



From Repetition to Transformation: Art Therapy and the Weight of Transgenerational Trauma

De la répétition à la transformation: art-thérapie et le poids du trauma transgénérationnel

Odette Chesnot

In the schools of Iraqi Kurdistan, children and adolescents silently carry the legacy of the 1988 chemical bombings known as al-Anfal, ordered by Saddam Hussein. Although rarely spoken of within families, the psychological imprint of these atrocities continues to be transmitted across generations. This phenomenon, described as transgenerational trauma, constitutes an invisible burden shaping both self-image and behavior.

To respond to the situation, clinical experiences in art therapy were conducted with 1,206 students in Kurdish schools, combined with a structured referral program. Adolescents displaying signs of extreme violence participated in clay-based workshops, a medium chosen for its malleable qualities, with the capacity to symbolize, externalize and re-organize unspeakable memories. This process enabled these students in groups of 15 to confront, in the course of 10 sessions, inherited narratives of silence, guilt, and loss, while simultaneously creating a renewed sense of self.

In resonance with Cavafy's metaphor of Ithaca, their journey itself became meaningful: art therapy transformed their imposed memory into a living experience, an act of resistance and a path toward reconciliation with self and others.

Quantitative evaluation conceived by Odette Chesnot using a Likert scale confirmed the therapeutic impact. Across six conflict scenarios, students increasingly chose non-violent strategies, with improvements ranging from +6 to +39 percentage points depending on the situation. The average composite score rose from 3.52 to 4.73 (+1.21 points, $p < 0.001$), shifting students from 'medium risk' to 'safer' behavioral profiles. Notably, the proportion of



at-risk students fell from 38.9% to 17.2%, with 21.7% moving out of the at-risk category. Qualitative findings further highlighted improved dialogue skills, empathy, and self-regulation.

The therapeutic aim extended beyond reducing violent behaviors: it empowered students to reclaim a singular identity beyond inherited wounds. In shaping clay, they metaphorically reshaped their psychic inheritance, breaking cycles of repetition and orienting themselves toward a navigable future.

Biography

Odette Helou Chesnot holds a PhD in Clinical Psychology and is an art therapist specialized in trauma, with more than twenty years of field experience in France, Lebanon, Iraq, and the Sahel region. She currently serves as *Senior Program Manager* at the UNOPS headquarters in New York and represents the MENA region at the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT). Co-founder of the Lebanese Association of Victims of Terrorism (AVT-L), she leads numerous psychosocial and prevention projects in partnership with the UN, the European Union, and international NGOs. Her innovative approach places clay-based art therapy at the core of clinical work with individuals affected by war, grief, and displacement. She also trains teachers, psychologists, and social workers in trauma-informed approaches and develops programs linking art therapy, prevention of violent extremism, and community resilience.

Recent Publications

Chesnot, O., Chidiac, N. (2020). **Clay mediation: an innovative therapy in the treatment of trauma and post-traumatic stress.** *Annales Médico-psychologiques; Vol 178 - No. 1 - January 2020*, (p. 1-104.)

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Chesnot, O., Schauder, S. (2024). **Aspects scientifiques et cliniques des médiations thérapeutiques: quelle prise en soin pour les victimes de l'explosion du port de Beyrouth? Scientific and clinical aspects of therapeutic mediations: Caring for victims of the Beirut port explosion**, *L'Évolution Psychiatrique*, 2024, ISSN 0014-3855, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evopsy.2024.02.001>.

Chesnot, O., Schauder, S. (2025, accepté). « **J'étais comme sortie de l'humanité...** » **Deuil, argile et art-thérapie**, *Annales Médico-Psychologiques*.

Schauder, S., Chesnot O., Menegatti, J. (2024). **Current practices in art therapy: where stand research, theories, and indications?** Communication au *17th ECARTE Conference, Singing about the dark times. Creation and Resistance in the arts therapies*. September 11th -14th 2024. Artevelde University of Applied Sciences, Gand, Belgique