

Understanding power imbalance through cultural humility: experiences from an immigrant art therapist's work with refugees in the U.S. and beyond

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The increasing diversity of the global community has resulted in a growing need for culturally responsive therapies that meet the unique needs of immigrants and refugees. This presentation aims to explore the experiences of an immigrant art therapist who worked with immigrants in the United States and later returned to their home country to work with refugees. The therapist encountered challenges in navigating power imbalances and cultural differences that affected the therapeutic process. As an immigrant art therapist in the US, they were able to draw from their firsthand acculturation experiences to connect with their clients. However, upon returning to their home country to work with refugees, they found that their experiences as an immigrant art therapist in the US did not necessarily translate to the cultural context of their home country. They faced challenges in establishing trust and rapport with clients who viewed them as a privileged therapist. The shift in the therapist's position of power impacted the client-therapist relationship.

The presentation will address the challenges they faced in navigating cultural differences, expectations, and power imbalances when working with refugees. Immigrant therapists may hold a position of privilege and power relative to refugees, given their professional status and access to resources and networks. The transition from being a minority immigrant art therapist in the United States to becoming a *privileged* therapist required the therapist to engage in ongoing critical self-reflection on how their cultural positionality affected the therapeutic relationship. Cultural humility is necessary to better understand and validate clients' experiences and provide inclusive and culturally responsive art therapy. This presentation will

also cover inclusive and culturally responsive art therapy interventions that can help art therapists to be culturally competent and respectful of diverse beliefs, values, and customs.

Biography

Seung Yeon Lee is a Clinical Assistant Professor at the Graduate Art Therapy Program at New York University. She holds an Ed.D. from Teachers College, Columbia University, an M.A. in Art Therapy from New York University, and a B.S. in Child and Family Studies from Yonsei University in South Korea. Her research focuses on exploring the role of flow theory in art therapy with immigrants and refugees. Additionally, her work with global art therapy communities in South Korea, Nicaragua, and Europe has created opportunities for cross-cultural art therapy services. Prior to joining NYU, Seung Yeon was an Associate Professor in the Clinical Art Therapy and Counseling Program at Long Island University (LIU). Before her tenure at LIU, she worked at the Adult & Adolescent Acute Care Psychiatric Unit at NYU Langone Medical Center.

Recent publications and conference presentations

Goodman, G., Dent, V., Tuman, D., & Lee, S.Y. (2022). **Drawings from a play-based intervention: windows to the soul of rural Ugandan children's artistic development.** *Arts in Psychotherapy*. 77(1). 1-10. <https://doi-org.proxy.library.nyu.edu/10.1016/j.aip.2021.101876>

McFarland, A., Lee, S.Y., Due, D. (2022). Presentation: **Undergraduate sub-committee graduate student outcomes survey: results and implications.** 53rd American Art Therapy Association (AATA) Annual Conference, Minneapolis, MN.

Lee, S. Y. (2017). **Global action art therapy: cross-cultural experiences in South Korea.** *Journal of Canadian Art Therapy Association*. 30(1), 11-21. Doi: [10.1080/08322473.2017.1306768](https://doi.org/10.1080/08322473.2017.1306768)

Lee, S.Y. (2017). **How art instills sense of competence: engaging inner-city children through imaginative drawings.** *Art Education*. 70 (5), 43-49. Doi: 10.1080/00043125.2017.1335548

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