A PHENOMENOLOGIC RESEARCH STUDY OF A CLIENT'S EXPERIENCE IN ART THERAPY†

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A phenomenological research approach to a client's experience in art therapy is described and illustrated here with a description and discussion of the findings of the artmaking phase. Research investigations in art therapy commonly focus on the potential usefulness of the art product for assessment purposes and the effectiveness of art therapy. Nevertheless, what art therapy is and how it occurs does not appear to be well understood or articulated. "Meaningful theoretical constructs have not yet been developed from the matrix of art therapy itself" (Rubin, 1984, p. 190). Instead, art therapy tends to be viewed and understood from the theory and language of other disciplines.

Phenomenology calls for a return to the subjective—the experience as it is lived—to gain understanding. Previous studies in art therapy that have used phenomenological principles have tended to focus on the subjective experience of a particular psychological disturbance (i.e., schizophrenia and manic depression) (Wadeson, 1980) or the resolution of bereavement issues in children (McIntyre, 1987, 1988) and have used client's art products and verbal descriptions to arrive at a greater understanding of these experiences. The purpose of the study described in this article is to gain understanding of a client's experience in art therapy and to demonstrate a research approach that may be useful in gaining knowledge of phenomena that occur in art therapy. This research differs from previous research in that it attempts to overcome the tendency to focus on the art object apart from the person, to tease out the art therapy experience itself from the rich detail of the narrative and to describe what is given versus interpreting it from a particular theoretical perspective. This research study is grounded in a client's verbal descriptions of her experience in art therapy versus an art therapist's observations of a client's nonverbal descriptions and focuses on the art therapy experience itself versus a particular issue or mode of art therapy. The study constitutes a contribution to art therapy research through a research design that uses the verbal descriptions of the client as the main source of data, subjects them to a systematic analysis and tries to stay close to the experience and meaning systems of the client.

The research question was: What meaning is revealed in a client's descriptions of her experience of artworks created in art therapy over time? Specifically:

1. What is a client's experience in art therapy? (When a client is in art therapy what does she or he experience in making art, and in looking at and discussing the art in the presence of an art therapist? What appears to the client?)
2. How does a client experience art therapy? (Through what activities—behaviors, mental processes, influences and so forth—does the

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client come to have this experience? This question does not imply cause and effect but rather represents the movement, interrelationships or style through which the experience comes to be.)

The importance of doing the research lies in the need to disclose the foundations of phenomena for the purpose of understanding (Colaizzi, 1973). Understanding is important, not only to articulate what art therapy is, but also for therapeutic practice. Empathic responding by the therapist is necessary for the client’s development in therapy (Rogers, 1951). Understanding can also help the art therapist to be more intentional in the practice of art therapy.

Method

Within the naturalistic paradigm the researcher chose to use a phenomenological method. A phenomenological approach (Giorgi 1985, 1989c; Speigelberg, 1982; Wertz, 1983) is discovery-oriented and offers a way of explicating the essential qualities and structures of art therapy phenomena as experienced by a client. Other traditional qualitative approaches were considered, but did not appear to have the same potential to access various levels of understanding as a phenomenological method or to be as appropriate a fit to art therapy and the early stage of development of its own body of understanding. The following phenomenological characteristics and assumptions were foundations for both conceptualizing and doing the research:

1. Phenomenology is the study of how things appear to consciousness or how phenomena are given in experience. Value is placed on persons’ experience of their world versus their theoretical knowledge of it. For example, a phenomenologist would base understanding of light on how light is immediately experienced by a subject (i.e., bright, warm, comforting, etc.) whereas a natural scientist may understand light as a wave equation. Phenomenologists believe that all things start with the life-world of subjects, the world as it is lived and experienced before it is abstracted into theory or explanations. Phenomenologists call to return to this as a guide to human understanding.

2. Intentionality of consciousness implies being directed toward something that is not consciousness itself or that is beyond the conscious act that it appears to, such as a memory or an immanent object. There is a tension, a stretching between the object of consciousness and the consciousness that beholds it. Things and events are not viewed or studied separate and apart from the consciousness that beholds them. There is a mutual co-existence between the subjects and their world, a necessary unity versus a natural scientific tendency toward subject-object dualism. The essence of consciousness is not awareness but intentionality; it is essentially relational.

3. The client’s descriptions are considered valid data. Unprejudiced, prereflective (prior to interpretation, theory or explanation) verbal descriptions of a client’s experience of a phenomenon are sought. It does not matter if the account is retrospective and lacking in facts of the actual occurrence. What is important is that the subject has experienced what is sought and is able to illuminate this experience through their description. The existence of the phenomenon, the literal meaning and the facts are not as important as the sense or presence of the phenomenon embedded in a subject’s descriptions. The researcher needs as many participants as is necessary to illuminate the data. A single case is acceptable if the subject can describe his or her experience.

4. Phenomenologists seek the logos (patterns, structures) of the phenomena they are studying. Forms, essences and structures emerge from and are not imposed on the data. An essence is the most invariant meaning for a context. It is not the literal meaning that is sought but the essential structure that arises and distinguishes it from other experiences.

5. The concept of the phenomenological reduction plays an important role in this research approach. The researcher strives to attain an attitude free of presuppositions. This is achieved through two mental exercises: (a) bracketing—a attempt to set aside opinions, theories, explanations of what may appear and (b) a suspension of belief in the existence of what appears, so that one does not fixate on this and remains open to what can emerge. Some phenomenologists (Colaizzi, 1978) recommend that the researcher explicate and make known personal presuppositions prior to doing the re-
search. However, as presuppositions often arise as one does the research, an important emphasis lies on adhering to an attitude of openness and, as one becomes aware (usually through some kind of reflective process), of setting aside assumptions throughout the research study.

Issues such as validity and reliability are considered in a different manner in research studies following a phenomenological approach than in traditional scientific inquiry (Giorgi, 1989b; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The phenomenological framework emphasizes essential meaning, the sense of the empirical rather than facts. One is also dealing with structures and totalities rather than discrete units of data. In phenomenological research, no reality claim is being made and

... instead each reader of the research report becomes a critical evaluator of the researcher's essential intuition. ... Validity is considered to be a temporally unfolding process that possesses a certain quality that happens to an individual. (Giorgi, 1989a, p. 83–84)

Lincoln and Guba (1985), Giorgi (1989b) and Colaizzi (1978) also suggest that trustworthiness is established through the researcher's ability to present the research in a thorough and convincing manner and through demonstrating worthwhile results in terms of the original aims.

Description of the Participant

A single client's experience in art therapy was the basis of this research study. Purposive sampling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), where the researcher selects the best possible participant for the study, was used in the selection of a participant. Criteria that were considered essential for this study were: (a) that a client had participated in art therapy and experienced it as being therapeutic, (b) that the client be willing and able to articulate her or his experience in the form of descriptions and (c) that she or he had completed the art therapy program so as not to confuse either the therapeutic or the research process.

The subject of this study was a client who was not known previously to the researcher. The participant volunteered for the study. She had recently completed a structured time-limited art therapy group for women who had been sexually abused. Each art therapy group session consisted of a specific direction followed by the artmaking and then the looking at and discussing of the art object. The participant happened to have formal art training. Ethical considerations, such as obtaining written consent and protection of the participant, were followed and maintained.

Generation of the Data

The participant was interviewed in the presence of the artworks she had created in a 16-week art therapy group. The interviews were held in a site chosen by the participant. Thirteen artworks were viewed individually in the approximate order in which they were created to parallel the client's experience in the therapeutic context. There were a series of 5 interviews that were spaced to give the participant and the researcher time to assimilate the experience. During the interview process 2 or 3 artworks were viewed and discussed in audiotaped interviews of approximately one to two hours duration. The interviews were in-depth and unstructured with both the client and the researcher in the presence of the artwork. The interviews continued until the participant felt she had completed everything she wanted to say. The interviews initially began with the request that the participant describe her living experience of the artwork in art therapy, what she could recall and describe of the making of and looking at and discussing the artwork, the art therapist and group members. She was also asked to describe how she had experienced the artworks and art therapy in her day-to-day life. After each painting had been fully described, she was also asked to describe her experience of the painting now, at this time, in the research context. The researcher only interrupted the flow of dialogue to ask the client to clarify or elaborate on what she was saying. The participant was informed that the descriptions of her experience, rather than her interpretations or explanations, were sought.

In the interview phase, the client assumed the role of co-researcher (Colaizzi, 1978) in investigating and describing her experience. The researcher reviewed the audiotapes after each session and began each new session with particular questions from the previous session that needed clarification or elaboration. The researcher also returned to the participant at times during the data analysis to seek further descriptions of her experience. For example, the way the experience of making the art object had been interpreted by the
researcher felt stagnant; in obtaining further descriptions from the client of her experience some of the energy and movement was recaptured.

**Analysis of Data**

The method went through a series of transformative steps during the analysis of data. The phenomenological attitude was assumed by the researcher as she proceeded through the following methodological steps:

1. The audiotapes were transcribed verbatim by the researcher.
2. The written transcripts were read several times to get a sense of the whole.
3. Following Giorgi’s method (1975, 1989a, 1989c), the transcripts were read and noted in the form of meaning units every time a transformation in meaning occurred. These were placed in categories of what the client experienced and how the client experienced art therapy (through what activities or processes did she come to have this experience).
4. Procedures described by Wertz (1983) for reflecting on phenomenal descriptions were used to slow down and dwell with the data and to discover implicit and deeper meanings.
5. Each session of art therapy that the client described was drawn out in diagram form in order to get a sense of the movement and to see each session as a whole, captured on one page.

Through the above procedures the researcher familiarized herself with, and began to explore, the data for levels of meaning. Giorgi (in Von Eckartsberg, 1986) stated that many of the methodological procedures serve the main purpose of immersion in the data and not closing down on them too quickly. The inherent complexities contained in the art therapy process and the large amount of data made it difficult to grasp and integrate coherent meanings. Therefore, the researcher continued with the following methodological procedures.

6. The following structure, which appeared to be in harmony with the elements of her art therapy experience and with how the art therapy process would normally proceed, was imposed on the data. Descriptions were extracted from the transcripts of the client’s experience of: (a) the art therapist, (b) the making of the art object, (c) the looking at and discussing of the art object, (d) being in the world between art therapy sessions and for a few months following, (e) looking at and discussing the art object from this time. (This was done in order to illuminate the original experience of looking in art therapy and to give it a context of then and now.)
7. Colaizzi’s (1978) suggestion of extracting significant statements was used for each of the delimited areas above and these were then clustered into themes under each category.
8. Descriptions of the essential themes were written and rewritten, and organized and reorganized several times, always being mindful of the whole experience (by returning to the transcripts). In this way, the thematic statements were viewed as being constituents of the whole experience. The constituents were also organized into the structure of the experience (what the client experienced in art therapy) and the style of movement of the experience (how the client came to have the experience).
9. Statements of the thematic constituents with descriptions from the client as examples of a possible actualization of an essential characteristic were written for each delimited area of experience. A formulated structure was then written for: (a) the client’s experience of the art therapist, (b) the client’s experience of the making of the art object, (c) the looking at and discussing the art object and (d) the client’s experience from art therapy into the world.

The analysis of the data took place over an extended period of time. This was not a linear process, although it is presented in this way. The researcher continually returned to the original transcripts to ground her intuitions in the experience of the client. This is an example of intuition through tuition, learning from the data through a familiarization with the material in more than an intellectual sense. The essential structure and coherence emerged from the data and from within the researcher. The process could not be rushed or drawn to a quick intellectual conclusion. The essential structures and essences of a client’s experience in art therapy were co-constituted by the researcher and the descriptive experience of the client and they were presented in this way in the interpretation of the findings. As the decisions being made by the researcher are based on a systematic but intuitive
approach, they are said to be constituted by the researcher, and someone else may constitute them differently.

Findings

Although in the original study other aspects of the client’s experience in art therapy were explored, the findings presented here focus only on the artmaking phase. This is both for the sake of brevity and to present the reader with as full a description as possible. What the client experiences and how the experience occurs is presented first as a unified structure and then in a thematic and descriptive form. Quotes of the client’s verbal descriptions are supplied so the reader may get a sense of what the researcher’s intuitions of the essential characteristics are based on or how these experiences are actualized for the client.

A Client’s Experience of Making the Art Object in Art Therapy

The client’s experience of making the art object in art therapy was a complex and fluid process. The client intentionally worked at contacting and expressing aspects of her inner world. The work involved both the physical acts of looking at and making the art object and the mental and emotional processing that occurred with the creation of meaning.

The client let go of inner expectations and opened herself to what was before her, allowing herself to experience the colors, textures and images of the artmaking. The materials and activities of the making became analogues or media for expressing her feelings. They were transformed through meaning to aspects of self. This allowed the client to extend her being beyond her inner world, beyond her body to encompass the objects and activities of the artmaking. In the here and now, they assumed a parallel level of existence.

The meaning emerged and formed as she worked. This motivated and engaged her—she could make and mold meaning, aspects of self, through her activity. The meaning emerged and formed in various ways. The deepest experience for the client was the dialectic forming of meaning when she discovered the existence of the opposite to what she had intended. The meaning also formed in an interactive (dialogal) manner where one aspect informed another or in a synergetic manner where the meanings worked together and the combined meaning superseded the individual meanings.

Through these activities and processes the client had an intense emotional experience. She felt deeply connected with what she was doing. She felt vulnerable and exposed, as if she were undressing. She experienced the making as a temporal and spatial process. Certain points over time were more significant than others. She experienced the spaciousness of the process as the meaning expanded from being in her to encompass the activities, the materials and the art object. Through the meaning the client discovered experiences of other times, other places. There was a fusion of horizons between what was then and what was now, between what was her and what was the art object. The client experienced increasing awareness and understanding. There was excitement, a sense of discovery.

How the Experience Occurred

The client’s experience of making the art object in art therapy occurred through the volition/intention of the client, the physical activities of making, the process of expanding the field of meaning through analogues and by forming meaning.

1. Through her own volition the client attempted to contact and express her inner experience: visual images, expectations, conceptions, meanings, feelings. This implicit experience was the stuff of the making, the ground of experience that the materials and activities helped to make more explicit.

2. Through the physical activities involved in making the art object—mixing the paint, moving the brush through space and on space, forming the clay, stopping, sitting and looking—the client engaged with external objects and attempted to bring forth her inner experience.

3. Through the tacit and direct guidance of the therapist and seeing that lack of concern for artistic merit was encouraged and accepted by other group members, she gradually experienced a transition in her experience of making. The client let go “of conscious concerns” for accurate representation of her inner visual image; previous knowledge of the formal qualities of art; expectations about having a show, using canvas, and good paint; and other conceptions,
ideas and concerns for what other people might think of her and her painting.

4. The client became more open and accepting of what she was involved with in the experience of making the art object. "By accepting the materials, letting go of expectations and realizing I had to forget about everything..." Rather than trying to place her expectations on the objects of the artmaking, a seemingly one-way process that blocked the flow of her experiencing, there was an interactive or dialogal sense of movement and energy, a flowing in as well as a flowing out:

... just letting feelings and emotions come and responding to them on the paper—rather than before things would be coming and I would be concerned where to place them on the paper and how to make the colors work together and how to make the material do what I think it should be doing.

The client's field of experiencing expanded. There was a sense of her experience, her existence, moving out beyond her inner world to encompass what she was looking at and what she was doing with the materials, that she had extended herself in the world through these materials and activities and forms, a sense of her being in psyche rather than psyche being in her. The client called this process "getting into," as if she were entering into something with her whole being. She discovered analogues for types and levels of feeling and self in the qualities of the materials, such as texture, consistency and color, and the activities of making, such as mixing, painting and forming the image. When this occurred there was a change in her relationship with the art object and the materials: in experiencing the art object as an aesthetic object she viewed it as having needs and wants and qualities as an object apart from her:

It's like this empty space that didn't want to be black and it wanted something in there.

When the client began what the researcher will name an analogal process (a process of reasoning and experiencing from parallel cases), qualities of the artmaking and of herself appeared to intermingle—what was her and what was "it" became less clear:

I had a good feeling about myself and the good feeling needed to be yellow. It's not all that bad, it's not all black, red and blue, there has to be something positive in there.

These qualities of the paint or the activities of the making and image were elevated to a parallel level of existence with her; she could exist in them and they in her; she lived through them. As such, they could assume an intentionality that informed her:

I started to paint this form, I was very unconscious of painting anything, I was just putting the paint on and becoming aware of what it was doing and where I was putting all this stuff.

She watched and allowed the experience to unfold, to flow, through her eyes and body, through something other than her intellect:

I remember just allowing the process to happen and being watchful of it and just watching the process and not really understanding it as it was happening.

The process of analogal experiencing can be further illustrated as follows:

(a) "Getting into" the materials (colors and textures):

She put her inner previous experience with artist quality materials and disappointment about the poster paints behind her and opened herself to experiencing the qualities of the poster paint, the "smushing" and "luscious" texture of the paint. She liked it. The color and texture, "the colorful lusciousness" were analogues for the feelings of peace and harmony that were going into the safe space on the painting.

(b) "Getting into" the making (mixing the paint, the activity of painting, making or forming and responding to the image):

The activity of stabbing was an analogue for her feeling of anger and increased as the feeling increased:

... I was sitting there looking at it and it got real black and I got real angry and I just went with my brush right on the mid (front) of the face and then as I did that I was getting angrier
and angrier and pretty soon I was just stabbing the whole thing...

In the above example the analogical qualities assumed a symbolic form that included both the destructive feelings and the activity:

I had the impression as I was stabbing at this face that this face was like rotten and dead and just putrid and horrible and I felt like, when I was stabbing it, I didn’t feel like I was stabbing it with a knife, I felt like what I was doing was like a crow like pecking at it, tearing at it, making it bleed.

In making a particular clay piece (Figure 1) she let go of her concern for something “nice and smooth.” The activity of patching was an analogue for feelings of being wounded and repaired. She experienced the reality of this process as being part of her existence, as being who she was:

... as I kept working on it it wasn’t working out the way I wanted it to and I kept putting these pieces on it and at some point I gave up the idea of having this beautiful smooth piece and I realized what I was doing was patching up this shell, and I kept putting these patches on it and I thought ‘Well isn’t that appropriate’ that I kept doing that and that that’s what it was... part of me was all these patches, and then I sort of made a joke about how I kept having to patch all these things up and of how I was rather tattered and torn and needed to have all these patches.

5. As the client made the art object meaning emerged and formed. The meaning emerged in a manner that was:
(a) Dialectic. For example, in painting an image of herself and experiencing being critical, the antithetical meaning emerges (Figure 2):

... and it’s like me and my mother because this is my mother as well and my grandmother and all of them and then at some point I could really feel this other feeling... which was a feeling of almost nothingness, just very close to nothingness... It’s like being totally worthless, nothing.
(b) Interactive (Dialogal). For example, the meaning can inform the painting:

At the time of this painting I knew that I had a real physical need to have this height, and it was in order to actually make conscious choices about persons that were allowed into my space in regards to my safety, and so that's why I painted the stairs in there.

The making of the art object can communicate meaning:

. . . when I was making the model and she wouldn't stand up on her legs and I couldn't model them, I could not make the legs . . . and it just really said to me—I've got a problem with my legs.

Or, the looking at the art object, during the making of it, can inform the meaning:

And I went 'God, I don't believe it. Look at this woman. She's a tough, big woman, right?' I was amazed at how I put in these stripes there was like a muscle woman coming into form.

(c) Synergistic. The meanings work together and the combined meaning exceeds the sum of the individual meanings. For example:

I had felt very angry and it was a totally body kind of feeling it was in my body that I felt angry, in my heart in my whole body, in my stomach. And when I felt sad it was more like a mental thing. It was in my mind. It wasn't a thought, it wasn't that I thought that I was sad, I felt sad but it was like I remembered the sadness whereas I felt the anger but I remembered feeling sad and then I felt sad. And then the other thing was the green that was the humiliation and that was something that really came from nowhere, I felt really humiliated but I remembered the situation when it occurred, that this painting represented . . .

(At some point this can assume the form of a hermeneutic inquiry where understanding takes place where the meaning of the separate parts is determined by the global meaning of the context, i.e., of sexual abuse. Understanding appeared to close down the client's experiencing; she would place it in a context, contain it rather than watching, responding to the phenomena that appeared before her.)

What the Client Experienced

In making the art object in art therapy, the client experienced moving through time and space, a deep connection to the objects of the making, intense emotion and energy, being visible, increasing awareness, and being motivated to act.

1. The client experienced the making of the art object in art therapy as a temporal and spatial process. There was a sense of the spaciousness or fullness of the process, and also of things emerging in a point of significance, in Gestalt terms, a sense of figure and of ground. The temporal experience is illustrated by—

. . . somewhere along the line . . . at some point in the process I could really feel. . . .

—which implies the existence of other points in time. The “figure” would be the emerging meaning: “At some point in it I did know what I was painting because I realized. . . .” The spatial process occurred in the “ground” of experience in which the meaning arose and may have extended from being in her:

. . . the image I had seen was a very clear star, it wasn't drawn, it was just a clear star. . . .

—to being in the materials:

I really quite liked these stupid poster paints. They're really thick and there's something that I really liked about mixing that paint up and sort of like it was like shit and I was going to paint this face brown.

—to being in the making:

I was having trouble translating the image that I saw in my head onto the painting and it just didn't want to be translated. It just didn't want to be there.
By this time I realized that this (image) was me.

2. The client’s experience of making art was one of being or becoming connected, of contacting meaning in a significant way within that context at that time, yet going beyond it to connect with other times and space, such as—a living memory:

As I was painting . . . I could remember the feeling of being there as a little child and just being bewildered by all this confusion and cattle that were crying and there was always a lot of people around . . .

—a physical object (such as an art object):

I remember from the movement thing the feeling of power in my arms and somehow that also harkened back to the painting of the helper with the wings. . . .

—or a person from the past.

I was absolutely horrified when I finished the face and I just went ‘Oh my God this is my grandmother. What is she doing here?’

The client’s experience of making the art object in art therapy was not separate from self, there was an emotional connection:

It seems to me and that’s what I’ve also noticed with my paintings and that when you’re actually going through the art therapy process that you have this emotional connection and you’ve gone through this sequence and process and building up, the piece is so much bigger and the qualities of it are much more exaggerated than when you look at it later or pick it up later.

3. The client experienced feeling exposed, visible, as if she were undressing. She felt vulnerable, being part of an intensely personal process she did not want anybody to see. Yeah it feels exposing, it feels like exposure, yeah any art.

At the making stage she experienced irritation if the therapist watched her or came too close to her. Although initially she also experienced this when the therapist gave her direction, she also found it to be helpful to her in facilitating further self-exploration.

4. The client experienced the meaning as being in the making. The meaning was in the doing; this motivated the client to act:

. . . I knew that there was a reason why I wasn’t able to make these faces. I wanted to do it and to keep making things and I knew I had all these faceless things here that somehow it was important to try and get a face.

5. The client’s experience of artmaking in art therapy was dynamic. The client experienced meaning emerging and forming. There was energy and excitement in this, a sense of discovery and increasing awareness. She experienced not knowing and coming to know through the living process of making. An example of not knowing would be when she was painting or involved in the activity of making without consciously thinking or knowing what she was doing:

All of a sudden out of nowhere and for no reason I painted this other little scenario just painted this one, I never even thought about anything, I was just painting it.

The meaning arose as an intuitive impression, an apprehension through the senses:

I became aware that this was not a white bubble, that this was something else happening on this painting.

—and sometimes as a cognitive awareness:

I didn’t decide as I was putting the color on what it meant except for the green and I knew that when I was putting it on it meant my material needs.
What she experienced as she became aware varied: it was an experience of direct and clear contact with a feeling, an emotional reaction:

... it became very clear how it felt ... here was this incredible contact with this feeling of humiliation.

—a surprise:

... this was a surprise to me as was painting that little part a surprise to me.

—or an experience of apprehending, something coming into her possession:

I got this sort of image of this grin and these eyes and for some reason or another this time I recognized it as this particular uncle.

—or a gradual experience of increasing awareness:

I started to paint this form, I was very unconscious of painting anything I was just putting the paint on and becoming aware of what it was doing and where I was putting all this stuff.

Discussion of the Findings

How the Experience Occurred

In making the art object in art therapy, the client appeared to go through a transition from being preoccupied with her inner world to becoming engaged in the process of making. This research study illustrates the transition from inner experiencing to outer involvement, something usually discussed in theoretical terms. The findings indicate that this took place through letting go of conscious concerns, and opening herself to the materials, activities and objects of the artmaking through analogal processing. The client was able to relax her intellectual controls because of the value the art therapist placed on individual art expression and because of the emotional intensity of what she was involved in. She recalls it as a conscious decision to let go, however, and from that point on her experience of artmaking differed. She felt freer, not as critical of what she was doing or of what it would look like. This freedom from intellectual constraints was manifested in her artwork: that she did not feel obliged to fill the whole page with paint (every painting after this has some blank space on the page) and she could allow herself to do quick sketches or draw stick people.

On another level, the client appeared to open herself to experience other objects. The findings indicate that letting go of her inner expectations and being more open and accepting of what she was involved with allowed for an interactive sense of movement and energy. For example, the client responded to what she saw on the paper rather than continually trying to place her experience on the page. The client's field of experiencing expanded through an analogal process. An analogal process is understood by the researcher as a process where one medium or activity is used to express another in real time (there is no time delay); at any instant the one medium or activity explicitly or uniquely expresses the other. For example, if the emotion of anger increased in intensity, so would the analogal activity of stabbing the page, or the color brown would be similar either in amount or the type of brown to the quality or proportion of the “yucky” feeling. In an analogal process a parallel relationship exists between things that are otherwise entirely different. It was as though through this analogal process, the parallel relationships between the client and the art materials and activities, her inner world extended out beyond her intellect to encompass what she was involved with.

A significant finding in this research study is that the relationship exists for the client not only in the images in the artwork or the completed symbolic form, but also in the actual materials and activities that went into making them. The relationship takes place through the analogal process whereby the materials, activities and images assume a parallel level of existence with her emotional state; there is an energy flow between self and objects that is variable but parallel and similar in intensity or quality. The client experiences connection, contact and energy through this process. This finding would indicate that art therapists might consider personifying the discrete units of materials and activities that together make up the image and not just the image itself. Art therapists commonly encourage this kind of linking through such comments as “Let a color be a feeling,” but this research study illuminates the importance of this process through the descriptions of the client.

A phenomenology orientation (Betensky, 1987) mentions how through visual perception a client can move from preintentional experiencing, where there are vague stirrings one is barely aware of, to becom-
ing more aware and truly seeing what is there (having objects become meaningful) and assuming a fully intentional relationship with the object, implying a tension between subject and object, a dialogue and a mutual coexistence. It is interesting to note that, at various times in this participant’s experience in art therapy, the intention or the consciousness of the client appears to exist beyond her physical boundary in the objects of the making and the objects assume an intentionality that informs her. An example of this is when she puts the paint on and becomes aware of what it is doing, or where something seems to have come to be through a process of its own. Rubin (1984) mentioned how the creation of an object that is both of the self but not self is an experience unique to art therapy, but this experience is not yet well understood or articulated. The client’s experience and relationship with the art object in the making phase of art therapy is a potential area for further exploratory research.

The channelling and restructuring of drive energy through sublimation is viewed as a therapeutically valuable aspect of artmaking (Kramer, 1987). In this research study sublimation in the complete sense of the word may not have been achieved in many of the instances described by the client. The experience that comes closest to sublimation appears to be Figure 1 mentioned earlier. The client describes how after surrendering her wish for perfection she was able to experience the work of patching and repairing the shell-like aspect of a clay piece as being more accurate and true to who she was and what she needed. What appeared to be most significant to the client in this research was the meaning she uncovered and the experience and acceptance of an authentic self; in other words it allowed her to experience her existence in a fuller way. Although full sublimation may not occur, what seems to be helpful is for the client to remain open while artmaking as this creates possibilities for the appearance of new things and for forming and experiencing meaning.

Patterns to the formation of meaning appeared to emerge in the artmaking process. The structure of the appearance of meaning seemed to indicate different levels of experiencing in art therapy. For example, the client stated the interactive meanings, similar to a dialogue, were experienced as “more on the surface” than the dialectic that was “deeper.” The dialectical uncovering of meaning is a particularly interesting one for art therapy. A painting or sculpture is capable of containing visible conflicting or opposing elements in a stable structure, for example Figure 2 contains both the critic and the criticized. The client experienced and began to reconcile both aspects of this conflict while she was making the art object. If one considers a whole series of artworks as a structure, such as the series of artworks done in a complete art therapy process, one sees the emergence of dialectic meanings between artworks. For example, the client’s painting of a safe space was grey, uniformed and insubstantial in appearance; the client was barely visible. In experiencing this through making, seeing and reflecting on it, she discovered that “to be safe means not to exist.” This discovery amazed and angered her and motivated her to create the next painting—the opposite of the previous one—a lusciously colorful painting of a safe space where the client is clearly visible, yet also protected.

The meanings can also form synergistically where the combined meaning exceeds the sum of the individual meanings that work together to compose the meaning. There is an energetic quality to all of these formations; dialogue, dialectic and synergy involve such things as interaction, combination, reconciliation and integration. These movements and formations are all possibilities in the process of artmaking. How meaning forms, and the client’s experience of the creation of meaning, is an area worthy of further research in art therapy.

What the Client Experienced

What clients experience in the artmaking phase is rarely mentioned (Edwards, 1987; Rubin, 1984) except in terms of theories about creativity or in case study descriptions. The constituents revealed in this research study of what the client experienced as she participated in artmaking in art therapy were: temporality, spatiality, deep connection and contact, motivation, being visible and vulnerable, increasing awareness, and intense emotion and energy. What follows will elaborate on these experiences. The research attempted to capture the essence of what a client experiences in art therapy and the findings may appear nebulous or difficult to grasp hold of. However, this is perhaps in keeping with the phenomena as the making phase in art therapy is one of immersion and deep nonrational involvement.

The client experienced change while making the art objects through a process in which different experiences emerged at different points in time and space as she worked. The activity and the meaning that
arose from the process allowed her to contact and connect with other times, people, places and objects. This experience was not just an intellectual one, but one that she experienced with her whole being. She would re-experience something from the past as if she were there or be amazed to discover her grandmother had appeared before her. In this way boundaries between reality and illusion, and the past and present seem to become less clear.

Ulman (1987) mentioned that art therapists are aware that they can know in different ways that besides the logical, sequential and rational there is the intuitive, holistic and visual-spatial process, but how this is experienced by the client needs further exploration. This study attempts to discover and describe this experience at the level of the meaning that is lived by the client. The findings provide a sense of the movement and fullness of the process.

The amount of space between the art object and client is mentioned in art therapy literature. Rubin (1984) and Edwards (1987) mentioned the close perspective of the individual while immersed in artmaking and the effect that the distance between the art object and the client has on the client’s experience of it when the art object is put up on the board, separate and apart, to be looked at and discussed. Edwards (1987) stated that it is as if the dialogue or interaction is within the image in the artmaking phase of art therapy. The findings in this study indicate that the client frequently mentions getting into or entering into an experience or an aspect of the artmaking process similar to an experience of immersion by Rubin and the dialoguing within the image by Edwards above. By placing the object (an inner representation in the form of an art object) outside of the self the individual appears to be able to absorb and learn from it according to its own properties. This is similar to the phenomenology concept of intentionality where a tension and directional relationship exists between subject and object. It appears that the space between the object and the person who created it influences, or says something about, his or her relationship with it.

The findings indicate that the client’s experience of the spatiality and the fullness of the process evolved out of the emergence of meaning from within her to finding meaning outside of herself in the materials and objects of the artmaking. This concept of emerging meaning is discussed by Betensky (1987) from a phenomenology perspective. She mentions a gradual increase of intentionality of emotion in relation to the object and emphasizes the visual aspect of this experience. However, Betensky does not directly mention the spatial aspect to this experience, that the meaning begins to exist across space, beyond and through the client as these research findings illustrate.

The client’s experience of increasing awareness and dynamic energy in the making phase in art therapy seems to demonstrate that there is a field, a space between the art object and client where meaning arises, a spatiality from within her to outside of her. The findings illustrate that the getting or receiving of meaning is experienced in different ways, as a direct contact, a gradual process of increasing awareness or an apprehension, something that comes into her possession that she grasps (“I got”). Psychoanalytic theories mention the mental mechanisms of projection, introjection, displacement and identification: clients can project out onto the materials or art object; they apprehend or take things in as in introjection; they displace their energy and emotion onto other objects; they fuse and identify with the artwork. There is an implicit spatiality to these concepts that needs further exploration and explication in terms of the experience of clients in art therapy, but the findings do illustrate experiences in keeping with these analytic concepts. Increasing awareness is often the goal of art therapy. The findings indicate that increasing awareness is an ongoing, evolving and variable experience in art therapy.

The findings mention how the actual doing of the art therapy engages the client and encourages her to continue. This particular client did not get much sensual pleasure out of the art materials as she was used to artist quality materials. She also surrendered her wish for an aesthetic art product. What motivated her was the discovery of meaning and that the making of the art object could inform and influence the meaning.

An interesting aspect of the client’s experience of making the art object in art therapy is how exposed she feels, how visible and vulnerable; she doesn’t want anyone to see what she is doing. The client in this research study feels like this not only in art therapy, but in any artmaking process. Perhaps it is because she exists now beyond the boundary of herself. She exists in the materials and activities and images that she is involved in making; artist and artwork are one. There appears to be more of a consciousness of this existence in art therapy than in ordinary artmaking as materials, activities and images are invested with meaning. Rubin (1984) mentioned how one of the greatest abuses in art therapy is interference in this
stage. In this study the client experienced the therapist’s presence in the artmaking phase as an intrusion. It was only in retrospect that the therapist’s interventions were viewed by the client as helpful.

In summary, the findings illustrate an analogical process in art therapy that allows the client to expand her field of meaning beyond her physical boundary to encompass the activities and objects involved in artmaking. The client experiences temporality, spatiality, contact and connection, being visible, being motivated, energy and becoming aware while making the art object in art therapy. The findings indicate that a client’s experience in art therapy does have its own nature and essence and although there are similarities between theoretical interpretations of this experience, there are also subtle differences. This research conveys some of the movement and energy that occurs in a client’s experience of making the art object in art therapy.

Conclusion

The outline of this research study is an example of an indepth, extensive application of a phenomenological research approach in art therapy. The strength of this research approach lies in attempting to remain open to and describe art therapy phenomena as they emerge in the experience of the client. In keeping with this, the findings are not meant to be presented as facts or as the only truth about what art therapy is or how art therapy occurs. Rather they are the researcher’s constitution of this experience and are presented as an exploratory offering, as possibilities, to promote discussion along the path to understanding. Having an attitude of openness to possibilities is crucial at this stage of art therapy development. There is danger that imposing theoretical terms and concepts from other disciplines on art therapy phenomena will close down our ability to see and describe what is uniquely art therapy.

The importance of this research approach lies in the discovery of art therapy viewpoints, the location of art therapy from within itself so that it can interrelate with other disciplines in a meaningful way. Art therapy researchers have called for new research approaches and for research that respects the emergence of meaning and allows the phenomena to speak for themselves (McNiff, 1986). This type of research approach was experienced as validating and affirming of art therapy not only in an intellectual sense, but in a deeper way. It is very much like a creative process in which one has to grapple with an experience at various levels of one’s being in an attempt to contact and accurately express its essence.

References


