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# Creating a Culture of Connection: A Postmodern Punk Rock Approach to Art Therapy

Jessica Masino Drass 

## Abstract

*Punk culture is based on an ideology that emphasizes questioning conformity and creating a space for individuality within community. It has inspired fans to create their own music and art as part of their quest for authenticity. Art therapy informed by punk culture can be a way to create a culture of connection while also building resiliency and instilling hope through core concepts of collapse of hierarchy, a search for authenticity and understanding, deconstruction/reconstruction, and empowerment through a DIY mindset. In this article the author illustrates firsthand experiences with punk rock culture and postmodern art and describes how they inform her art therapy practice.*

“Almost to the point where in the past I’ve given up, but this time something keeps on telling me I’ve got to go on. . . .”  
(Tilt, 1995, track 12)

It was sometime in the spring of 1999, and I was finishing my first year of undergraduate study at Montclair State University in New Jersey. I had developed an identity around the punk values of DIY (do-it-yourself), questioning authority, going against the grain, and maintaining a sense of individuality within a tight-knit community. Punk gave me a voice and a place to belong, and it helped me build a sense of resiliency and respect for other points of view. I heard that the band Tilt (whose spunky, female lead singer Cinder Block was a long-time role model of mine) would be playing at a nearby VFW hall in North Jersey. Their lyrics instilled a sense of hope in me, and through my teenage years the two lines quoted above would repeatedly play in my mind as I was embarking on some difficult task. My friends and I decided to make the pilgrimage to the event. In typical punk fashion, the band mingled with the crowd, and for the first time I was able to meet and talk with Cinder Block. I was struck by her sense of personal authenticity and respect for her fans—a quality I have come to find in many of the punk musicians I

have met over the years. These musicians/artists were accessible, and there was an underlying sense of community that encouraged artistic expression among all its members. The DIY attitude of punk culture inspired me to not only attend concerts, but also to get out there and get involved in the scene. I formed my own band, produced my own fanzine, and put on large-scale outdoor concerts as a teenager, all the while feeling very connected to a community.

For the past 4 years I have worked as an art therapist in a partial hospital setting. Over the course of my clinical practice, I have observed how intense feelings of loneliness can be the primary issue that drives self-destructive and isolating behaviors in patients. I have found that art therapy practice informed by punk culture can be a way to create a culture of connection among patients. Furthermore, it builds resiliency through four core concepts I identify as: (a) the collapse of hierarchy, (b) the search for authenticity and understanding, (c) deconstruction and reconstruction, and (d) empowerment through a DIY mindset. In this article I discuss my experiences with punk rock culture and explore how my personal narrative has informed my practice as a postmodern art therapist working in a trauma program based on the foundations of Dialectical behavior therapy (DBT). The setting in which I have worked follows a medical model and relies on observable behavior, symptoms, diagnoses, medication management, and treatment planning. Within this medical model I have found ways to use my punk rock orientation to enhance practice. In the studio I focus on creating experiences for patients that highlight their “artist identity” and that can be used as a means to establish their personal artistic language. In this paper, I first present the basic principles of DBT; second, I examine how postmodernism, punk rock, and contemporary art support my art therapy practice in an outpatient setting for trauma; and third, I offer examples to highlight the four core themes listed above.

## DBT Basics

Dialectical behavior therapy is a structured treatment program grounded in the theories of mindfulness and dialectics (Linehan, 1993, 2014) that values multiplicity of perspectives. The mindfulness component of DBT is based on the idea that feelings, thoughts, behaviors, and environmental cues are often unrecognized. For example, a person’s

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failure to be mindful of escalating emotions can lead to impulsive behavior such as self-harm. In DBT, patients are taught that achieving mindfulness is an everyday, ongoing process. The dialectic component arises from the nature of reality and stresses the idea of opposites or extremes. DBT teaches patients that extremes often come into conflict, and that there is truth to be found in each extreme. Patients are taught to look at themselves as part of a larger system and to gain awareness of their own internal opposing forces (Linehan, 1993).

The idea of dialectics is built on two core assumptions of DBT. First, patients are doing their best yet need to do better. Second, although patients may not have caused their problems, they still need to solve them. DBT focuses on teaching patients the skills to help manage emotional trauma instead of looking at ways to avoid crisis situations (Linehan, Armstrong, Suarez, Allmon, & Heard, 1991). In essence, DBT leans on a postmodern approach to therapy, because for “the process of becoming and letting go, of antithesis and thesis, there is no fixed truth. Truth is not absolute. It develops over time” (Lachman-Chapman et al., 1998, p. 240). Postmodernism stresses the need to look for the paradox of multiple realities existing simultaneously (Kapitan & Newhouse, 2000). In my experience, I have found art making to provide an excellent opportunity for practicing DBT skills. Art making becomes the means to concretize DBT principles, as well as offering a way to explore the real life situations in which patients face dialectical dilemmas.

## Postmodernism and Art Therapy

There is some debate on the exact definition of postmodernism, but it is widely accepted as a reaction to the modernist movement, beginning approximately in the 1960s and 1970s. Modernist thinkers believed in the ideas of universality (one singular truth), conformity, and progress. This is also referred to as “creative destruction,” which Harvey (1989) described as a practical dilemma and an underlying concept of modernism.

Postmodern thinkers believe in a constructivist point of view—instead of one reality there are multiple, socially constructed realities that are different for each individual. Postmodernists also believe in the acceptance of inherent chaos, and that dualities can exist simultaneously. The dialectic component of DBT fits comfortably within this framework. What is of importance to postmodernist thinkers is the individual meaning created through deconstruction and reconstruction of their personal narratives and experiences in the world (Harvey, 1989; Kapitan & Newhouse, 2000).

Graham (2008) defined contemporary art in the postmodern era as “characterized by appropriation, layering of styles, recontextualization, interaction between text and image, and a willingness to embrace multiple meanings” (p. 10). Postmodern art moved away from the idea of “art for art’s sake” while emphasizing “uncertainty, ambiguity and paradox rather than promoting certainty, harmony and conventional aesthetics” (Alter-Muri & Klein, 2007, p. 82).

This movement, one that is no longer confined art to museums and galleries, became accessible to anyone, and there were no limits to the kinds of materials that could be used to make art. For example, Keith Haring, a pop artist and activist, responded to the AIDS crisis in the 1980s by making art on the streets and in subway stations in New York City. His art produced much-needed AIDS awareness in the public, further blurring the boundary between “high-brow” art and mass culture. Artist Shepard Fairey stated, “art has an incredible potential to affect people emotionally and intellectually, create conversations, . . . and help people to think about what human beings have in common” (Katsir & Moreschi (Writers), Hoskinson (Director), & Colbert (Executive Producer), 2015, 44:22).

Postmodernism is not a new concept to art therapy (Alter-Muri, 1998; Alter-Muri & Klein, 2007; Burt, 2012; Kapitan & Newhouse, 2000; C. Moon, 2000, 2012; Riley, 2000), yet there doesn’t appear to be a singular way to define exactly what postmodern art therapy is (C. Moon, 2012). Postmodern art therapy has moved away from the focus on diagnosis and cure used in the medical model and has given less attention to the pathology of individuals in relation to their families (Burt, 2012), and it has placed more emphasis on art therapists “becoming co-creators with their clients in a life of meaningfulness rather than continuing to act as mere interpreters of the signs and symbols of pathology” (Alter-Muri, 1998, p. 250). From this perspective, the therapist is seen more as a consultant and collaborator, thus collapsing the hierarchy and refocusing on clients as the “expert” on their life experiences.

Postmodern art therapy “accepts a highly relative, fluid reality that grows out of and matches the flux of the pluralistic, fragmenting culture we live in . . . [and] may reject or work to undermine existing authoritative structures” (Kapitan & Newhouse, 2000, p. 112), and for this reason it offers a framework applicable to punk culture. An art therapy postmodernist approach to “artistic meaning is seen as a socially constructed entity requiring the viewers to look beyond the formal qualities of a piece of art, decode its imagery, and expose its assumptions” (Alter-Muri, 1998, p. 247). This is the work art therapists are continually doing; that is, guiding patients on a journey of translating their own artistic language to support their health and wellness.

One of the basic ideas of postmodernism is linked to the process of deconstruction and reconstruction in order to form new meanings. In the art world, “deconstruction . . . is seen in an artists’ use of extreme irony or parody . . . [and through] the appropriation and counterfeiting of images” (Kapitan & Newhouse, 2000, p. 112), and reconstruction is putting these fragmented pieces together to form a new whole. The idea of using unconventional materials, such as found objects, logos, and images from mass media and popular culture, underlies many themes common to postmodern art therapy and punk rock. As starting points for discussion and art making, I have brought in works of art by well-known postmodern artists such as Robert Rauschenberg and Shepard Fairey, among others, to highlight concepts of deconstruction and use of unconventional media.

## Punk Rock Culture and Identity Formation

There is no one definition of punk, but Greg Graffin (2002), a professor at Cornell University and a singer in the well-known punk band Bad Religion, gives some sense of punk culture in his *Punk Manifesto*. He describes punk as:

the personal expression of uniqueness that comes from the experiences of growing up in touch with our human ability to reason and ask questions . . . a process of questioning and commitment to understanding that results in self-progress, and by extrapolation, could lead to social progress . . . a belief that this world is what we make of it, truth comes from our understanding of the way things are, not from the blind adherence to prescriptions about the way things should be. (Graffin, 2002, para. 9, 24, 30)

Through this definition Graffin described a culture that extends far beyond mohawks, fast and simple chord progressions, and studded leather jackets. It is a culture based on the ideals of “strength in understanding” and “knowledge is power.” Graffin believed anyone has the potential to be punk, and paralleled the seeking of knowledge within one’s culture to the traditions of the Enlightenment.

Moore (2004) stated that the similarities between post-modernism and punk rock exist within a “culture of deconstruction” and a “culture of authenticity” (p. 305). While the art world was repurposing found objects and images from popular culture in the name of art, punk was doing much the same, usually as a reaction against mass media or to create a political statement. The simplicity of punk music of the 1970s and 1980s inspired fans to create their own bands. The “collapse of hierarchies and boundaries between ‘high-brow’ and ‘lowbrow’” (Moore, 2004, p. 305) within the culture at large paved the way for the DIY movement in punk. Because corporate media was not interested in underground music movements, fans created their own media and developed their own social networks to disseminate their music and philosophy. People within punk culture created their own independent record labels, music stores, performance venues, and fanzines as part of their quest for authenticity.

Mingling with the crowd is not unusual for punk rock band members, as Cinder Block did in 1999 during the show in North Jersey. Hancock and Lorr (2012) discussed how in punk rock “musicians and fans are intertwined” (p. 337) and that participation from audience members is crucial to any performance. In his memoir, Kauffman (2007) described the bonding that takes place between the band members and fans, and the culture created by these underground, all-ages punk shows. Muñoz (2006) discussed how his own identity formation came from a process of “disidentification” with mainstream culture and identification with the Los Angeles punk scene of the 1980s. Disidentification is a way of adapting social norms to fit an individual’s values while creating a counterculture in response to the rejection of the individual by mainstream culture (Muñoz, 1999).

Snyder and Engelsgerd (2014) described punk rock as more than a musical style or a shocking fad in fashion; it is

an ideology that emphasizes questioning conformity, creating a space for individuality within community, and believing in more than material wealth. Punk musicians want to connect directly with their audiences and “use music to tell the untold story of their lives and the lives of their fans” (Snyder & Engelsgerd, 2014, p. 14). In their performances there is no hierarchy that distinguishes between performer and audience; there is a “collapsing of space that heightens emotions and the intensity of the experience as people feel taken over by the music or moved by the music in visceral ways” (Hancock & Lorr, 2012, p. 337). In a recent interview on *The Late Show With Stephen Colbert*, artist/activist Shepard Fairey, whose work is rooted in punk culture, asserted that visual art should do more of what music does; that is, “affect people viscerally and be very democratic and accessible” (Katsir & Moreschi (Writers), Hoskinson (Director), & Colbert (Executive Producer), 2015, 44:48), and emphasized the importance of finding any means necessary to connect with people. I share Fairey’s sentiment and bring this perspective into my clinical work as an art therapist at a hospital in an outpatient women’s trauma program.

## Punk Rock Art Therapy

So what is a punk rock approach to art therapy and how can art therapists use this approach to create a culture of connection? Thompson (2009) asserted that “art therapy can utilize practices from contemporary art, especially the development of an artistic sense of self and the cultivation of an artistic sensibility toward life challenges” (p. 159). I emphasize that punk culture thrives on establishing how to use the artist self to work toward personal change and social progress. Kauffman (2007) described punk as a “special kind of music that . . . could bring individuals together, and break down walls of social convention” (p. 28), as well as a “mental and psychological kung-fu used to fend off an insane and antagonistic world” (p. 20). Muñoz (2006) pointed out that although punk culture may appear apocalyptic, it is active and future oriented and provides an avenue to instill a sense of hope. He described the punk rock community as a type of transcendental utopia and a space where disenfranchised youth could imagine a time and place “where their desires are not toxic” (Muñoz, 2006, p. 14) and where they could feel a sense of belonging. He described how, through his identification with punk rock culture, he could imagine a future sense of self that gave him hope that his life was not always going to be one troubled by the difficult experiences that he faced.

Muñoz’s (2006) writings support my ideas of punk rock-informed art therapy and validate my experiences working with patients in the studio. In my thesis research on the use of art therapy to treat trauma and dissociation, the theme of hope emerged numerous times in the literature, and instillation of hope was found to be associated with a greater chance of recovery for patients with a history of trauma (Drass, 2012). By incorporating punk rock culture into a traditional treatment setting, I stress the idea of using art and expression to imagine a utopia, a place that looks beyond managing the difficulties of the here and now. I have often

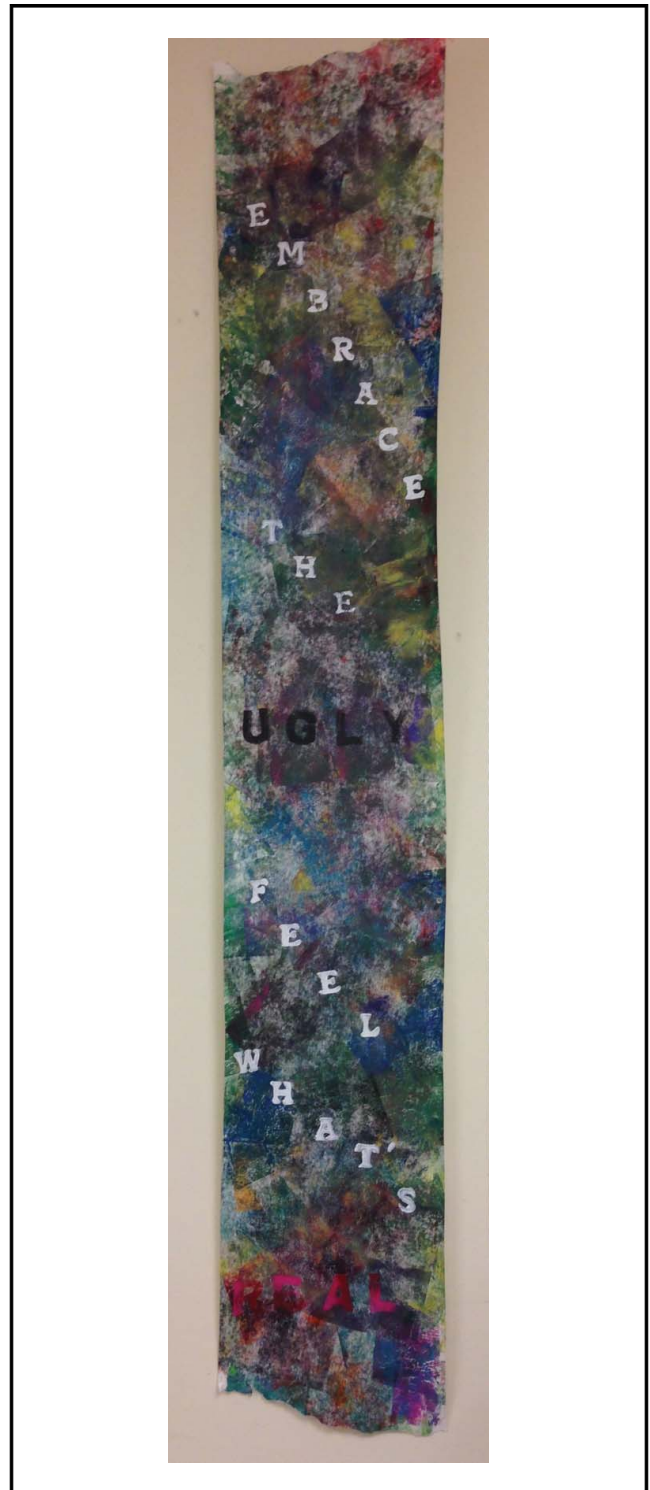
witnessed the ways in which art becomes a record of the self in the process of becoming. In DBT Linehan talks about how a large part of practicing mindfulness comes from finding connection to the outside world, and to “build a life worth living” by finding ways to connect to something larger than ourselves (1993, 2014). At the same time, the evolution of my identity within a punk rock culture helped me to internalize the power to persevere even in the most difficult of circumstances. I wasn’t alone—I was part of a group that believed in creating something better for the future. My experience as part of a punk rock community validated difficult experiences in my life, helped me unite with others through difficult emotions, and gave me a space to explore a sense of self that transcended the here and now. I have built an art therapy practice that is informed by my punk culture foundations and seeks to create connection in four ways: collapse of hierarchy; search for authenticity and understanding; deconstruction/reconstruction; and empowerment through a DIY mindset.

### The Punk Rock Art Therapy Studio

In art therapy practice, I work to create a sense of community in the studio. I often refer to the art therapy studio as a “laboratory” where patients can practice the DBT skills they are learning in real time. The main goal of the art therapy groups is to establish a space where patients can bring their most authentic self to the table, free of judgment. Figure 1 shows the first project done by the patients in the studio, created on the day the program opened. The words “embrace the ugly, feel what’s real” came from a discussion on what would motivate group members to connect with a sense of authenticity when making art, and how to set a tone for the studio space. The mural, which still hangs in the art therapy studio, gives patients permission to create more than just pictures of butterflies and rainbows. It provides a starting point for an ongoing dialogue on how to use art in the search for personal authenticity.

Much has been written about the importance of the art therapy studio’s structure and space (see, e.g., Allen, 1995; McNiff, 1995; B. Moon, 2009; Thompson, 2009). In my work, to collapse hierarchies—or, in other words, create a collaborative space—patients are encouraged to freely use the art studio, open cabinets, explore materials, and choose what is best suited for them in the moment. By transferring ownership to patients, the studio becomes a liberating and empowering space. Patients find the art studio to be a place to connect with themselves, spending “alone time together” in a group. Although it is important to maintain professional boundaries when working with patients, by bridging the space between therapist and patient we can truly build the sense of connection and community that is vital to decreasing feelings of isolation and loneliness that patients often experience.

My role as an art therapist becomes one of a consultant, or co-creator, giving ideas and feedback during the art-making process but always ending with an encouraging statement, such as, “you’re the artist, so you are in charge of your work.” I stimulate curiosity in the group by asking



**Figure 1.** Group Project, *Embrace the Ugly, Feel What's Real*

patients to try new ways of working. Making art is not always comfortable; for some there is a great deal of anxiety associated with something that can evoke a vulnerable state. My roots in punk values lead me to encourage patients to experience new thresholds in a safe and supported way. More recently, I have begun to share my artwork with



patients as a way to inspire and motivate them. Allen (1995) and B. Moon (2009) discussed the value of therapists sharing art with their clients to help them focus on the art-making process itself and illustrate the innate ability we all have to be artists. Most importantly, sharing art with clients also demonstrates how we are not asking them to do something that we aren't willing to do ourselves.

## Group Art Therapy: The Evolution of Empowerment

In group art therapy I work to create a sense of community by using unconventional materials and the process of deconstruction and reconstruction to help patients form new personal narratives through art making. The process of art making generates metaphors that lead to conversations among group members. One powerful example occurred when I introduced the group to the work of artist/activist Shepard Fairey. Fairey (2009) brings art to people in places beyond the walls of institutions like galleries and museums. He began his career in art with a punk rock medium: stickers. He described his OBEY giant sticker campaign as a phenomenological experiment to “stimulate curiosity and bring people to question both the sticker [the ‘art’] and their relationship with their surroundings” (Fairey, 2009, p. 5). Using Fairey’s work as an example, I set

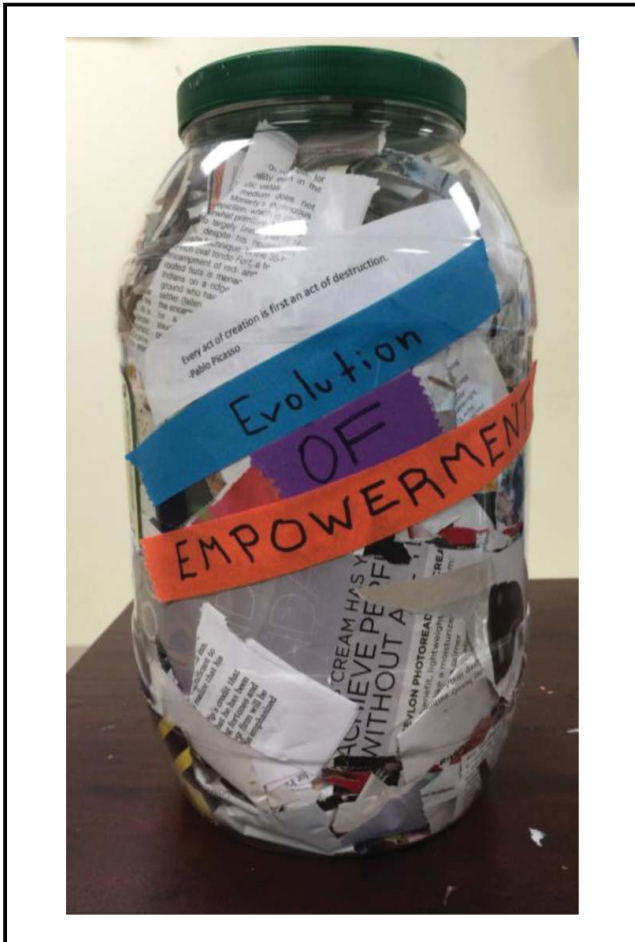


Figure 2. Group Project, *The Evolution of Empowerment*

up a table with magazines. I asked group members to imagine that they had just walked into an art museum or gallery and the table was an art installation, then I invited them to tear out pages from the magazines. I wanted members to explore the apprehensions experienced when breaking down a barrier and to question the cultural norms imposed on people in a gallery space. Using mindfulness and distress tolerance skills, members were asked to become aware of their responses as they tore the magazine pages. As Graffin (2002) argued, the power of punk comes from our “ability to recognize ourselves and express our own genetic uniqueness” (para. 7). According to Graffin, people are taught to go along with what they are told, but punk teaches people instead to ask questions and hold firm to the idea of strength in understanding.

The group process resulted in a healthy discussion on how to rewrite personal narratives and re-story the impact of trauma on patients’ lives. The tearing of pages resulted in group members exploring a variety of emotions: anger, frustration, guilt, and shame. But the conversation moved circuitously to hope and the power of transformation. The group ended with a discussion on the importance of learning new skills to cope with everyday life stressors. The art process led group members to question their life choices. To contain their intense feelings as a group, the members chose a large, clear, plastic container, filled it with their magazine clippings, and titled it *The Evolution of Empowerment* (Figure 2). The jar was left in the art studio and continues to be displayed as a reminder of the power of art to communicate deeply held beliefs that had never been questioned before.


## Conclusion

On a personal level my punk rock roots gave me a sense of resiliency that reinforced a belief that no matter what, I had a community to fall back on. Growing up as a self-identified artist was lonely and isolating, but I found my community in punk rock. In this community a “sense of ‘realness’ comes from the feeling of connectedness or the larger sense of community within which everyone participates” (Hancock & Lorr, 2012, p. 338). Similarly, connection and community are themes I introduce in art therapy groups. Many goals for clients center on fostering a curiosity about art and art making, and how art can lead to people questioning the cultural frameworks they inhabit. Authenticity in art making and connection to a group are an important part of the recovery process. I encourage clients to find music that they can connect to and create art that can inspire them to connect to something they are passionate about. In DBT Linehan suggests using the skill of Alternate Rebellion to help cope with urges and to satisfy the innate desire for rebellion (2014). Using art therapy informed by punk rock values aligns with this concept as a safe way to rebel against authority and conformity. By sharing my own passion for punk rock and contemporary art—modeling mindfulness as a living practice—the art therapy studio becomes a space to make connections, as well as a space to refine my practice as an art therapist.

This article highlights my theoretical foundation for punk rock art therapy. Future exploration of these ideas can illuminate the intersection of punk rock art therapy with a

variety of other themes—most notably, feminist theory and existentialism. In addition, although I am certainly not the first art therapist to use my own culture and experiences to shape my clinical practice, my hope is to continue to inspire art therapists to engage actively with self-reflexivity and to explore their own personal narratives as a way to continually redefine “art therapy.”

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