integration of photovoice techniques with art therapy empowers participants to share their stories and perspectives, enhancing their sense of agency and resilience. The creative process facilitated the development of effective coping mechanisms, enabling refugee and immigrant adolescents to navigate the multifaceted challenges of resettlement successfully. This underscores the inherent value of creative approaches in helping these vulnerable populations process their experiences and emotions, ultimately contributing to their mental well-being.

Furthermore, Idelby [10••] examined the use of artistic drawings as a means to identify post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in children affected by the war in Syria. The research employed an experimental design and a sample of 65 children from varying backgrounds and age groups. It explored the role of art therapy in addressing the mental health challenges faced by Syrian children who have experienced war-related trauma. Furthermore, it touched upon the importance of identifying coping mechanisms and psychological dimensions in this context. The study uncovered the

psychological impact of war on Syrian children. By analyzing the drawings, the research uncovered a range of psychological dimensions, including a lack of self-confidence, disappointment, despair, hesitation, fear, insecurity, selfishness, feelings of defeat, and melancholy. These findings provided valuable insights into the emotional and mental states of the young participants.

The studies on Syrian refugees, and the broader research done on other populations of refugees [4, 8, 11•], collectively emphasized the role of art therapy in promoting resilience and coping among vulnerable refugee children and youth, particularly those affected by displacement and trauma.

Theme 4: Expressive Arts and Cultural Identity

Cultural sensitivity and the preservation of cultural identity are integral aspects of effective art therapy with refugee populations. Theme 4 highlights the role of art therapy in providing culturally relevant interventions and fostering a sense of connection to one's heritage.

In a recent study by Hanania [12••], cultural sensitivity took center stage. The embroidery (*Tatriz*) program, functioning as an art therapy group, not only facilitates emotional healing but also serves as a means for Syrian refugee women to connect with their cultural heritage. This approach demonstrated that art therapy can extend beyond the realms of psychological treatment, offering a platform for individuals to express their cultural identity. By creating a safe and meaningful space for healing and storytelling, art therapy, in this context, became a bridge between the past and the present. Kolah [13••] recognized the challenges posed by language barriers and the necessity for cultural competence in art therapy practice. Language barriers can impede traditional therapeutic communication, making art therapy an invaluable alternative for therapists working with refugees. For children and adolescents who may not have fully developed language skills, art therapy can serve as a powerful means of communication and expression. Therapists working with these age groups should be especially sensitive to their unique language and communication needs. However, cultural competence is paramount in ensuring the effectiveness of these interventions. Therapists must be attuned to cultural nuances and preferences to provide meaningful and culturally sensitive support. Furthermore, Khatib and Potash [9] explored the power of visual journaling in art therapy with Syrian refugees, including children and adolescents. The researchers examined how art therapy can serve as a means for children and adolescent refugees to express their experiences, including the significant migration from their homeland. This study underscored the critical role of art therapy in preserving cultural identity and

providing a channel for self-expression. It becomes a tool for younger individuals to convey their unique narratives and histories.

In summary, the studies on Syrian younger refugees and the broader research done on other populations of refugees [4, 8], collectively emphasized the role of art therapy in providing culturally sensitive and relevant interventions, fostering a sense of connection to one's heritage, and preserving cultural identity among refugee populations.

Theme 5: Integration of Art Modalities

Art therapy's versatility lies in its capacity to integrate various art modalities, thereby enriching therapeutic outcomes for refugees. This theme explored how the amalgamation of diverse artistic forms enhances the effectiveness of art therapy in addressing the multifaceted mental health needs of refugee populations.

In their study, Feen-Calligan and colleagues [2] emphasized the significance of incorporating multiple art modalities into therapeutic practices among refugee children and adolescents. Drawing and painting, among other forms of artistic expression, are employed to facilitate emotional expression and healing among Syrian refugee youth. This integration of diverse artistic mediums creates a multifaceted approach that enables participants to choose the mode of expression that resonates most with their experiences and emotions. By offering this array of options, art therapy becomes a personalized journey for each participant, allowing them to externalize their thoughts and feelings in ways that are most comfortable and meaningful to them. Similarly, Oepen and Gruber [14••] emphasized the evolving nature of creative arts therapy research with younger refugees. This theme acknowledges that art therapy's effectiveness is heightened when a spectrum of art modalities is integrated into therapeutic practices. Beyond traditional visual arts, this integration includes visual arts, music, and expressive writing. By embracing such diversity, art therapy provides a holistic approach to addressing the complex mental health needs of refugees. This approach recognizes that individuals may have unique preferences and affinities for different art forms. Consequently, integrating a variety of modalities ensures that art therapy remains flexible and adaptable to the diverse backgrounds and experiences of refugees.

In summary, the studies on Syrian refugee children and youth, and similar studies on other populations of refugees (e.g., [5]) collectively emphasized the importance of integrating multiple art modalities in art therapy to address the multifaceted mental health needs of refugee populations effectively.

Future Directions

The critical review of recent studies on art therapy interventions for refugees not only provides valuable insights into the transformative potential of art therapy but also points toward promising future directions for research and practice in this field. These future directions aim to further enhance the effectiveness of art therapy in addressing the mental health needs of refugee populations, develop tailored curricula, and explore comparative analyses with other therapeutic modalities. The following analysis delves into these future directions, offering a comprehensive perspective on the evolving landscape of art therapy with refugees.

Advancing Evidence-Based Guidelines

Oepen and Gruber [14••] emphasized the evolving nature of creative arts therapy research with refugee children and youth. This recognition underscores the need for further exploration and development of evidence-based guidelines in the field of art therapy. While existing research highlights the positive impact of art therapy on refugee mental well-being and resilience, there is a call for more rigorous and methodologically sound studies to strengthen the evidence base. Future research efforts should prioritize conducting controlled experiments, randomized controlled trials, and longitudinal studies to establish a robust foundation for the effectiveness of art therapy as an intervention for refugees. By adopting rigorous research methodologies, the field can provide clearer guidance to art therapists and mental health practitioners working with refugee populations.

Tailored Art Therapy Curricula and Heritage Preservation

Yılmaz [15] highlighted the potential for developing tailored art therapy curricula to cater to the specific needs of Syrian refugee populations. Just as the study by Hanania [12••] demonstrated the importance of cultural sensitivity in art therapy with Syrian refugee women, this principle can be extended to children and adolescents. Art therapy programs tailored to their age group can help them explore and express their cultural identity. This future direction suggests that researchers and practitioners should invest in designing and refining school curricula that align with the cultural, linguistic, and contextual aspects of different refugee communities. Such tailored curricula can be instrumental in creating culturally sensitive and effective art therapy interventions. Moreover, they can incorporate elements that address the unique challenges faced by refugees, including trauma,

displacement, and cultural adjustment. This approach allows art therapy to become a more precise and impactful tool for promoting mental well-being and resilience within refugee communities. To achieve this, interdisciplinary collaboration between art therapists, educators, psychologists, and cultural experts will be essential.

Comparative Analyses and Unique Contributions of Art Therapy

Building on the evolving nature of creative arts therapy research with refugees, future research endeavors could delve into comparative analyses between art therapy and other therapeutic modalities. While the reviewed studies primarily focus on art therapy's positive outcomes, they do not directly compare it to alternative approaches. Oepen and Gruber [14••] suggested that conducting comparative analyses could shed light on the unique contributions of art therapy in the context of refugee children and adolescent mental health. Comparative studies could explore how art therapy compares to traditional talk therapies, pharmacological interventions, or other creative arts therapies. This could provide insights into the specific strengths and weaknesses of art therapy, helping clinicians make informed decisions when selecting interventions for refugees. Furthermore, such analyses could contribute to the broader field of mental health by identifying innovative ways in which art therapy complements or enhances existing therapeutic practices.

In summary, the future directions for art therapy with refugees offer a promising landscape for advancing research, practice, and the overall well-being of refugee children and youth. These directions underscore the importance of evidence-based guidelines, tailored curricula, and comparative analyses. By embracing these future directions, the field of art therapy can continue to evolve, adapt, and innovate to better serve the diverse and complex mental health needs of refugees around the world. Moreover, this evolving landscape reinforces the pivotal role of art therapy as a creative and transformative force for healing and resilience within refugee communities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this comprehensive critical review provides evidence that art therapy serves as a potent and versatile healing tool for Syrian refugee youth, effectively alleviating trauma-related symptoms and enhancing their overall mental well-being. It has illuminated the adaptability of art therapy in accommodating diverse circumstances, including the transition to virtual platforms during crises

such as the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it is imperative to underscore the critical necessity for further rigorous research endeavors aimed at augmenting the existing evidentiary foundation, thereby ensuring the sustained efficacy and appropriateness of art therapy interventions for refugee children and youth.

Moreover, the review has emphatically underscored the profound therapeutic potential inherent in art therapy, notably its capacity to mitigate the debilitating effects of trauma, anxiety, and depression among refugee children and adolescents. The amalgamated insights from the studies encapsulated within this thematic exploration have collectively highlighted the pivotal role that art therapy plays in addressing the intricate mental health requisites of refugees, fostering their psychological well-being, and endowing them with invaluable coping mechanisms, even when confronted with the most arduous circumstances. The recurring theme of art therapy's therapeutic efficacy, underpinned by its remarkable adaptability across various contexts, further accentuates its applicability and beneficial impact on the mental and emotional recuperation of those who have endured trauma and forced displacement.

Furthermore, this exposition has delineated the significant implications of research findings in terms of their potential to empower refugees in surmounting adversity and nurturing resilience. Art therapy, facilitated through an array of expressive modalities, emerges as a therapeutic conduit for individuals who have grappled with the profound upheaval of displacement and the enduring repercussions of trauma. By affording them the creative means to articulately convey their emotions, art therapy not only ameliorates psychological distress but also equips them with the essential tools requisite for confronting and surmounting future adversities.

Additionally, this discourse has accentuated the paramount importance of cultural sensitivity and the preservation of cultural identity within the framework of art therapy interventions intended for refugee children and youth. These interventions extend beyond the confines of psychological rehabilitation, furnishing a platform through which individuals can reestablish connections with their cultural heritage and express their unique lived experiences. By nurturing a profound sense of cultural belonging, art therapy emerges as a holistic contributor to the overall well-being and identity reclamation of refugee youth populations.

Furthermore, this study has underscored the indispensability of integrating a plethora of art modalities within the domain of art therapy interventions tailored for younger refugees. This multifaceted approach enhances therapeutic outcomes by proffering tailored, flexible, and comprehensive strategies for addressing multifaceted mental health

needs. By offering an expansive array of creative avenues for self-expression and healing, art therapy retains its dynamism and adaptability as a paramount instrument in the enhancement of the well-being of refugee children and youth populations.

The amalgamation of diverse art modalities within the ambit of refugee mental health carries profound significance on several fronts. Primarily, it recognizes the inherent diversity of human expression and emotional processing. Refugees emanate from multifarious backgrounds, each characterized by distinct cultural, social, and individual histories. Thus, the ability to choose from an array of art forms empowers them to select the most resonant mode of communication and self-expression, fostering a deeper sense of agency and empowerment.

Secondly, the incorporation of varied art modalities broadens the therapeutic repertoire available to both therapists and participants alike. Beyond conventional drawing and painting, music, for instance, possesses the ability to evoke emotions and recollections in unique and profoundly evocative ways. Expressive writing, conversely, may provide an indispensable outlet for individuals who may encounter challenges in visual arts. This diversity equips therapists with a panoply of interventions customized to the unique needs and proclivities of each participant, thereby enhancing the therapeutic alliance and overall effectiveness.

Moreover, the inclusion of diverse art modalities engenders a comprehensive approach aimed at addressing the intricate tapestry of mental health needs exhibited by refugees. Mental health challenges encountered within refugee populations often manifest in intricate, interconnected ways. Young refugee individuals may grapple not only with the symptoms of trauma but also contend with concurrent conditions such as depression, anxiety, and the intricate facets of cultural adjustment. By embracing an expansive spectrum of art forms, art therapy furnishes a holistic arena wherein refugees can simultaneously explore and ameliorate these diverse challenges, facilitating a more comprehensive and efficacious path to psychological recovery and well-being.

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Availability of Data and Materials In this review article, no new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing does not apply to this article.

Declarations

Ethical Approval This article does not contain any studies with human or animal subjects performed by any of the authors.

Competing Interests The author declares no competing interests.

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