Art-Based Organic Inquiry: Creative Expression with Natural Materials

Link to the Research Output


This case is an example for an *art-based organic inquiry*, a qualitative method that incorporates heuristic and transpersonal features. This study honored the participants' lived experiences, while they engaged in creative expression with conventional art and natural materials as means for personal reflections on the stressors that accompany career life in major metropolitan areas. A thematic analysis of visual and verbal data, culminating with the researcher’s creative integration in response to her findings and her own connection with the topic, provided a transparent picture of the method's descriptive and interpretive functions. This case describes the structure of art-based organic inquiry and its value in supporting the design of this qualitative research. Extracting from a master's degree thesis in art therapy, the authors provide examples for the method's role in each phase of the study and discuss limitations and potential for future applications of this approach in related fields of inquiry.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case study, you should

• Be aware of the key features, structure, and application of art-based organic inquiry
• Recognize the role of the researcher as facilitator of an experiential study
• Understand the subjective nature of interpreting nonverbal data
• Gain familiarity with a transpersonal approach to qualitative research that often results in personal transformation of the researcher, participants, and readers

Introduction

This case describes how the choice of research method supported an art therapy master's degree student in her design of a personally meaningful study. The study emerged from the researcher's connection with nature as a source of creative inspiration and alleviation of the common stressors accompanying urban professional life. She sought to explore how the use of natural materials in art therapy can benefit urban adults who experience work- and school-related stress and do not have frequent opportunities to spend time in nature. To this end, she selected a research method with heuristic and transpersonal features that served to structure and contain her role as a co-researcher and facilitator of a study that focused on self-examination and participants' opening to change through creative discovery.

Jennifer Clements, a co-developer of organic inquiry, stated that this method serves to catalyze transformative change, inclusive not only of information but also transformation of mind and heart. The researcher in this case reflected on her experience of art making with natural materials in an indoor environment and was open and willing to change her existing beliefs and personal perspectives on the topic. The study's transpersonal orientation examined the transformative dimension of participants' therapeutic engagement with natural materials in comparison to their expression with conventional art media.

Topic and Design

The researcher focused her investigation on the characteristics of natural materials as a creative medium and on expressive art and nature in connection to human psychological dimensions. She sought to uncover the thematic elements that emerged in the urban professionals' art expression with natural materials in indoor settings and
understand whether and how it differed from expression with conventional art materials in its therapeutic effects.

The qualitative design included nine participants (six females and three males; 22–40 years of age; of diverse racial and cultural backgrounds—Chinese, Taiwanese, African American, Latin American, and Caucasian; living in New York City or Seoul; all with a college or graduate degree). Participants were in good physical and mental health. In their screening interview with the researcher, some participants reported that due to the nature of their work settings, they experienced moderate to high levels of stress as a result of difficulty with expressing feelings and emotions within the workplace. They lacked opportunities to spend time in nature and felt mental and emotional disconnection from the natural world.

Each participant had an individual session with the researcher for up to 2 h that included three art-making exercises and a semi-structured interview. Four participants were ultimately selected as exemplars for in-depth study. The analysis and discussion of interpretive findings included the participants' original artwork and embodied writing in response to their creative expression. The researcher invited the participants to engage in this mode of reflective writing, which was developed by Rosemarie Anderson, because it emphasizes attention to all the senses, the visceral, intuitive, and subtle feelings expressed by the body and not only an intellectual discussion of their creative expression. She explained to her participants that this method of writing is not concerned with linear narrative, grammar, and syntax; it can include fragments and poetic expression, so the participants can feel free to express glimpses of their felt awareness, even when they do not have fully formed rational insight. The study culminated with the researcher's own creative integration, which included her artwork and disclosure of personal transformation in light of the study.

Art-Based Research

Art-based research was developed by Shaun McNiff, an art therapy pioneer, who sought to support art therapists' empirical research as a bridge between therapeutic practices and scientific inquiry. Essential to this method is the use of artwork as objects of inquiry as well as the means or process of investigation. To McNiff, as to
art therapists at large, the artist who trusts the creative process possesses unique intelligence, or alternative ways of knowing, which provide guidance and authentic forms of expression, different from rational analysis. Creative-expression calls for attentive and compassionate relationships, where researchers facilitate transformation and healing while learning about human experience. McNiff's contribution is in delineating creative expression as a way of knowing, which he called *artistic epistemology*. In addition, the researcher's connection with the topic and her creative experiences through the developmental arc of the inquiry are emphasized as heuristic: a creative process of discovery in which uncertainty and mystery are essential steps toward reliability and predictability as well as the driving forces of creative transformation.

This approach seems most appropriate for art therapy research, when seeking to heal a split between the personal nature of therapeutic art making and the objective stance of scientific inquiry. However, honoring artistic epistemology can serve a variety of research topics in the social sciences and humanities, where creative expression is valued as a way of knowing and an experiential mode of discovery, facilitated by the primary researcher and directly engaged by participants as co-researchers, the latter are regarded as members of the research team along with the primary researcher. Art-based research may take many forms, where various modalities—visual, written, or performative—serve as primary data and means for interpretation. The primary researcher, co-researchers, and ultimately the research audience as well, let the phenomenon being studied speak for itself. Part of contributing to an art-based research entails the construction of meaning through a creative process and the formation of relationships with images, which lead to distinct and shared understanding of subjective human experience.

**Organic Inquiry**

Organic inquiry is a transpersonal research method that suits researchers who seek to shed light on topics pertaining to psycho-spiritual growth. It was named when first conceived, in 1993, by five female researchers (Jennifer Clements, Dorothy Ettling, Lisa Shield, Nora Taylor, and Dianne Jenett) at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology in Palo Alto, California (now Sofia University). Organic inquiry is intended as a living
and mutable process (similar to processes in nature) that invites transformative change for all who contribute to the research experience. It emphasizes the feminine aspect of the self in values such as the inclusion of embodied knowing; mind, heart, and spirit; feeling and intuition; cooperation; compassion; flexibility; interconnection and interdependency among diverse voices; and the liminal (the threshold of change). In order to balance subjectivity with objectivity, the researcher is required to temporarily suspend critical thinking while activating the imagination and intuition, and be willing to think metaphorically, in order to entertain different worldviews, and remain humble and open to transformation of existing knowledge and bias.

Organic inquiry is structured as a three-step process: (a) preparation, (b) inspiration, and (c) integration. If you were to imagine the inquiry as the process of growing a tree, the researcher metaphorically prepares the soil and plants the seed of the inquiry by honoring her personal connection with the topic. Before data gathering (inspiration) can ensue, the roots of the inquiry are acknowledged. The roots constitute tacit knowing—aspects of the inquiry that tend to be invisible and beyond intention (such as the researcher's subjective perceptions and chthonic processes). Gathering data through interrelationships with research participants is akin to the growing branches of the tree. The fruits of organic inquiry (in the phase of integration) are not only the study's findings but also the transformative changes that the researcher, participants, and readers of the study results have undergone.

Art-Based Organic Inquiry

Organic inquiry places strong emphasis on narrative and data gathered through in-depth interviews of participants. Art-based organic inquiry is a qualitative blend that emphasizes creative expression as the primary source of data. It invites participants who might not be highly articulate (for various reasons, such as young age, developmental disabilities, speaking a different language, having experienced trauma, recalling preverbal childhood memories, etc.) but who can provide rich nonverbal data.

Discovery or change cannot be forced. The researcher actively facilitates the study from one step to the next but must be sensitive to what she is presented with rather than seek to control it. Even though organic inquiry is structured as a three-step procedure,
the transition between steps may be blurred, having steps co-occurring. As in the metaphor of the tree, root thoughts and feelings about the inquiry continue to spread and deepen while branches of new understanding also spread; as blossoms appear in the form of new expressions of experience, the study bears fruit and ultimately seeds for future investigations.

**Step 1: Preparation**

Generally speaking, when researchers explore topics that are close to their hearts, their preparation may often begin years before they embark on their formal inquiry. In this case, the researcher studied philosophical perspectives of human connection with the natural world and nature therapy, as well as experimented with the use of natural materials in her artwork over a period of many years before the study commenced, as well as throughout its duration. She drew on prior experiences as an urban professional adult who has come to recognize the detriments of environmental stress and the value of creative expression in alleviating it, especially with natural materials that transport the artist away from the city’s industrial qualities. This preparation led to her immersion in the topic and served, later on, to nourish receptive and compassionate engagement with the study's participants, as she introduced activities she first explored for herself.

Art-based organic inquiry invites a balance of feeling and thinking. Before departing into the liminal realm, where the researcher opens to change and unanticipated discovery, she delimits her journey by intentionally focusing on a question or intent. In this case, the central question was: How do urban adults (working professionals and/or university students) who experience some level of job stress and do not have frequent opportunities to spend time in nature respond to the use of natural materials, presented indoors, compared to creating with conventional art materials? With awareness of her own bias and expectations, the researcher encouraged within herself (and ultimately within her participants and research audience) a state of curiosity and innocence, a *beginner’s mind* that is not attached to controlling the outcomes.
Experiential Container

As part of her preparation, the researcher in this case formulated three exercises:

1. **Exploring conventional materials.** In an indoor setting, for the first 20- to 25-min interval, each participant would use conventional art materials, which included graphite pencils, an eraser, crayons, watercolors, colored pencils, and paper to create a piece of artwork that represents any relationship with his or her work or school life. The participant would be encouraged to explore the various qualities inherent to those materials in a reflective manner.

2. **Exploring natural materials.** Once the participant had exhausted his or her exploration with conventional materials, for the next 20- to 25-min interval, the participant would take a similar reflective approach to creative exploration of the natural materials, such as leaves, seeds, rice, various beans, flowers, nutshell, seashells, handmade paper, blueberries, teas, vine charcoal, stones, branches, cinnamon sticks, and natural linen thread.

3. **Embodied writing** encourages the writer to tune into body sensations and feelings and record them intuitively and without concern to the rules of formal composition, so as to not censor immediate responses to felt experience. The participant would be invited to reflect on personal growth and development (e.g. desires, wishes, or expectations, as well as personal direction and changes throughout the different aspects and phases of his or her life), as these might have taken symbolic forms in creative expression with natural materials.

Even though each of the nine participants, as well as the researcher, experienced the exercises in the same order, the structure left room for each to have a unique and unpredictable experience, especially because the subjects of their imagery, memories, and associations that emerged in response to the exercises were unforeseen to the researcher and the participants alike. It is important to acknowledge, however, that the participants had varied degree of comfort in expressing themselves with conventional art media as well as with natural materials (some preferred the former while others felt more at ease with the latter). For this reason, the nature of the experience was not only dependent on the subject matter of exploration (i.e. their stress-related feelings) but also...
participants' respective interaction with the media. Even though the use of conventional art materials with adults in art therapy is typically associated with tension around lack of skill, in this study, some of the participants were more comfortable with the use of conventional media because they were more familiar with them.

Reflection on Step 1

This study’s design evolved intuitively and creatively, considering the researcher’s connection to the topic. It was also approached with great discipline, in confirming the need for the study through a careful review of the literature. The procedures were refined, based on purposeful conceptualization and imaginative envisioning, while the researcher recognized the limits of access to participants and the scope of research for a master’s thesis, especially its restricted timeline. The in-depth preparation of the soil of this inquiry (through thinking, feeling, engaging all the senses and intuition, as well as literature review) was evident in this researcher's commitment to clarity and organization of the design, as well as flexibility and creative experimentation. Investing in preparing the ground beyond the purpose of a singular seed inquiry ultimately yielded continued exploration and practice of the value of creative expression with natural materials beyond the scope of this research.

Step 2: Inspiration

The second step of organic inquiry, Jennifer Clements wrote, is marked by the researcher’s stepping over the threshold of her personal experience into the liminal realm in search for inspiration. The term inspiration is derived from Spirit and is present in creative endeavors. Spirituality and creativity are qualities that distinguish being human, as is the desire for knowledge and the capacity to inquire with others as means to grow one’s own understanding and consciously interrelate and interconnect with others. At this stage of the inquiry, the researcher is faced with pure possibility. As psychologist Carl Jung put it, a liminal place is one where one’s ego must endure being powerless.
In this case study, the researcher adjusted her plans for recruitment, schedule, and location of the study, responding to the availability of the participants and the circumstances surrounding the execution of the study. The rationale for the selection of materials was not discussed with the participants prior to the three exercises. It was important that the participants would not be led into selecting a particular medium but instead intuitively select the medium they were naturally drawn to, perhaps a material that best complemented their individual artistic expression and which they were comfortable using.

Example 1

Not all participants experienced a major difference between expression with conventional art materials and natural materials. For example, Triece (pseudonym), a 30-year-old African American schoolteacher who lives and works in Seoul, Korea, and loves the big city for the culture it offers, felt that drawing with colored pencils was comforting because it took her back to childhood. It was initially difficult for her to use natural materials for self-expression, as they were unfamiliar, and she connected more readily with the embodied writing exercise, having kept a writing journal. Triece valued the overall experience as therapeutic, since the art making helped her to focus and center herself, and she enjoyed the sensory experience of working with natural materials. Yet, she did not experience as significant a change between exploring conventional and natural materials as most other participants did. Both of her artworks (Figures 1 and 2) depicted Triece’s feelings about the stress associated with structured and monotonous work life, suggestive of isolation and compartmentalization.

Figure 1. Exploring conventional materials, Triece, pencil, watercolor, color pencils, and crayons (12# × 18#).
Figure 2. Exploring natural materials, Triece, leaves, flowers, peas, cinnamon sticks, tea, stones, seashells, rice, nutshells, and natural paper (18# × 24#).

Triece’s colored pencil drawing is divided into sections, each schematically depict a segment of her life routines, including computer work, sleeping and dreaming, eating, teaching, traveling by public transportation, and interacting with others. People are depicted as stick figures, and there is a feeling of isolation and compartmentalization of life activities and interactions.

Triece’s collage of natural materials seems to mirror her pencil artwork. Naturally less literal, it is still segmented and divided into sections, systematically ordering and containing the various natural elements into explicit depictions.
Example 2

Most participants, however, resonated with the innate differences between conventional and natural materials—the change in the medium resulting in a significant shift in their felt responses and their artworks' subject matter. For example, Agua (pseudonym), 40 years of age, of Latin American origin, who is a museum educator and filmmaker living and working in New York City, expressed how he often feels disconnected from nature because he works long, stressful hours indoors. He enjoyed all three exercises but found the embodied writing the least expressive, perhaps because English is his second language, and he was more self-conscious of his use of grammar and syntax. Listening to music while he engaged with conventional and natural materials helped him relax and focus.

Agua’s art training was reflected in his ease of expressing himself freely through the pencil drawing (Figure 3), and with a wide range of tones, from light gray to dark black. Even though he did not feel limited by the conventional materials, he felt much more stimulated by the colors, textures, and even the scents of the natural materials. He said that after his conceptual, dark pencil drawing, working with natural materials felt bright, active, and multisensorial, without too much thought invested in the process. While the first drawing was his attempt to express frustration and not being fully clear about his life's direction, Agua's work with natural materials (Figure 4) was more intuitive rather than rationally conceived. He did not hesitate as much and, therefore, more readily connected with himself in a way that felt to him as personally meaningful, precious time, rather than fulfilling an assignment.

Figure 3. Exploring conventional materials, Agua, soft pencil (12# × 18#).
Figure 4. Exploring natural materials, Agua, leaves, walnuts, stones, peas, blueberry, natural thread, charcoal, rose-petals, cinnamon sticks, and tea (18# × 24#).
Reflection on Step 2

Inspiration includes all forms of new understanding, in this case emerging from the participants' contribution via participation in the art-based experientials and the data they produced (i.e. artwork and verbal and written reflections) as well as from within the researcher's observations, analysis, and insight. In this study, the researcher presented the exercises as planned, encouraging the depth of qualitative data by emphasizing the importance of a quiet and meditative space, where participants could tune into feelings and body sensations as they engaged with conventional and natural materials, as well as embodied writing. She observed and noted without interference how participants were drawn to certain materials or resisted others, as well as how they reflected on their creative expression. The data she gathered informed her own responses authentically, in ways she could not predict. At the same time, the researcher adhered to ethical considerations, especially as they pertained to honoring her participants' freedom to disclose only to the degree they were comfortable with.

Step 3: Integration

The final phase of organic inquiry is a shift from witnessing back to a more analytical stance, as the researcher extracts major themes from the data she gathered. In art-based organic inquiry, the researcher observes the artworks as wholes, where all aspects (e.g. subject, colors, and composition) are inextricable and should be taken as an integral unit with an inherent meaning. In addition, the researcher examines the artwork for visual themes that inform her central question and inspire her own creative response and realization. The artworks communicate unspoken or unconscious qualities, in addition to those verbally articulated by the participants. In this case, transformative inner change occurred, particularly when engaging with natural materials. Even though participants were asked to describe their work life, natural materials often elicited felt responses about their personal life, such as their innate nature, childhood memories, experiences along their life journey, connection with family and friends, and the need to make time for themselves.
For example, with regard to Agua's response to the exercises (see Figures 3 and 4), the researcher noted how Agua was at first serious and measured in his responses. His original choice of medium was a soft gray pencil and he approached his drawing with the artistic skills, confidence, and control he had cultivated for many years. He appeared to examine it and assessed the drawing with his artistically critical eye. Agua's work with natural materials, however, was quite surprising to the researcher and Agua himself. He was playful, joyful, excited, spontaneous, and free-spirited. All his senses were activated; his facial expression relaxed; and his heart opened, he said, to remembering his wife and young daughter, as he anticipated missing them when he would soon leave on a professional trip abroad. He acknowledged the need to make time for personal creative expression.

Reflection on Step 3

The researcher observed changes of heart and mind within herself and her participants. Four participants were selected as exemplars for having experienced significant moments of change (from focus on work-related stress to personal feelings and sensations, playfulness, and creative expression). The researcher considered how the texture, shape, scent, and connection with a place in nature in each one of the natural materials might have imaginatively transported the participants into nature or the associations they have with it. Her careful observations of each participant’s experience and creative expression cumulatively shed light on their shared experience (called in organic inquiry the group story).

There were eight major subthemes related to the participants' transformative changes: (a) describing their personal life rather than work life, (b) relieving work-related stress, (c) expressing their feelings rather than thoughts, (d) experiencing playful and imaginative moments, (e) gaining sensory experiences, (f) including symbolic expression, (g) realizing the importance of their inner lives, and (h) discovering intuitive insight and playful outlook on life. Each of the subthemes was grounded in the art expression, participants' verbatim reflections, embodied writing, and researcher's observations.
Creative Integration

Art-based organic inquiry culminates with the researcher's creative integration of her response to the data. This form of integration may commence before, during, or after the thematic content analysis. Creative integration lends itself to the researcher's exploration of the study's creative-expression procedures as well as reflection on the data in an intuitive manner. Creative expression is best perceived, at first, as a phenomenological whole, prior to engaging in analytical observation. Intellectual analysis tends to break down the holistic meaning of artwork and imposes interpretation, in hindsight, over one's remembering the experience intact. Conversely, intuition tends to tap into tacit knowing about the original experience, a knowledge that exists unconsciously but needs uncovering to inform the experience and infuse it with personal meaning. By responding to the data intuitively at first, the researcher remained as faithful to the data and to the participants' holistic understanding of their respective experience.

In this case, the researcher engaged in the three exercises before engaging in data analysis. Undergoing the same procedures her participants had undergone, she developed empathic identification with their experiences, as well as became more aware of her own unique experience. Her experience was self-guided, as she selected natural materials from the immediate grounds of the university campus. Conducting the exercises while on campus, at the end of summer term and with anticipation for autumn, she was acutely aware of the stressors surrounding her final semester of graduate school and art therapy internship. Perhaps because she surrounded herself with natural materials even during the first exercise, her drawing with conventional materials (Figure 5) was inspired by nature as well.

*Figure 5. Exploring conventional materials, Min, crayons and watercolor (12# × 18#).*
She reflected on hope for her last months of schooling to unfold and move forward naturally, just like the changing seasons. Unlike her participants, the researcher was accustomed to working with natural materials, and yet she found herself at a loss of how to express her feelings in that moment. This was an example of how authenticity in the process of qualitative inquiry may result with surprises and unanticipated outcomes. At the same time, similar to her study’s participants, the researcher noticed how the natural materials, in and of themselves, provided inspiration (Figure 6). A big green leaf attracted her attention with its smooth surface and its fresh smell. She imagined it as a boat in which to travel in her mind to a place she had never been to before, as she stated: ‘where freedom resides’. Working with the natural materials created containment and stability, even a realization that this phase in her life shall pass and that she has the capacity to alleviate her own stress by focusing on beauty and joy. Her embodied writing (following the principles outlined by Rosemarie Anderson, as described earlier in this case study) expressed her feelings further:

Figure 6. Exploring natural materials, Min, leaves, stones, and straw (18# × 24#).
I just want to flow well. Just like winds blow. I don't want to plan everything ahead of time. Life will direct me to a place I belong and fit in. Peace and calmness will reach me through the winds ... I don't know where I am going, but I feel quite stable.

Conclusion

The purpose of this case study was to explore how the use of natural materials in art therapy can serve to alleviate work- and school-related stress experienced by urban adults, who have limited access to nature. The study's culturally diverse sample of students and professionals in two countries made it more difficult to attribute characteristics in the findings to a phenomenon in a particular population (e.g. shared stressors experienced in Western professional females). At the same time, the ideographic nature of this kind of study aims to provide in-depth understanding of particular experiences rather than generalize beyond the participants of the study. In addition, the researcher of an art-based organic inquiry benefits from reconsidering her study's central question in light of the entire arc of the research and from valuing her subjective observations and emphasis on transformative changes.

Being limited in the range of natural materials in an indoor setting also diminished the contrast between them and the conventional materials. However, the inclusion of original artwork and verbatim comments invites readers to engage with the raw data and thus establish what is called in organic inquiry transformative validity—the extent
to which readers incorporate the findings into their own perceptions of the topic and change in light of being exposed to the study.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

1. Art-based organic inquiry is best suited for topics that are close to the researcher's heart and which benefit from the gathering and interpretation of verbal and nonverbal data. What topics do you envision might benefit from the philosophy and approach of this heuristic and transpersonal, qualitative method?

2. One of the distinctive features of organic inquiry (as is true for other transpersonal research methods) is the transformative potential for researcher and others. Can you identify the transformative role of the three stages of organic inquiry in the presentation of this case study?

3. In what ways has the incorporation of creative expression expanded the feminist, narrative tradition of organic inquiry in this case study?

4. The authors did not mention in this case study the full range of limitations acknowledged at the end of the study. What limitations do you see in the study design, which were not mentioned in this case study summary?

Further Reading


**Web Resources**


**References**


http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/978144627305015602455