

OUR OWN VOICES: NEW PARADIGMS FOR ART THERAPY RESEARCH

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The word “research” too often evokes waves of insecurity and images of scientific laboratories and white coats. This is because it is generally associated with the single predominant paradigm of Western science, positivism and the empirical, quantitative model. In this essay, the argument is for both the naturalness and the necessity of an expanded range of lenses through which art therapists can approach research. The dominance of the positive, empirical model in the human sciences is described as a socio-cultural construction. Challenges to it are emerging in the form of new paradigms that offer many cultures of inquiry¹ and diverse ways of knowing and that, most importantly, may be more resonant with art therapists’ talents, interests and world views. The fabled paradigm shift is now before us.

We believe the field of art therapy is philosophically and epistemologically aligned with the empirical research tradition out of its perception of the need to validate its theory and methods within the prevailing framework. This has not provided a comfortable fit for art therapists who, emphasizing creativity and subjective ways of knowing, may find their affinities with the qualitative, descriptive, phenomenological, metaphorical and interpretive methods of inquiry. One reason that art therapists have not emphasized research nor significantly introduced their own research strategies lies in the inherent conflicts and incongruities between the assumptions of the natural science model and art therapists’ typical approaches to human experience. After discussing the issues, this

paper offers a range of cultures of inquiry indicating a diversity of research philosophies and paradigms with research examples, and provides a beginning bibliography.

During the 19th century, psychiatrists and psychologists interacted with their patients to develop comprehensive case histories that sought to illuminate human behavior, psychopathology and the subjective human experience. In spite of this history, in the 20th century the human sciences have been strongly dominated by a current of thought emphasizing their similarity to the natural sciences, called Positivism. Positivism maintains that there was a single scientific method—that of the natural sciences—universally valid in every situation and in all domains of knowledge. Only the result of applying the scientific method could count as *true* knowledge. In this way of thinking, human beings are studied through experimental methods to find the underlying “truth” of the laws of human behavior.

Historically, art therapists have been concerned with the process of legitimizing themselves both clinically and theoretically as professionals. However, in an era that has predominantly valued the model of empirical, quantifiable research “science” dealing with causality and predictability, and based on the assumption that the world and the human being are objectively knowable and therefore predictable, art therapists too often fit uncomfortably, if at all, into this model. Art therapists engage in the metaphorical creation of meaning. As researchers within this West-

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¹The term “cultures of inquiry” is borrowed from the “Research Study Guide” of the Fielding Institute’s Human and Organizational Development Program.

ern science tradition they have often found themselves out of sync with their own talents, interests and proclivities. For art therapists, research has been and remains problematic and fraught with hazards that emerge from and have an impact on professional self-image.

Based on the perception of having to “prove” the value of art therapy, there has been a tendency on the part of art therapists to align themselves with the most mainstream research traditions where empirical analytical science has dominated. They have accepted the myth of a value-free science. This one “truth” approach assumes there is a right way and a wrong way to do inquiry and that there is only one legitimate kind of knowing. From the need to validate art therapy as a profession, therapists have placed themselves in a framework for research that sometimes seems like a straitjacket. Although they continue to engage in descriptive, exploratory and case study research, art therapists secretly and not so secretly exhibit a bad case of low self-esteem about these approaches. Not much has yet been done to develop their own methodologies. Often art therapists do not regard themselves as “real” researchers as they conflictually retain their identity as artists who help others through the wonderfully rich and evocative subjectivity of the creative process.

Art therapists can never fit easily into this model of empirical science because the artistic nature of the work assumes that there are many different ways of looking at the world—as many as the varieties of lines and shapes and colors clients create—and that there are many different kinds of knowing. A consequence of this has been that many have too often felt uncomfortable doing research and have sidestepped the endeavor, concentrating instead on the development of clinical skills in training programs. There currently exists a state of dissatisfaction with research and a yearning for models of inquiry that have more meaning.

Research paradigms are sociocultural constructions embedded in a particular contextual network based on explicit and implicit assumptions about the nature of the world, of truth and of meaning. For a long while now, and particularly in the last 20 years since Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970), there has been a tremendous amount of criticism of traditional research philosophies and methods. Increasingly, the notion that the world is out

there to be learned and separate from the self is under attack. Exciting and useful research paradigms are springing from a variety of cultures of inquiry. These recognize that science is a socially constructed endeavor emerging from one’s own assumptions and biases. Research does not simply observe, describe and measure. The concurrent subjective and implicit experience and the researcher as active participant in creating the experience under consideration must be understood. Art therapists are particularly adept at and trained in these ways of knowing. What are sometimes called “post-positivist” approaches may include some or all of the following characteristics:

- holism: a concern with the properties of the group (“systemness”), rather than merely the individuals who comprise it;
- intentionality: a concern with the “interior” (cognitive, emotional) meaning of action (to the actors involved), rather than merely with observed behavior by itself;
- symbolism and interpretation: a concern with the way in which all human behavior, action and experience are shaped by and occur within systems of language, meaning and symbolism that cannot just be described and explained but must be understood and interpreted;
- engagement: a concern with being actively involved with the subjects of one’s study, rather than distant and emotionally detached;
- understanding: a concern with fully comprehending the unique features of an event, situation or organization, rather than attempting to draw some highly general conclusions that presumably enable one to make predictions about the future;
- historicism: a concern with comprehending the unique by seeing it in a multi-dimensional historical context;
- critique of ideology: a concern with unmasking individual and social illusions that are part of the social fabric and that sustain social and political domination and oppression;
- actions: a concern with combining inquiry with direct social change, rather than limiting inquiry to mere explanation.²

Crucial to effective and enjoyable research for the art therapist is that there be a match between his or her personal style of engaging with the world and the

²From the “Research Study Guide,” of the Fielding Institute’s Human and Organizational Development Program, 1991, p. 22.

particular research methods utilized in the inquiry. Most art therapists never fit easily within the laboratory's white coat procedures nor are they naturally in tune with reductionistically employed statistical analyses. In essence, the attraction to objective, empirical science was part of the need to validate art therapy as a profession within the acceptable and prevailing research tradition of the psychologies. The exciting and expanding understanding that there are many cultures of inquiry and ways of knowing evoked by the post-positivist new paradigm research welcomes art therapists to participate in research endeavors that are more creative and that may be vastly more fruitful to clinicians and to the profession. The shift toward new research paradigms recognizes the development and sense of personal identity and opens the doors wide for art therapists to value and to confidently express their own creativity. In particular, questions and methodologies that concern themselves with metaphor and meaning in their many forms will prove useful and intriguing. Art therapy researchers have a rich and exciting future, and have unique contributions to make.

Currently, in the human sciences, debates rage over the nature of knowledge and what kinds of knowledge lead to useful and appropriate research. The researcher's epistemological perspective and its underlying conscious and unconscious assumptions impacts and defines what is thought of as productive inquiry. Quite simply, research is structured inquiry. Questions are asked out of a particular philosophical and epistemological stance and appropriate methods are developed that are likely to produce generally reliable and valid knowledge. Sometimes methods suitable to answer the posed questions already exist and have been used by previous researchers, although they may need to be changed to fit the specific question or problem. A research method in the human science of art therapy is a guideline and not a "technique," at least not in the strict sense of a statistical analysis nor a laboratory protocol. It is a coherent path toward answering a question. It is a way of selecting, approaching and sense-making of data. In an ethnographic or qualitative study, for example, the researcher collects material about human beings and, often using previous knowledge, intuition and creativity, looks for patterns of meaning. It is no news that artwork created by clients in therapy sessions offers remarkable windows into the human experience. New paradigm approaches uniquely lend themselves to potentially powerful explorations of art therapy pro-

cesses and products as the perspectives are broadened and new methods created out of a sense of personal identity.

The following delineation of nine cultures of inquiry includes the positivistic, natural science model but also offers research philosophies that may engage more readily the style and curiosity of the art therapist. Each of these cultures of inquiry addresses primary questions in different ways, including: (a) analysis of the relationship the researcher has to the subject, (b) exploration of underlying assumptions and (c) acknowledgment of personal style.

In the Department of Marital and Family Therapy (Clinical Art Therapy) at Loyola Marymount University, new paradigm research is being taught and masters students are encouraged to develop research strategies synchronous with their philosophies and values. Examples given are from student and faculty work.

1. Phenomenological studies explore the lived experience, how we think and feel in the most direct ways. The inner experience of the person is focused upon, with the goal of grasping the essential nature of the phenomenon separate from the constructs of intellect and society. Phenomenologists strive to free themselves from the taken-for-granted ideas about things and attempt to get beneath the conventional ways experiences are described to the underlying structures. Phenomenology, not unlike certain art psychotherapeutic perspectives, approaches the most subjective data of all and involves listening to, watching and empathic understanding of another person and his or her products. Through empathy and a deep indwelling, the understanding of the experience is gained. The phenomenological researcher is typically not interested in what causes something, but what something is. Although extraordinarily experiential, it is also one of the most analytic modes of inquiry and requires careful dissection and reflection toward the goal of understanding the structure, meaning and nature of consciousness.

Example: "A Phenomenological Exploration of Metaphor in Six Art Therapists' Experiences Including Both Visual and Verbal Expressions."

In this example, the researcher conducted lengthy and in-depth interviews that included directed drawing to elicit the experience of met-

aphor as a dimension of art therapy practice. Through an analysis of the visual and verbal interviews, interpretive patterns of meaning were understood. The researcher's own experience as an art therapist provided an immersion into the phenomenon and a heightened consciousness and empathy. Her articulated understandings were validated by the co-researchers.

2. Heuristic studies involve a phenomenological approach but are introspectively oriented toward the investigator's own consciousness of the explored experience and involve simultaneous immersion into and analysis of the studied phenomenon. The discovery process of heuristic research involves internal searching into the nature and meaning of experience. The researcher's focus remains on him or herself throughout the process. It is crucial that, as the understanding of the phenomenon studied deepens, the researcher's self-awareness and self-knowledge increases. Creative self-processes are an important component of heuristic research.

Example: "A Self-Reflective Exploration of One Art Therapist's Experience of the Process of Engagement in Art Therapy." In this example, the researcher focused on her own insights over a four to five month period of the continuous experience of therapeutic engagement with her art therapy clients. She developed an immersive procedure of spontaneous drawings and journal keeping of her immediate reactions to sessions with adolescents in a residential treatment center. After the data producing phase, a protocol was developed for a thematic analysis. She utilized the meanings she discovered in her process to augment her understandings of her therapeutic encounters. Important learnings from this study centered on this art therapist's developing process of empathy and the enhancement of self-reflection through her visual product leading to a more profound use of relationship in her therapy session.

3. Hermeneutic studies involve attempts to interpret and understand meaning based on the dialogical process between the inquirer and the data (text or artifacts). It is a sense-making process bounded by one's specific historical existence in culture and time. Contemporary hermeneutics understand one's viewpoint and therefore one's prejudgments that are brought

to the work as largely culturally determined. Hermeneutic studies acknowledge intersubjectivity as the source of interpreted meaning and the value of the contribution of the subjective reactions of the interpreter in constructing meaning. Understanding thus becomes an integration of the phenomenon itself and that of the interpreter. In comparison to phenomenology and the natural sciences, hermeneutic methods are designed to work not only with living experience but with cultural artifacts from history, and is avowedly high context work. The hermeneutic researcher is concerned with "objective" meaning of symbols and ideas, and also with what they convey. Within this frame, no hypothesis is the starting point nor is there a final answer. Instead, within a dialogical perspective, there is a continual spiral of guess and validation with a working back and forth between parts-whole relationships and the context of interpreted meaning. This researcher recognizes him or herself and her cultures as the product of a tradition that is both perpetuated and changed through the act of interpretation.

Example: "An Art Therapist Looks at Family Portraits From Art History." Using five art history family portraits from different periods and by different artists, the researcher developed a reiterative dialogical process in which she attempted to understand the meaning about the families portrayed in the artworks and the meaning to her. Acknowledging her own perspective, it was used as both an aid and a limitation to understanding. A process journal of the dialogue was kept. The chosen interpreted patterns were understood to be culture-bound and were compared with an interpretive model from art history and three models of family therapy in the attempt to build a coherent and powerful web of meanings.

4. Ethnographic studies, including participant observation, naturalistic inquiry and other forms of field studies, involve direct observation of a particular culture or social group. These studies characteristically include immersion in the life, behavior, attitudes and concepts of the group that is the focus of the inquiry. Explorations within this category aim to grasp, interpret and explain the way in which people make sense of their world. Individual or group interviews are often used to gather indepth descriptions.

Example: "The Journey With Central American Refugees: An Exploration of the Conditions of Uprooting, Migration and Relocation Through Family Art Psychotherapy." In this example, the art therapists/researchers attempted to understand the refugee's migration experience by immersing themselves in the culture of refugees in Los Angeles and utilizing the art therapy modality to elicit pictorial expression and verbal communication about the experience. Beginning with pure description, the study moved toward creating a model of the experience with this group.

5. Empirical/Analytical studies include all types of quantitative inquiry and typically are concerned with the measurement of phenomena. The word "empirical" comes from the Greek word for experience and means "based on experience." The approach is often called "the natural science model" derived from the physical sciences in which philosophers and scientists believed that objective, rigorous observation of the "facts" would yield universal truths. "Analysis" implies the breaking down of elements into discrete parts that may then be described mathematically to express correlations and causal relationships. Thomas Kuhn (1970) successfully demonstrated the impossibility of describing pure "facts." What we call "facts," he said are, partially, conventions scientific communities agree upon. Nonetheless, this approach still dominates virtually all academic psychology and social science disciplines.

Examples: "A Survey of Mental Health Professionals' Attitudes Toward Art Therapists and the Art Therapy Profession." The researcher developed a numerically coded questionnaire to assess attitudes. She mailed the questionnaire to 300 mental health professionals in California. The data were analyzed statistically and correlations and trends established.

"The Use of Art Therapy to Assess Burnout of Emergency Medical Personnel: A Single Case Study." The single case was a group of medical personnel in a large metropolitan hospital who met for six weeks in an art therapy setting. Pre- and post-test instruments were used to establish the level of burnout for each participant. The art expression and therapy pro-

cess was both the assessment and intervention. An hypothesis was that by becoming more conscious through the visual projection of their inner feelings, participants would gain a sense of control and well-being.

6. Action research involves the intent to impact and effect change through the accumulation and implementation of new knowledge for the individual, group or organization. Its values are: participation, self-determination and empowerment through the acquisition of new knowledge. Although there are different models the general protocol is: (a) identifying a problem to be acted upon, (b) forming an hypothesis implying a goal and procedure whereby the goal can be attained, (c) recording of actions, (d) generalizing from the data about the relationship between actions and goal, and (e) retesting of generalizations.

Example: "The Use of Art Therapy in Organizational Consulting." With a model from the organizational consultation literature, the researcher incorporated art therapy processes at each step. Two organizations were utilized, a preschool and a university art therapy program. In the first, administration and staff were involved. In the second, administration, faculty and students participated. The researcher created an artwork to explain the data she had gathered to the participants. Evaluation sessions were held in which participants discussed their increased sense of empowerment due to the actions established and taken in the process of the consultation.

7. Comparative/Historical research reviews the context over time of a particular phenomenon, culture, individual, group, institution or organization to understand it through its history and differences. Some questions posed are "How did this occur?" "What was the context?" "What makes this unique?" Patterns in context are formulated through the researcher's selection of what is important and relevant. This form of inquiry may be used to modify theories of change. History is a form of hermeneutic knowledge in that it involves interpreting meaning and is a form of self-knowing.

Examples: "An Oral History of the Evolution of the Art Therapy Program at Immaculate Heart College." The researcher did taperecorded interviews with the Program Director

and core faculty members and interpreted the data within the historical context of mental health of the time.

A History of Art Therapy in the United States. Using material from the Archives of the American Art Therapy Association at the Menninger Foundation, taperecorded oral histories of art therapy pioneers, written materials, art therapy literature and personal communications, the researcher told the story of the personalities, events and milestones in the evolution of art therapy in the United States. The story is situated within the historical surround including trends in mental health and is differentiated from other disciplines such as psychology, psychiatry and art education.

8. Theoretical research, including critical theory, critiques and integrates existing theories in an attempt to generate new knowledge and theory. In this form of inquiry, theory is the data. The researcher first searches out limits and contradictions of the theories under study and then attempts to eliminate them. What is produced is either theory or critique of theory in that theoretical analysis is driven by the consciousness of inadequacy of the theory or theories in its explanatory power and strives to develop a more integrated, comprehensive and powerful theory. Primary methods are logical analysis, evaluation and synthesis.

Example: "Steps Toward a Systemic Theory of Art Therapy." Through a rigorous logical analysis, the researcher considered a model of different system paradigms and a variety of seminal art therapy theories from the literature, evaluated them and evolved a synthesized theory that integrates and extends knowledge of art therapy theory.

9. Evaluation research attempts to assess the effectiveness of programs. It typically uses empirical/analytic methodology that may be combined with other forms of inquiry such as ethnography. The evaluation researcher often struggles with a conflict between rigorous traditional research and the very real needs of the human beings under study. This research tends to focus on experience to the exclusion of theory. Underlying this form of inquiry is the assumption that the goals of the program are clear and measurable; research within this perspective is objective, rational and systematic. Eval-

uation research is used for holding people accountable and for eliminating, changing or keeping a program.

Example: "An Evaluation of an Art Therapy Program in a Pilot Program for Ex-Offenders and a Proposal." Using pre- and post-tests and systematic measures, the researcher analyzed the effectiveness of a time-limited art therapy program. From her findings about the effectiveness of the pilot program, she developed a proposal for a full-scale endeavor.

We are convinced that it is imperative that art therapists broaden their range of inquiry past the more traditional philosophies and methods and that they have the confidence and commitment to discover their own identity as researchers. Continuing investigations into new developments and paradigms in human sciences research will help to achieve that. Their natural tendencies as clinicians—to work intuitively and metaphorically—do not have to be sacrificed in the interests of rigor. And training programs need no longer support the anomalous contradiction between excellence in clinical training (emphasizing creativity, relationship and subjectivity) and traditional research methods (emphasizing analysis, measurement and objectivity). Rather, as we develop research more integral to and synchronous with our own proclivities, we may contribute important research about the human condition in our own voices and from our own ways of being and knowing.

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