

What Are The Unique Therapeutic Characteristics Of Fiber Arts? A Research Proposal

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What Are The Unique Therapeutic Characteristics Of Fiber Arts?

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Abstract

Fiber arts are meditative, soothing, easily accessible, and easily incorporated into daily life. These themes seem to be generally accepted and continue to arise in research. I would like to discover if there are other unique characteristics of fiber arts that are therapeutic. Are there reasons that have not been mentioned in other research about fiber arts? Through the Heuristic and Art-Based research methodologies I will try to discover a clearer reason as to why fiber arts are so beneficial and how this can apply to Art Therapists work with clients.

What Are The Unique Therapeutic Characteristics Of Fiber Arts? A Research Proposal

Artists have long used fiber arts as a source of expression as well as a source of meditative comfort and personal healing. Women historically have gathered together in groups for quilting and talking about their daily lives and struggles, (Anderson & Gold 1998, p. 15-16). The goal of this study is to determine the unique characteristics of fiber arts that make them therapeutic and how fibers can be applied to art therapy. I believe that it is important to understand the specific reasons why working with fibers is beneficial and how these benefits can be applied to working with clients in an art therapy setting. Research has suggested that individuals benefit from gathering in these knitting or quilting art groups by having a venue for sharing experiences with others. (Anderson & Gold, Broadbent, Gschwandtner, Reynolds 1998, 2002, 2008). This study will attempt to answer the question: What are the unique therapeutic characteristics of fiber arts? Is there more to fiber art than the meditative process or the benefit of group? By identifying the unique therapeutic characteristics of fiber art, art therapists will be able to use this information to specifically benefit their clients through the use of different fiber art processes and materials. This research combines my own personal experience with fiber art that I have recorded in a journal that details the effects of the fiber work on my mood before, during, and after. I will also interview various fiber artists and art therapists to learn their reasons for using fiber arts, the effects fiber arts has on them, and if/why they find them therapeutic. This research is limited by the fact that the data are dependant on the participants and their personal honest interpretation of their moods and how the process of creating art with fiber affects it. For verification of this research, I will compile the data I find from interviews and my personal

journal and then share these results with my study participants, comparing my results with their experiences. Chapter two will discuss the literature review of themes that surfaced regarding the therapeutic characteristics of fiber art.

Literature review

A few themes have surfaced consistently during my review of the literature on fiber artists as well as other studies of fiber art. Artists and researchers have suggested that participating in creative fiber work such as knitting, quilting, and embroidery provide emotional healing through a cathartic and transforming nature, through its meditative and soothing properties, and as a way to build a community which further enhances the healing effects of the artwork. I have also found that it is generally agreed upon that fiber arts are very accessible (inexpensive and readily available in local stores), socially acceptable since it is a traditional craft and fit easily into home life. Are these the factors that make fiber arts therapeutic or is there a unique property? Is it the physical process of slowly working with the hands, is it the finished product or is it the texture and feeling of the fiber itself? I will review various studies as well as the work of fiber artists to try to discover a common theme about the uniqueness of fiber arts.

Artists have used their fiber art to help themselves transition from pain to healing after experiencing the death of a loved one or grieving the loss of something meaningful in their lives. Sherri Lynn Wood is an artist who creates *Passage Quilts* with and for her clients as a way to transition through a life event, usually the death of a family member or friend. With these quilts individuals are able to clean out old clothing that is taking space their home and is a daily reminder of the person that is gone. These clothes are then cut into strips to be sewn together for

the quilt. Cutting the clothing is a physical step towards transformation, as is the final step of piecing them together into a quilt. It is a process that helps individuals process the feelings associated with death and move on with their own lives and honor and remember their loved one. Embroidery can also be used for its meditative process, as in the artwork of Karin Birch. Her series titled *Transition* “documents Birch’s artistic journey through grieving, one which has been cathartic for her.” (Gosslee 2005, p. 21). Birch used the slow and meticulous process of embroidery to help heal herself and transition to a life without her husband. Another way to use the process of creating fiber art for healing is through the symbolism of the fabric as in the work of Dorie Millerson. The death of a family member spurred Millerson to move from weaving to needle point lace because the holes created in the work reflected her feelings more so than the fabric she was creating through weaving. Millerson uses photographs of her family as the inspiration for her small, intricate lace sculptures. (Kotani & Freydberg, 2008 50-53)

Loren Schwerd is a sculptor who received her undergrad degree from Tulane University in New Orleans and is currently a teacher at Louisiana State University, so when hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans in 2005 Schwerd used her art to process the trauma. She initially spent some time looking through the destroyed neighborhoods taking photographs of the damaged and flood soaked homes. During this time Schwerd found a large supply of discarded hair extensions from a beauty supply store that she would use in her sculptures for *Mourning Portrait*, a tribute to the lost homes of New Orleans. Schwerd wove the hair through wire screen to create replicas of the houses she took pictures of that had been so damaged by the hurricane. She compares this work to “*memento more (Latin for “remember you will die”)*” (Hansell, 2008, p. 38) in which women used to wrap hair around wire to create jewelry or other small objects to

honor the deceased. Schwerd was able to use the weaving and knotting of the hair extensions as a way to transform a traumatic event into a memorial that honors the homes and those that had lived in them.

The processes involved in fiber arts have aided some individuals in the recovery from depression caused by abuse or illness. Reynolds and Anderson both have separate studies in which the participants state how the use of some textile art was very relaxing and self-soothing. Reynolds (2000) reports in her study that the majority of the participants claimed that their fiber art was relaxing and calming.

Knitting served as a meditative distraction from depressive thoughts for artist Adrienne Martini. Martini had been a sporadic knitter in the past, but after being hospitalized for depression she took up knitting more regularly as a meditative practice to combat her depression. She was able to easily pick up a knitting project that was in progress and continue knitting without much thought. Martini used her knitting skills to help herself transition through her post-partum depression after the birth of her daughter, and she was able to give away her knitted pieces as gifts to friends and family further reducing her depression symptoms.

A combination of community building and soothing meditation was the result for Kotani who created an art installation to honor her mother. Kotani created her own doilies, which served as a self-soothing process, and asked others to contribute doilies for the project along with stories of how creating the doilies was healing for them. The doilies and stories that she received confirmed for her that their “creation do indeed contribute to healing” (2004, p. 23). What started as an installation for her to honor her mother turned into a more meaningful community of other artists who used the process for healing. This same combination of community and soothing

process was experienced by a group of teenagers who came together after the world trade towers collapsed in 2001. Many teenagers were taking up knitting as a way to process the trauma. The effects of knitting are like meditation and act as a de-stressing tool, which also helped the teens focus and relax.

Textile arts also have a unique way of bringing artists together to form a community, which also increases the healing effects of the art itself. Teenagers gather after school for knitting groups and have the chance to talk about things, in a safe place, that scare or bother them. (Broadbent, 2005, p. 2) Participants in the study by Reynolds (2000, p. 112) also stated that in addition to the relaxing effects of the fiber art they were also inspired to join groups or clubs, which helped to build a social support. Anderson alludes to the quilting bees of our history where women regularly gathered to stitch and talk about the issues in their lives. (1998 p. 16). Gschwandtner (2008, p. 51) also refers to the healing effects of the group that gather to create a *Passage Quilt* by sharing their stories with one another. As stated by Anderson (1998) “historically, women have used creative expression and art activities to express the unspeakable, to soothe the self and to connect to other women”. Women would often gather together to complete quilts for each other as well as to commemorate important life events. It was at these gatherings that the women were able to share with one another and help to heal.

This study examines the therapeutic elements of fiber arts by looking for themes that emerge. As revealed in the literature review, fiber arts contribute to healing through a meditative effect, through cathartic and transformative elements, and by building a supportive community. This study will use two research methods, Heuristic and Art-Based, to look for themes that have

not been found through the literature review, themes that may be relevant to the use of fiber arts for art therapy.

Research Methods

Heuristic research

Heuristic research is a qualitative research method that relies heavily on the personal experience and internal frame of reference of the researcher, and therefore is a good research method choice when researching human experience. This research is autobiographical and the researcher is personally and deeply involved in the process. It involves an internal search for meaning about a subject or question that interests the researcher, and with "virtually every question that matters personally there is also a social - and perhaps universal - significance." (Moustakas, 1990, p.15). Heuristic research requires that one be completely absorbed in the process of finding the answer and be open and receptive to the experience.

The beginning of heuristic research starts with identifying the question or problem and trying to "get inside the question, become one with it" (Moustakas, 1990, p.15) to be able to thoroughly understand it. This type of inquiry requires the researcher to become very focused on the question and allow intuition and tacit knowing to add to the understanding and aid in discovery of new ideas and understanding. Tacit knowledge is explained as something known internally but not expressed with words. Moustakas also describes how the researcher must practice the process of focusing.

The steps of focusing as used in heuristic research include the clearing of an inward space to enable one to tap into thoughts and feelings that are essential to clarifying a question; getting a handle on the question; elucidating its constituents; making contact with core

themes; and explicating the themes. (Moustakas, 1990, p. 25)

The process requires the researcher to be disciplined and persistent, prepared to encounter small revelations at a time about the research question.

Heuristic research has six distinct phases as described by Moustakas:

1. Initial Engagement

The first phase of heuristic research is the formation of the question. The researcher is compelled to discover something new and of importance regarding a subject matter that he/she is personally engaged in. The process “requires inner receptiveness, a willingness to enter fully into the theme, and to discover from within the spectrum of life experiences that will clarify and expand knowledge of the topic and illuminate the terms of the question.” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 27)

2. Immersion

This is the phase in which the researcher becomes fully immersed in the subject matter he/she is studying. “The researcher lives the question in waking, sleeping, and even dream states”. (Moustakas, 1990, p. 28) Everything, an article, conversations, books... that is related to the question is available for research and should be explored.

3. Incubation

In the incubation phase the researcher is no longer directly absorbed in the research question. The ideas and discoveries from the immersion phase are allowed to linger in the mind in order to produce a new understanding.

4. Illumination

During the illumination phase, new knowledge or understanding of the question arises. The

new information may be clarification of ideas or a correction of previous incorrect or misunderstood ideas. The illumination is part of the tacit knowledge that is allowed to emerge during the incubation phase.

5. Explication

“The purpose of the explication phase is to fully examine what has awakened in consciousness, in order to understand its various layers of meaning”. (Moustakas, 1990, p. 31) It is similar to the illumination phase but the ideas are explored in much more detail and the researcher takes into account his/her own judgments and experience.

6. Creative Synthesis

At this last stage in the research process the researcher has a full understanding of all aspects of the question as a whole and can now bring it all together in a creative synthesis. This final phase can be expressed in a variety of ways: “narrative depiction..., ...poem, story, drawing, painting, or by some other creative form.” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 32) It is the challenge of the researcher to take all the knowledge and understanding of the initial question or topic and present it as a whole.

Heuristic research is verified by confirming the finding with the participants of the study. Asking them if the meanings discovered during research are accurate according to their experience as well. Another type of validation can come from people responding to the work with examples of similar experiences in their own life as described by Moustakas in reference to his research on loneliness. (1990, p. 34-35).

An advantage of heuristic research is the depth of understanding that is made available to the researcher through the process. This also leads to a disadvantage, as no one could understand

the meanings of the research as well as the researcher without having the experience and following the process of heuristic research.

Art based research

Art-based research is a qualitative research method that involves the use of artwork as the primary source of knowledge and understanding. This research methodology does not have definitive steps as in heuristic research, which may be considered a disadvantage. However, with nearly limitless methods one could choose, the freedom to explore possibilities is a great advantage. One possible method described by McNiff is that the research questions could be explored through an artistic process such as painting and then the findings discussed in a narrative (McNiff, 1998, p. 22-23). McNiff gives numerous other examples of possible research inquiries in his book *Art-Based Research* and compares the process of the artist/researcher working in the studio to “what a chemist does in a lab.” (McNiff, 1998, p. 26). McNiff continues to explain how “The key to keeping the arts as primary modes of psychological inquiry lies in making sure that the research is focused on experiments with media just as the chemist works with physical substances.” (McNiff, 1998, p. 26).

I think that heuristic and art-based research would work well together for art therapists. Both methodologies lend themselves to the deep introspective and reflective processes that are often associated with creating art.

By combining these two methodologies in my research of therapeutic characteristics of fiber art, I will be able to compare my personal experiences using fiber arts with the information I gather from interviews with other artists. I will keep a daily journal of my own experiences

with fiber art in which I believe themes will arise that will be similar to those that I have found in my research and themes that will most likely arise in interviews. I would like to interview fiber artists and Art Therapists who use fibers with their clients to discover themes of therapeutic benefits. Once I have discovered the themes from my journal and the interviews I will try to find themes unique to fiber arts and present these findings to the artists and Art Therapists that were interviewed to find out if my findings match their experience with fiber arts.

Structure Of The Study

This research combines my own personal experience with fiber art that I have recorded in a journal that details the effects of the fiber work on my mood before, during, and after. I have also collected survey and interview questions from various fiber artists and art therapists regarding their reasons for using fiber arts, the effects fiber arts has on them, and if/why they find it therapeutic. I contacted fiber artists and art therapists through email or phone to ask if they would be interested in participating in a research study regarding the use of fiber arts. The study aimed at discovering the therapeutic characteristics of fiber art. Those who agreed to participate received a survey of 16 questions that took approximately 5 minutes to complete. I then chose 3 - 5 participants to answer 13 detailed interview questions that took no more than one hour. After I analyzed the data I was able to share the results with the participants to confirm the findings. This this final step took approximately 10 minutes for a total time commitment of one hour and 15 minutes. Participation in this study was voluntary. This research was limited by the fact that the data were dependant on the participants and their personal honest interpretation of their moods and how the process of creating art with fiber affects them. For verification of this research, I compiled the data I find from interviews and my personal journal and then share these

results with my study participants to compare if my results were consistent with their own understanding.

Analysis: Results

Discussion

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Appendix A

Survey

When questions state 'fiber art' this refers to any art that uses in whole or part fiber materials and techniques such as (but not limited to) knitting, crochet, quilting, sewing, and mixed media

Please check appropriate answer

		Yes	No	N/A
1.	Do you regularly use fibers in your art or art therapy practice?			
2.	Are you over 18 years of age?			
3.	How were you introduced to fiber art?			
4.	Do you choose materials based on feel or content?			
5.	Do you prefer natural materials?			
6.	Do you prefer synthetic materials?			
8.	Does working with fibers affect your mood?			
10.	Have you ever reached out to touch fibers? (for example, someone's coat, scarf, or blanket or clothes in a store)			
11.	Do you enjoy the process of working with fibers?			
12.	Do you enjoy the finished product after working in fibers?			
13.	Do you enjoy looking at fiber art in print?			
14.	Do you enjoy looking at fiber art in person?			
15.	Is your fiber art to be touched or worn?			
16.	Is your fiber art only for display?			

Name:

Date:

Would you be willing to answer interview questions in more detail? The questions would be sent to you through email and can be emailed back to me when completed. The final deadline is

March 1st 2009. The interview questions should not take more than one hour to complete.
(please circle) yes no

Appendix B

Interview Questions

Interview questions:

1. When did you begin working with fibers?
2. What was your reason for choosing this media?
3. How many times a week do you work with fibers?
4. What are your earliest memories of working with fiber?
5. Do you create work for yourself?
 - a. For others?
6. Do you sell your work?
7. Do you enjoy viewing fiber art in print or in person?
8. Describe a memorable experience with fiber arts:
9. Does working with fiber arts effect your mood? please explain:
10. How do you feel while working with fiber?
11. How do you feel about your finished fiber arts project?
12. How do you feel after a work of art is complete?
13. Are fiber arts therapeutic for you?
 - a. If yes, what makes them therapeutic?