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## NOTES FROM THE FIELD

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# Art as a mediator for intimacy: Reflections of an art-based research study

### ABSTRACT

*This article presents an art-based research study that explored whether art and artmaking could be considered mediators for intimacy within personal expression. The primary participant of the study was the artist-researcher-therapist, and the imagery created served as co-participants who played the role of 'others' residing in the self. Certain qualities of intimacy were identified within art and artmaking: an urge to move closer, embracing small details, layering, safety, transformation, borders and empty spaces, restrictions by limiting media and tension. Art as a mediator was found to provide an intermediate space and a transcendental realm and to serve as a vehicle of expression that could bridge between the physical and the imagined, integrate inner qualities, support differentiation, encourage witnessing and reconcile ambiguity and conflict.*

### KEYWORDS

art-based research  
art as mediator  
intimacy  
artist-researcher-  
therapist  
expressive therapies  
art-based family  
therapy  
intimate experience

## INTRODUCTION

As the artist-researcher-therapist, I was the primary participant of this research study. Being an artist for more than twenty years, I use drawing and painting as my primary discipline, employing a variety of visual, figurative styles. One of my research interests has been intimacy, especially the intimate experience during artmaking within therapeutic sessions. My clinical experience as an accredited art-therapist supervisor and a certified family psychotherapist includes practice with inpatient and outpatient mental health environments.

In my work with couples, I recall moments of feeling mesmerized when witnessing clients doodle and play with art materials. I am attracted to the movements of their hands and the attentive expressions on their faces. In moments like these, I feel closer to them as if we share a secret, while they express intimate parts on a piece of paper. Over the years, I discovered that creating my own artworks leads to similar sensations in me and that I can use art to feel more connected to myself. This research germinated from a wish to explore the role of artmaking as a mediating agent to intimacy, in an art-based methodology, from an individual perspective.

One's chosen research method should align with the topic one aims to explore (Creswell 2007; Leavy 2017; Silverman 2017). Since art was the subject of my interest and artistic expression is a familiar language, it seemed natural to use art as both my research tool and my method. Many authors maintain that there is something unquantifiable in art: the existence of something bigger than words and bigger than reason (Moon 2012; Sullivan 2008, 2010). It is captured by notions of a felt sense and embodied knowledge (Rappaport 2013). Several authors have advocated for artistic experiences as ways of knowing, healing, transformation and problem-solving (Allen 2012; Barone and Eisner 2011; Levine 1992; McNiff 2013). They identify the artistic process as an important source of information that has the reminiscent qualities required for deep exploration of research questions and that 'meaning is generated through practice' (Prior 2013: 59). Art-based research is a form of inquiry, in which art forms the primary vehicle of research (McNiff 1998; Barone and Eisner 2011); it attempts to bring about an effect or change through body-based knowledge and different forms of reason (Prior 2013).

Since 'we live within a culture of the concrete' (Johnson 1994: 173), researchers face the challenge of building trustworthiness that allows people to know what they know and to see what they see. Patricia B. Allen (2012: 18) discusses how her work in the *Open Studio* format was an example of art-based inquiry because it met her research criteria, which included (1) passionate interest or question, (2) art as the method of inquiry, (3) disciplined adherence to a clear method and (4) systematic evaluation of the process. Mitchell Kossak (2015) also demonstrates the researcher as an active participant of the explored phenomena through an emphasis on coming to know the experience of others by studying one's own experience (Levine 1992; Irwin 2013). So, as I looked at exploring my own intimate connection to my work, an art-based approach made the most sense.

## THE ARTIST AND THE OTHER, THE OTHER IN THE ARTIST

Catherine L. Moon (2002) claims that to become a good clinician, therapists should fully participate in the intimate process of knowing pain, agony and humiliation to understand what it takes to rise above them, learn from them and be able to accept them. She proposes artmaking for these processes.

Art provides an opportunity for self-reflection and to deepen one's familiarity with oneself (Ross 2011), and when an artwork could function as *the other* (Jung 1953), it enables a relationship with aspects of oneself in ways that are unseen and beyond one's comprehension (McNiff 2013) in which the image as *an other* becomes a source of data (Sullivan 2008).

Barbara J. Fish (2013) proposes that although painting cannot change past experiences, it enables changing one's relationship with the subject being painted. Thus, a change of perception is fostered during the creative process. Nisha Sajjani (2013) explains how stories translate into embodied metaphors by Playback Theatre actors, and how aesthetic language offers new solutions to unresolved problems.

Art carries autonomous, physical qualities that are capable of being interpreted and perceived in many different ways; hence, it often requires a process of personal meaning-making to have significance (Le Blanc 2018). In her book *Art Is a Way of Knowing*, Allen (1995) refers to art's capacity to reflect patterns of thinking and behaviour that serves as a tool for deeper understanding of herself.

Art can often function as a framework. The ability to contain and hold, which is offered by the therapist or the therapeutic setting, can also be offered by the object itself (the artwork) and by the artmaking process (Lev 2019). The focus of the creative inquiry resides in the process that can lead to broadened awareness and insights (Sullivan 2010). The practice of art, which has transformative qualities, is sometimes accompanied by a numinous meditative state (Kossak 2009). These transformational conditions are facilitators, agents and could be considered mediators. Mediators simply being those which act between the self and others – whether external (concrete) others or others in the self, through a process of meaning-making.

## ART AS A MEDIATOR FOR INTIMACY

Intimacy is mainly researched in relation to marital conditions and perceived as requiring more than one person to exist (Chan 2017; Timmerman 1991; Wieden 2018). In much research about the phenomenon of intimacy, there is an underlying suggestion that preliminary conditions must be present for intimacy to take place (Bradbury and Karney 2010; Reis 2018, 1990; Waring and Chelune 1983). What is needed for intimacy to occur? The various definitions of intimacy in the literature share certain qualities such as closeness, familiarity with and presence (Kasulis 2002; intimacy 2003). Yet despite the positive correlation between high levels of intimacy and well-being (Osho 2007), the ways to achieve intimacy remain ambiguous. Given the intimate nature of the therapeutic relationship as well as recognizing that self-reflection is an intimate act, understanding both intimacy and how to best achieve it was important to this study I undertook. Only tenuous research is found that deals with the relationship between the creation of art and intimacy (Dissanayake 2015; Oppenheim 2005), and the possible contribution of art as a mediating agent to intimacy (Allen 2005; Fish 2013).

In an expressive therapeutic setting, the direct relationship between the therapist and client opens up to include a third participant – the artwork. Fish (2013) notes that painting enables changing one's relationship with the subject that was painted by providing a certain distance from the experience represented and by inviting the creator to see this subject differently. Although it is often assumed that intimacy requires another person to communicate

with (Maclaren 2014), an intimate relationship could be developed in relation to qualities within oneself that long to be discovered. James Hillman (2012) suggests exploring images rather than explaining them, so that individuals open themselves to *others*, which are inhibited within them.

### **ARTIST-RESEARCHER-THERAPIST REFLECTION: APPROACH**

To explore my question about art as a mediator for intimacy, I used a studio space for four experimental sessions that were intended to last 90 minutes each. Through free experimentation with art, I focused on discovering the relationships of *others* that exist within me, and the roles of art and artistic creation in giving meaning to these relationships. The creative process and the relations with the artworks created were explored. After each session, I journaled, reflected upon by free association and improvisation, and then systematically examined my explorations.

I chose to refer to these experiments or conversations as *interplay*. The prefix *inter* implies between and amongst. Thus, interplay is in-between playing and reciprocal playing. I was playing with art in various media and art played the role of *the other* in me. One of the main principles of art-based research is respecting and honouring the truths and discoveries as they unravel, by trusting the artistic process of inquiry. My process of inquiry was formulated by playing with art materials, with creative writing, photography and filmmaking, and then allowing myself to interact spontaneously with these modes of expression and to be affected by them. During the reflective process, it was sometimes difficult to determine the sequence of artmaking and responsive reflections. The interplay seemed like a game of ping-pong (i.e. table tennis) for a bystander. Most of the imagery and artworks created during this research formed an assurance to the presence of artworks as witnesses representing *the other*. I could feel that my responses to the imagery, whether visual or imagined, were indicators of how connected I was to myself at that moment.

My clinical practice as an art therapist values the feelings we have while participating in and witnessing the creative process. As a researcher I recognized the significance of these felt senses and aimed to include them as active participants in responsive reflections. My aim was to use artistic freedom and creativity, with awareness to aesthetic considerations and their strengths.

### **PROCESS GUIDES**

I developed process guides (PG) to sustain and keep me safe. These guides included seven questions that were systematically presented before, during and after each session. The questions focused on the process of artmaking, and on the artworks produced:

PG1: What helps me know myself better and develop?

This question was the starting point of every journaled session as I strove to increase my awareness through the artistic process. Instead of seeking an immediate answer, I maintained a questioning mode to stimulate exploration rather than a solution.

PG2: What do I see?

This was asked immediately after the artwork was completed. It implied an approach which looks at things as they are aesthetically, without any

search for meaning. To facilitate this process, I specified the following sub-questions:

- What materials did I choose?
- What are their characteristics?
- How did I use each material?

PG3: How comfortable do I feel now?

This question brought awareness to the body and its sensual knowledge. An intelligence involving all of the senses as agents of deep understanding. I was specifically interested in my breathing, body posture and movements.

PG4: Were there moments that enabled/interfered with the creation?

The focus here was on the relation between the surroundings and setting to the depth of the artistic process.

PG5: What do I feel towards the artwork?

I strove to see the image for what it was, be attentive to any feelings it stirred within me and then respond to it.

PG6: Did I have any insights during the creative process?

Insights reflect new inner understandings. The question encouraged the use of imagined visions to change perceptions and the way we describe an experience.

PG7: If it could speak, what would it say to me?

When the artwork is being treated as *an other* it gains objectivity and it becomes a neutral agent for dialogue.

It is important to note that all of the questions presented did not necessarily require a verbal or written response but offered an open platform for responsive expression.

## **ARTIST-RESEARCHER-THERAPIST REFLECTION: EXPRESSIVE RESPONDING**

During the second experimental session, I focused on the idea of intimacy. As the interplay with art began, I was waiting for a sign, a muse perhaps that would mark the point where I might delve deeper into the self, when the following poem emerged from my thoughts:

To Be  
 In present tense  
 be simple, be clear, be pungent  
 To Listen  
 In silence, to a rhythmic heartbeat  
 With veneration to frazzled muscles stretching  
 To Breathe  
 The cool air that penetrates my mouth, my chest, my veins  
 To Focus  
 On the tension  
 Between the flesh, the bones, and that beneath  
 To Crave  
 For more to happen  
 For ends to meet, and wish the same for separation  
 Yet, still, remain.

When I reached out for the art supplies, many questions arose within me: What is intimacy for me? What does it feel like to be intimate? Where do I feel it in my body? What happens to me when I experience an intimate moment? Can I recognize it when it happens? I maintained the questioning mode throughout the experimental session.

I felt present in the moment; spiritual and contemplating yet grounded and centred as I found myself focusing on my feet. My feet are the pillars that determine my posture, shape, my mood. They ground me and lift me up. They are my connecting point to earth, and they funnel energy from the ground to my skin, my blood, to my heart. These feet, which had been used and taken for granted, were unexpectedly sparked with my desire to explore and know them better. I was curious about their shape, their aesthetic virtues and hidden secrets. Expressive responding began by using my camera to photograph my feet in several positions, against multiple backgrounds, together and alone. I then transferred the shots to my computer, scanned through the images of my feet and chose the photos that intrigued me to inspect further, by painting them. As I painted, the tension and other elements involved in the artmaking process indeed created an interesting mediation to intimacy. There was a tension in concentrating on details, while observing the various geometrical shapes and artistic relationships made by my toes, feet and legs (see Figures 1–5). I wondered if intimacy required touch, or rather was maintained by tension and space.



Figure 1: Artist's Feet and Space, 2016. Watercolours on paper. 35 × 50cm.





Figure 2: Artist's Feet in Bath, 2016. Digital photographed image.



Figure 3: Artist's Feet Touching, 2016. Watercolours on paper. 35 × 50cm.



Figure 4: Artist's Feet in Bath, 2016. *Digital photographed image.*



Figure 5: Artist's Feet in Bath, 2016. *Watercolours on paper. 35 × 50cm.*



Figures 6–8 demonstrated to me how maintaining the tension required careful attention and often involved an unnatural exertion of my muscles.

### **REFLECTING ON THE ARTWORK: FEET AS THE WINDOW TO THE SOUL**

During the reflections and meaning-making process I could see that my artworks focused on small details and body parts that are normally covered and hidden. Delving into the small, made me pay attention to things I normally take for granted and perhaps overlook. This highlights that artistic creation involves a process of discovering the familiar in new ways by showing, aesthetically, what used to be overlooked (Irwin 2013). Aesthetic choices



*Figure 6: Artist's Feet Stretched, 2016. Watercolours on paper. 35 × 50cm.*



*Figure 7: Artist's Feet in Movement, 2016. Charcoal on paper. 35 × 50cm.*

were made and resulted in both losses and gain within the process of inquiry. The imagery created an exposition of concealed parts as I choose to see them and to show them to the world.

While painting, I also delved into details and their transformation from three-dimensional objects (e.g. my feet) to a two-dimensional form-factor (e.g. paper). This required artistic choices that made me aware of all that gets lost within the process. The angle from which I viewed the objects determined which parts I lost when painting them. I realized that the creative process of exploring my toes, my feet and my legs was very much influenced by my self-perception. Moments when I felt insecure, unworthy or hesitant, the painting mediated these feelings through a focus on fine, pedicured feet with my





Figure 8: Artist's Feet on Toes, 2016. Watercolours on paper. 35 × 50cm.

toenails neatly painted. When I felt strong enough to reveal and disclose my inner self and gut feelings, I painted the feet twisted, skewed, stained and distorted. Some of the images portrayed were difficult for me to digest. The viewpoint of my feet and thighs revealed my body from an unfamiliar position, as new. I understood that only an intimate familiarity with myself would allow me to befriend personal aspects I find as inimical and choose to hide or disconnect myself from. Exploring my own process of making art and the imagery created, led me to integrate and accept qualities that I found to be contradictory pairs or couples, which included dichotomies such as dominant and oppressed, planned and spontaneous, flexible and rigid. Hillman (1985) calls these pairs *Apollyonic* and *Dionysian*, conscious and unconscious, light

and dark, male and female, and maintained they should not be split, but instead integrated.

Safety is a required condition for the emergence of intimacy (Waring and Chelune 1983); hence, art functioned here both as a physical mediator and an abstract mediator. It was the conduit between the real and imagined. While painting, I became aware of the limiting conditions that contain, and hence, foster safety. The two-dimensional layout formed the boundaries in which I could express myself freely. Art served as the connecting point between the material (physical) and the experience (emotional).

My in-depth exploration of the self through various art forms and processes provided an opportunity for self-reflection and to deepen my familiarity with myself (Le Blanc 2018; Ross 2011). Such was the case when painted objects did not touch, creating tension and an urge for me to bring them closer together, and when layers of colour led to transfiguration and transformation. Different body parts communicated among themselves and formed artistic relationships from which, a couple-hood emerged. This supports McNiff (2004) in suggesting that when an artwork could function as the *other*, it enables a relationship with aspects of oneself in ways that are beyond one's comprehension. By acknowledging the created artwork or image as a separate *other*, distinctions were made and autonomies were established. This emphasizes how moving between the role of the creator to the role of a witness involves an opportunity for self-reflection and seeing the familiar as new (Lev 2020). The resulting sense of otherness was experienced as moments of intimacy. While intimacy has been perceived as requiring more than one person to exist (Timmerman 1991), based on this exploration, I question this assumption as I saw how dialogues within the self and imagery, through immersion in creative interplays invited intimacy.

From this study, I identified art as a mediator by nine principles: mediating the physical and the imagined, the vehicle of expression, mediating integration of inner qualities, mediator of differentiation, mediation through witnessing, mediating ambiguity and conflicts, intermediate space, the transcendental realm and the mediator as translator and interpreter.

## CONCLUSION

Exploring whether art can be used to better understand intimacy within oneself and within relationships generates questions related to how art acts as a mediator. In this study, mediation was referred to as a deep exploration within oneself involving engagement with *the other* (be it an imaginary other or a physical other), within a process of personal introspection in a safe and trusted space. The intimate art-based exploration, in which art functioned as an agent for self-expression and self-clarification was formed by my engagement as artist-researcher-therapist with artmaking in four experimental sessions unlimited by time. In this study, the creative interplay with various art forms and a systematic process of reflection responses strengthened the robust locus of art as a research method.

Albeit the common perception that intimacy is an interpersonal phenomenon (Reis 2018, 1990), the study demonstrated how artmaking provided the space and the prerequisites for intimacy to emerge, within an intrapersonal search of intimacy between my art and self. Furthermore, the study identified explicit artistic qualities within intimacy such as: the urge to move closer, embracing small details, layering, safety, transformation, borders and empty

spaces, restrictions by limiting media and tension. This study suggests art and artmaking as mediators for intimacy by acting between *others* in the self and bridging alternative dimensions of life – earthy and materialistic on the one hand, imaginative and abstract on the other.

The identification of art as a mediator for intimacy forms the basis for future art-based research involving both the self and other participants. Such research could focus on the mediating roles of art within therapeutic environments, between the therapist and clients, in couples' therapy and within groups. Further research should explore intimacy as an intrapersonal phenomenon, through engagement of other participants in artmaking.

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