

Beadwork: Art as Therapy

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Land Acknowledgement

We acknowledge that we live, work, and learn on the unceded territories of the xwməθkwəyəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), Stó:lō and Səlílwətaʔ/Selilwiltulh (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.

History of Beadwork

Beadwork has been a part of Indigenous cultures from around the world for thousands of years. Archeologists recently exhumed a nearly 4,000-year-old grave of an shíshálh Nation chief whose body was covered by a ceremonial garment that weighed more than 70 pounds. Beads may have been an indicator of wealth or prestige and have cultural value in traditional burial ceremonies (Pringle, 2017). Shell, bone, pottery, copper, claws, nuts, seeds, hoofs, horns, fish vertebrae, pearl, teeth, stone, porcupine quills, and fossil crinoid stems are the traditional materials used to make the beads that embellished clothing and everyday objects (Belcourt, 2010, p.8-9; Dubin, 2009, p.263). Europeans first introduced glass beads. Glass beads were welcomed by most beadwork artists early on as substitutes for the bead materials due to their richness of colour, ease of use, and diversity of size & transparency. This shift changed the aesthetic character of beadwork (Canadian Encyclopedia, 2020). However, colonial practices greatly hindered beadwork being taught and passed on through generations. The natural process of learning from family or community members was disrupted, and it has become harder to learn these skills in part because of the availability of teachers and because of the value of beading having been put into question. Today, individuals who bead may do so for artistic expression, cultural reclamation, and they may also be “beading an identity of their Indigeneity” (Gray, 2017, p.3).

Significance of Traditional Beading in a Therapeutic Setting

Lois Edge, an Indigenous researcher, speaks to the significance of beading through an Indigenous lens within her Doctoral thesis (Edge, 2011):

“The reclamation of Indigenous women's ancestral knowledge and ancient art forms enacts the embodiment of Indigenous women's philosophy [(ways of knowing)], pedagogy [(ways of teaching)] and ontology [(ways of being)] as signifying an Indigenous aesthetic of beadwork” - (Edge, 2011).

Edge defined beading as a ‘ceremony’ that is the safest, most beautiful place where one can be. It is a place where everyone is unconditionally accepted for up to weeks at a time. Participants of the beading ceremony are a part of something timeless, thus leading to a sense of belonging. When beading and being a part of a group, that's how one may feel: safe and nurtured.

Regarding the therapeutic significance of beading and making jewellery today, the art form is great for both mental and physical health (Desmond, 2015; Voaden, 2019). Researchers have long realized the benefits of beading for adults, children, and those in Occupational Therapy (Fortuna, 2017; Ndaa, P. O., Kwakye, A. H. & Shann, S., 2021). Beading is recommended both as an everyday stress reliever, and to improve and maintain various skills, such as:

Cognitive Skills

Planning. With a focused attention to detail, one can question: What style of jewelry/beadwork do I want to create? What pattern will I choose? What are the materials needed to do so?

Math. One can question: What are the measurements needed to complete the piece? How many beads do I need to complete my pattern?

Social Skills

Sense of Belonging. Along with other cultural crafts, learning beadwork increased a “sense of belonging derived from discovering or rediscovering cultural roots, feeling cultural pride, and learning about the impacts of residential school were deemed to contribute to healing (Archibald & Dewar 2010, p.22).

Cooperation. When choosing materials in a group setting, beading parties promote cooperation and communication of needs.

Sharing. When choosing materials participants are encouraged to share as to complete their projects in a group setting.

Visual Perception Skills

Visual Discrimination, Planning, and Memory. The participant must be able to remember the beading pattern to determine the bead they want to use. Once they know what bead they want, visual discrimination assists them in selecting the bead that fits their mental image of the desired bead. Finally, the participant must scan across many different beads before finding the desired bead.

Fine Motor Skills

Grasping. Various sizes of beads promote different grasps.

Hand manipulation. Many components of making a beaded art piece increase strength and coordination in the small hand and finger muscles. For example, picking up a bead and then manipulating it in one’s hand until it is pinched between your thumb and finger involves translation, shift, and rotation movements of the bead within the hand.

Visual Motor Skills

Eye-Hand Coordination. Threading beads onto a string involved coordination of both left & right hands and required the beadworker's eyes & hands to work together.

Flow State

Positive psychologist, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, discovered that people find genuine satisfaction during a state of consciousness called "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). In this flow state, people are completely absorbed in an activity, especially an activity which involves their creative abilities. During this "optimal experience" they feel "strong, alert, in effortless control, unselfconscious, and at the peak of their abilities." Csikszentmihalyi insists that happiness does not simply happen, that it must be prepared for and cultivated by each person. More specifically, by setting challenges that are neither too demanding nor too simple for one's abilities. In other words, when people partake in these creative activities that are within Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, people become happy. Beadwork as an art technique is a wonderful example of such a creative practice.

Mindfulness

Scientist, writer, and meditation teacher, Kabat-Zinn (2005), defines mindfulness "as moment-to-moment, non-judgmental awareness, cultivated by paying attention in a specific way, that is, in the present moment, and as non-reactively, as non-judgmentally, and as open heartedly as possible" (p. 232). Patricia Williams MA, CCC, ATR, CATA, CCPA, argues that the creative process is inherently suitable as a means of deepening the acquisition of the skills and resources associated with self-compassion and mindfulness (2018). Beadwork, as an Art Therapy and art as therapy technique requires such mindfulness and self-compassion from the artists carrying out the art-form.

Intended Population

Physically and cognitively capable people who are looking to practice cultural artforms, mindfulness, emotion regulation, cognitive skills, fine motor skills, visual motor skills, social skills, stress relief, self-compassion, and social connection.

Concerns

Physical, social, and cognitive skills are necessary to carry out this art technique (fine motor skills, visual perceptual skills, visual motor skills, planning, math, sense of belonging, cooperation, sharing). Sharp needles and scissors may be a danger, dependent on the population who is working with them (i.e. young children, psych ward members, people who may self-harm or harm others). If facilitating with these demographics, it is highly recommended to supervise the clients throughout the art making time and to count the number of sharps (scissors and sewing/beading needles) both before and after the session(s).

Who Can Teach This Art Technique to Who?

Engaging in beadwork from an Indigenous lens may have a profound impact and strengthen the therapeutic relationship between client and counsellor/facilitator. Yet *can a non-Indigenous person teach beading given it is considered an Indigenous art form?* In our experience, there is not a steadfast rule of thumb. However, because of the history of colonization, extra sensitivity is required. An important thing to consider is your comfort level and your ability to be respectful as you engage in the process.

An example would be to gauge your clients' receptivity by discussing ahead of time whether they would want to bead and explore their thoughts and feelings about learning the basics from you. They may already have skills or express a desire to learn or say they would rather not participate. Being open and respecting their boundaries will create safety and cultural competency. Ensuring the client(s) are aware of the cultural history and sensitivities is also recommended.

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