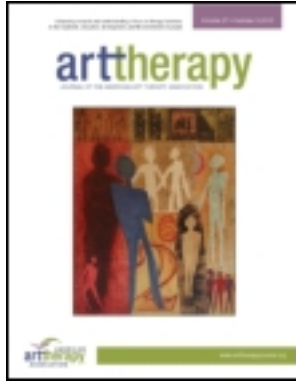


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From Linear to Imaginal: Choosing Research Methods to Inform Art Therapy Practice

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Viewpoint

From Linear to Imaginal: Choosing Research Methods to Inform Art Therapy Practice

Dorit Netzer, Huntington, NY

Abstract

The author discusses how a personal, evolving understanding of art therapy practice was reflected in and influenced by the author's choice of qualitative research methods. Heuristic inquiry in graduate research required a thematic analysis of artwork as symbolic depiction of the narratives disclosed by research participants. A shift to intuitive inquiry 10 years later employed a process of imaginal resonance that involved mental imaging in response to mystical poetry, art making, and embodied writing. This process yielded a new, holistic understanding of the participants' experiences and diminished reliance on analytical discourse.

Introduction: The Evolution of Research and Practice

In this viewpoint, I reflect on two primary experiences with research: heuristic inquiry, which I conducted for my master's thesis, and, more recently, intuitive inquiry at the doctoral level. I observe how my longtime interest in scholarly research has informed and nourished my clinical practice. I attribute this ongoing interest to the qualitative methods I chose, which encourage the researcher's self-awareness and the development of transpersonal ways of knowing (Braud, 1998). Transpersonal knowing reflects various states of consciousness and supports the researcher's tacit knowledge, intuition, imagination, and creative expression.

During my graduate training in art therapy and early years of practice, I placed much emphasis on the role past experience plays in present psychological health or pathology. Gradually, however, I adopted a more fluid approach to my art therapy practice. When I relinquished my personal conviction that we are permanently imprinted with

our pasts, a creative process was inspired within me that was not conditioned on personal history, perceived norms, or set goals, and that could result in unpredictable insight and counter-habitual transformation. Through the "open studio" approach (Allen, 1995)—which is nondirective in nature and relies on the transformative power of the creative process—I began to appreciate clients' spontaneous creativity, trusting in their intrinsic needs for equilibrium and their inherent capacities to heal. My clients revealed imagery that was not preconceived nor derived by association. Moreover, when I began to respond to these spontaneously emerging images in their own imaginal language, which encapsulated their analogical equivalents in daily life, the search for meaning did not rely on either my interpretation or the clients' analyses of their own artworks. Analogies for new directions of development were revealed in the process of uncovering knowledge that had existed all along, yet was previously unrecognized—what Polanyi (1962) referred to as "tacit knowing."

During my doctoral studies in transpersonal psychology, I integrated my clinical art therapy experience with various transpersonal theories, arriving at an approach I called *imaginal resonance* (Netzer, 2008). Imaginal resonance draws on the phenomenology of imagery (e.g. Sartre, 1940/2004), psychosynthesis (Assagioli, 1969), archetypal psychology (Hillman, 1979), participatory spirituality (Epstein, 2004; Ferrer, 2002), and the healing power of creative expression (e.g. Malchiodi, 2002). I use a series of insight-oriented exercises to activate responses to the images embedded in our everyday lives, including mental imaging, creative art expression, and "embodied writing" (Anderson, 2001). Rather than discussing our experiences and explaining their causes, my clients allow their experiences to speak to them through the images, feelings, and bodily sensations they elicit. My belief is that when we imaginably resonate with our lived experience, we activate a process of change through the transformation of our internal images.

Heuristic Inquiry Influences

Research differs from clinical practice in many ways, including its purpose, the interpersonal dynamics involved, and its outcomes. However, much is carried over from re-

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search to practice, depending upon the choice of research methodology (Braud & Anderson, 1998) and the knowledge gained from the research outcome. For my master's thesis, *Images of Self and Self-Image* (Netzer, 1997), I chose to conduct my research project using heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990), a qualitative method that relies on the researcher's intimate knowledge of the subject and on collaboration with participants to extract shared meaning. Heuristic inquiry is grounded in the use of the researcher's creative process to work with the data through periods of immersion, incubation, illumination, and, finally, a creative synthesis.

As a heuristic researcher, I was as much a participant as my participants were co-researchers. I had to begin with my own experience before reaching out to others. Moreover, I had to cultivate a practice of active listening to facilitate the disclosure of meaning-laden, personal data. As a young art therapist, I was intrigued by the relationships of my research participants with the images they generated. With only a year of internship experience, I was new to the art of attunement; I found that the systematic process of collecting and analyzing research data honed my attention to subtle details of dialogue and nonverbal communication. However, the questions I asked my participants—about how their art-making processes mirrored their self-image—relied on and was delimited by my analytical orientation.

Analytical Example

The following is a brief depiction of my analytical approach to the artwork of a client from my art therapy internship who subsequently became a participant in my heuristic inquiry. Carol (pseudonym) was in her mid 40s when I met her. Her initial work in art therapy revolved around the history of her family of origin, in which I saw the roots of her identity formation and present life experiences. She struggled to embrace the recognition that she was a lesbian and her choice to divorce her husband in order to nurture a life partnership with a female lover. She also examined her passion for art making, which she did not pursue as much as she felt the calling to do so. Carol's work in art therapy centered on giving her memories a visual form and expressing her feelings from that time in her life.

One drawing Carol created in an art therapy session (Figure 1), and that I discussed with her as part of my heuristic inquiry, symbolically depicted her family of origin. In this drawing, Carol's father is symbolized as a large open mouth and a fist pounding on a book that reads, "creativity and individual differences." The other hand holds a sign that proclaims "yes" to "gender roles" and "no" to "women rights," "free speech," "free thought," and "laughter" (Netzer, 1997, p. 107). Carol's mother is depicted as a wilted flower, and Carol is drawn as a tree with a heart carved into its trunk. The tree is rooted and green but sports a large severed limb. Carol used her drawing to communicate beliefs about herself and her perceived place within the dynamics of her family of origin.

My approach to art therapy during this period utilized the artwork as a point of departure for verbal association of

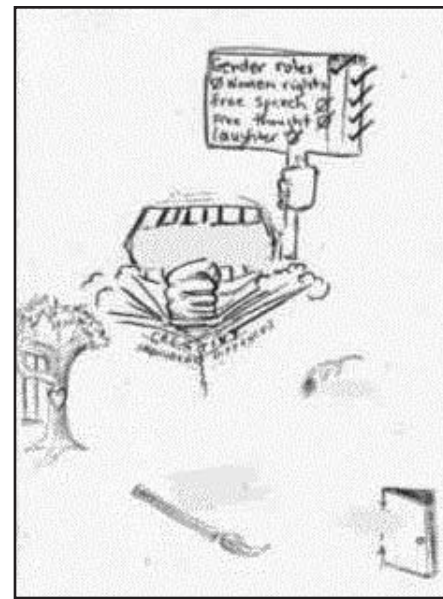


Figure 1

Family portrait by Carol. Crayons on paper (9" x 12")

the past with the present. I focused on the content of memory as the cause for the client's self-image in the present. Carol's sorrow and regret indicated to me a deeply held desire to have had a different past. Because I took a logical position that the past leads to the present, the main goals of my work with Carol were for her to gain a sense of clarity around her feelings, to experience relief through expression, and to embrace the value of her authentic self despite having experienced alienation from her father. The heuristic researcher's goal—to finely depict a portrait of each participant's experience—afforded both of us the opportunity to delve deeper into Carol's projective artwork and deepen our understanding of it.

Self-awareness notwithstanding, the effectiveness of my work with Carol as a therapist and a researcher was limited. Carol became focused on how her past was at fault for her present. She was much less engaged in the idea of utilizing the creative process to cultivate trust in her capacity to create and grow despite her past—or perhaps even because of it. She held the belief that no matter what she did, nothing would change in her family. She felt stuck and unable to change.

Although heuristic inquiry enhanced my growth as an art therapist, its primary purpose was to create an integrated narrative of complex experiences as they were, with the goal of extracting thematic qualities from these experiences and creatively synthesizing them. Further personal and professional growth on my part was needed before I gained the tools to facilitate change and self-transformation through the creative process in art therapy.

Intuitive Inquiry Influences

When I was preparing the research design for my doctoral dissertation, *Mystical Poetry and Imagination* (Netzer, 2008), I recalled how personally (and professionally) meaningful my heuristic research experience had been 10 years

earlier. However, this time I hoped to go beyond a thematic analysis by designing a research study that would enable me to more fully examine the benefits and limits of my evolving art therapy practice. Over the years, I have been drawn to the transpersonal dimension of healing and self-transformation, which I incorporated into my art therapy practice through references to ancient mystical wisdom that informs the present-day field of transpersonal psychology. Transpersonal psychology encompasses the study of human development in the context of various states of consciousness, mind-body awareness, creativity, and spirituality. Human experience, from this perspective, is not limited by external circumstances and the ego; ordinary experience can be transcended through practices that cultivate expanded consciousness of the self, others, and the universe at large.

Through my own experience of healing from a chronic illness, I have come to believe in the possibility of transcending past circumstances by developing one's capacity to creatively imagine and express aspects of oneself in the present. I wanted to study how the process of imaginal resonance, described earlier, could inspire transpersonal awareness of spiritual freedom—a deep recognition of a person's potential to change self-limiting, habitual patterns through cultivating a spiritual awareness of universal limitlessness.

I needed a research method that was compatible with both the nature of this topic and my style as a therapist and researcher. Intuitive inquiry (Anderson, 2000) was a perfect match for the process-oriented approach I wished to take in my study. Anderson (2000) defined intuitive inquiry as a set of qualitative methods that validate the subjective perception of lived experiences (*phenomena*) on the part of research participants, as well as the researcher's own interpretive understanding (*hermeneutics*) of the data as meaning-laden information. Intuitive inquiry provides a research design that is both structured and open to the unexpected. It validates transpersonal ways of knowing by encouraging the researcher to interpret the data collection through drawing on dreams, creative expression, and embodiment as vehicles for understanding. In addition, its cyclical forward and return arcs (the stages that precede and follow data collection) facilitate distinctions between the researcher's prior knowledge and the transformation of that knowledge through creative engagement with the data.

An Imaginal Resonance Example

The following is an excerpt from my intuitive inquiry, with a 60-year-old woman participant in response to a recitation of a mystical poem by Thomas Merton. Sandra (pseudonym) listened to the poem with her eyes closed while engaging in mental imaging of the poem, which was then followed by spontaneous art making. Finally, she reflected on her experience in writing. During this process, I maintained a nondirective, witnessing presence.

What resonated for Sandra during this experience was a sense of renewed connection with nature through the following images found in Merton's poem: "...ceasing to question the sun, I become light. Bird and wind. My leaves sing. I am earth, earth. All these lighted things grow from

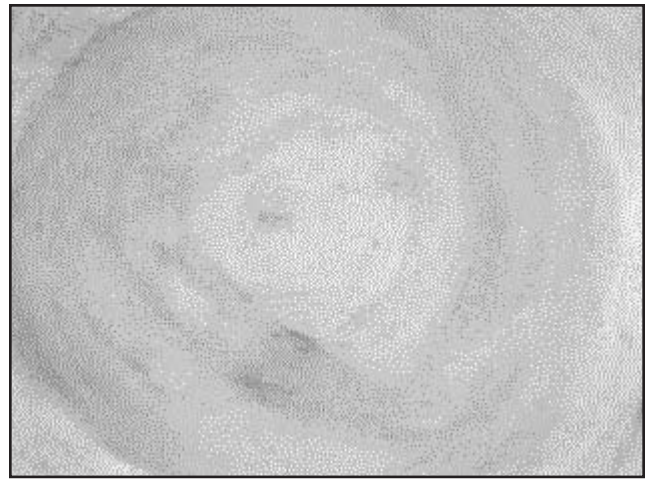


Figure 2 Expressive art image by Sandra. Soft pastels on paper (9" x 12")

my heart" (Merton, 1967, p. 105). Sandra described her mental image by saying "I am standing in an open field, overlooking a lake, [which is] calm, reflecting the sun. [I am] being comforted...I feel alone and comfortable, being thankful for the gift of being."

Sandra reported that the art-making aspect of the imaginal resonance process (Figure 2) was grounding, similar to the feeling of grounding in her mental image. She focused on the art experience and the simple image she had drawn: a large sun. Although the tangible quality of the poetry recitation and her own writing gradually faded in subsequent art therapy sessions, the image of the circle remained as a continued steadying force in Sandra's therapeutic work and led to an intensification of her experience through art making and personal discovery. One month following this single session experience, she wrote:

My overall experience now is one of peace, calm, inspiration, and discovery. This has significantly affected me in a positive way. I have been making more art and have a stronger desire to create, to listen, and to be still...Sensing and feeling the need to be alone, be quiet, and to reflect more deeply, I have begun to incorporate mindfulness meditation in my daily life. In relating to others, I am trying to listen more and to be less judgmental. (Netzer, 2008, p. 227)

Thus, in contrast to the example from my heuristic study, in which Carol's increased self-awareness did not readily activate her toward change, Sandra's imaginal resonance process, accomplished without interpretations from the researcher, remained with her as a constant reminder of the possibility to depart from old habits and to pursue change. Her imaginal experience seemed to have been embodied in that she was able to retrieve its healing essence long after the session, and reactivate it through art making in the context of her daily life.

As a researcher, I engaged in my own imaginal resonance process by responding to the participants' images and artwork. I did so intuitively, in reverie, with attention to the dreams I had at night, and by making spontaneous artworks. Through this process I became aware that even

though imagery is timeless, we experience it within the limits of our physical being. Because of the fleeting quality of images, we can swiftly gain or lose their healing benefits whenever we return to analytical reasoning. Nonetheless, a continued creative practice bridges the imaginal realm and our daily existence.

Conclusion

Through my experiences as a qualitative researcher, I had an opportunity to immerse myself in self-reflection and also to engage in an in-depth examination of my approach to my art therapy practice. Consequently, I have deepened my faith in my profession's unique capacity to facilitate healing and transformation as well as personal and spiritual growth and development. Despite the arduous nature of scholarly research, I have come to see it as inseparable from my practice as a therapist, and as a most valuable tool in the continued development of that practice. By describing the evolving nature of my questions and understanding, I hope to inspire other art therapists to engage in research as a vehicle for personal and professional growth in their art therapy practices.

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