Art Therapy: Mechanisms of Change and Identity: A Heuristic Study

Kirsten O'Loughlin

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Art Therapy: Mechanisms of Change and Identity: A Heuristic Study

by Kirsten O’Loughlin, Bachelor of Fine Arts

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in the field of Art Therapy

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Graduate School
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ABSTRACT

ART THERAPY: MECHANISMS OF CHANGE AND IDENTITY: A HEURISTIC STUDY

by

KIRSTEN O’LOUGHLIN

Chairperson: Dr. Jayashree George, DA, ATR-BC, LMFT, SEP

The aim of this arts based heuristic study was to uncover emergent themes through an intensive immersion in clay work to deepen my own embodiment and understanding of my identity as an art therapist in training and artist. As I moved through the immersion process, I experienced several mechanisms of change often theorized as reasons why art therapy works. By experiencing these mechanisms of change on a personal level, I have strengthened my ability to understand how these mechanisms work and their potential effects on clients. This has led to a better understanding and acceptance of my identity and the state of liminality in which I often feel suspended. I strengthened my identity as an artist and art therapist and experienced unexpected evolutions in imagery that pointed to the inner workings of mechanisms of change.

Keywords: clay, embodiment, heuristic, identity, liminality, mechanisms of change
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

My first intimidating experience with clay was a day at my practicum when I wanted to try clay work with a student and had no idea where to start. I discussed this with my supervisor, and she said: “Just make a pinch pot!” Following her simple advice, I found a tutorial on YouTube and got to work, digging my fingers into a gray lump in a five-gallon bucket, repulsed by the squishy, cold, seemingly lifeless material that found its way under my fingernails. I followed the instructions in the video, first slamming the clay on the cloth covered table. I mashed and folded, gradually finding myself enjoying the physical action and the loud thump of the material. I then rolled it into a ball and felt it absorbing the warmth of my hands, taking on a new feeling. I realized I enjoyed the sensation now, feeling the response of the material as it began to take form. Following the instructions in the video, I successfully created a satisfying little pot.

Later that day, I introduced clay to the student. It was our third session together. Every time he came to the art room, he wanted to make slime. Clay was a logical segue: a tactile sensory material, but one that makes a lasting object, and has endless possibilities for creative expression. He seemed intrigued, and we worked together, each slamming our lifeless lump on the table. I showed him how to knead it, then roll it into a ball. He worked diligently, quietly; I could hear his breath slowing down and evening out. I showed him how to roll it between his hands, how to poke his thumb into the ball and start working it slowly from the inside to the outside, to make the walls of the pot. At one point, he said: “This is cool!” I was surprised. This student had asked to leave 15 minutes into our first 30-minute session. He had chosen to draw when I had given him several material options: colored pencils, crayons, paints, and model magic. He chose pencils and
began to draw. The drawing he created brought up memories that he did not want to discuss.

He finished his pinch pot in that session. A few weeks later, once it had gone through the first firing, I showed him how to glaze it. Another few weeks passed before the pot was fired again. I presented the bright red, shiny pot to him in his classroom. I had never seen him so excited, and he immediately decided he wanted to give it to his teacher.

What had happened? Had it helped him? Did it change him? I feel it changed me. I was so intrigued and could not let go of the questions that kept bubbling up. I started encouraging other students to experiment with this material that sometimes repulses and scares me with its three-dimensional amorphousness, waiting to be transformed. It is not a flat two-dimensional surface, a format I’ve grown so comfortable with in my more than 20 years of graphic design practice. It is not a complex user experience problem to solve, with wireframes and interactions and calls to action that can be measured by key performance indicators. My fear of clay is summed up by potter and art therapist Joshua Kin-Man Nan’s (2021) poetic description: “You can make the clay into anything…the process is somewhat like your life” (p. 68).

In my experience with this student, I was observing several therapeutic mechanisms of change in action — I was witnessing how art therapy works. In this instance it was the power of the material and the experience of making art in the context of our relationship. The clay specifically contributed to a deep mind-body connection for him. In the art experience there was distraction, creativity, play, and learning a new skill.

I have an intuition that clay is calling me, inviting me to deconstruct years of a life of cognitive training that contribute to my desire for a black and white world. David
Henley (2002) suggested that “emotions which have been repressed or inhibited often find expression through clay, as the deepest reaches of the psyche may be touched” (p. 55).

Clay invites us into our own bodies, via haptic perception, a primary mode of communication between our hands and our brain. Haptic is defined as “an inherently active and exploratory form of perception involving coordinated movement and an array of distinct sensory receptors in the skin” (Fulkerson, 2011, as cited in Elbrecht & Antcliff, 2014, p. 22). Haptic perception is more specific to the use of the touch of the hands as the means through which perception is experienced (Elbrecht & Antcliff, 2014). Touch is a complex and rich method of feedback from body to brain, one of the first of our sensations as we move from the womb to the world (Sholt & Gavron, 2006). It responds to pressure, vibration, temperature, and the sense of pain among other sensorimotor experiences (Nan, 2021).

Elbrecht and Antcliff (2014) pointed out that hands represent our bodies; they are “capable of finding solutions by connecting with the most ancient parts of the brain” (p. 26). Recent neurological research provides evidence that “the hand has been instrumental in shaping the human brain” (Wilson, 1998, as cited in Elbrecht & Antcliff, 2014, p. 19).

My sense of intimidation toward clay hinted that there was a missing piece in connection to myself. I realized that the emotional demands of the helping profession necessitate an embodiment of ourselves and in the case of art therapy we also need a deep understanding of the materials we use and what those materials may evoke in a client. Being able to connect with another’s bodily experience is crucial in a therapeutic context as language can be a barrier to fully understanding another’s experience. Clay challenged
my cognitive artistic expressions to which I generally succumb due to my deep training in
graphic design.

Research Question

Therefore, my research question was: can an experience with clay catalyze a
reshaping of my cognitively driven brain, which in turn, will contribute to a deeper
embodiment of myself as an artist and art therapist? Can this experience reveal a new
identity and integrate my various identities, building congruence?

Definition of Terms

Embodiment

To embody is “to give definite, tangible or visible form to; make concrete”
(Guralnik, 1984, p. 456). Embodiment is considered “a moment-to-moment process by
which human beings allow awareness to enhance the flow of thoughts, feelings,
sensations, and energies through our bodily selves” (Aposhyan, 2004, p. 52, as cited in
Sultan, 2017, p. 181)

Mechanisms of Change

There are several terms used in psychotherapy to describe why and how therapy
causes change. These terms include causes, moderators, mediators, factors and
mechanisms among others. Mechanisms of change specifically are “the basis for the
effect, i.e., the processes or events that are responsible for the change; the reasons why
change occurred or how change came about” (Kazdin, 2007, p. 3).

Identity

The notion of identity raises the question “who am I” or “who am I going to be”? According to Erikson the concept of identity encapsulates “one’s ability to maintain inner
sameness and continuity of one’s meaning for others” (Erikson, 1963, p. 89 as cited in
Pittman et al., 2011). It has also been defined as “an internal, self-constructed dynamic organization of drives, abilities, beliefs, and individual history” (Marcia, 1980, p. 159 as cited in Beaumont, 2018).

_Liminality_

Liminality is a state during which an individual feels in between identities, yet is neither one nor the other (Beaumont, 2018; Beech, 2011). During a state of liminality, one has an opportunity for identity to be reconstructed “in such a way that the new identity is meaningful for the individual and their community” (Beech, 2011, p. 287).
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The following is a review of clay work and clay artists, the concept of embodiment, identity and liminality as seen in Figure 1. Articles were identified using the following databases: APA Psych Info, Taylor & Francis, Google Scholar, Elsevier Science Direct, Ebsco Host Academic Search. Search terms used are seen in Table 1.

Figure 1

*Intersection*
### Table 1

**Search Terms**

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**The Experience of Clay**

Henley noted that, due to its earthy qualities, we are triggered by clay to manipulate, mold, and shape it (Brooke & Avetikova, 2008). Clay demands we remain in the moment and stay with our flow of experiencing (Nan, 2021). Nan et al. (2021) considered an interaction with clay a bodily-based affective experience which heightens our physical and emotional awareness due to the nature of the kinesthetic and sensory interactions the material demands. Although these methods may not end in a final product, “a creative moment can still take place via the principle of *isomorphism*, as an internal state is expressed and matched in a corresponding external experience (Cohen, 1983; Feldman, 1972, as cited in Hinz, 2009, p. 42). Jaroch (2008) described clay as being a medium through which one can “creatively practice facing the self…”[it]
facilitates the expansion of awareness, a process of transformation activated by the force of creativity, and the creation of new forms” (p. 6).

**Clay and the Brain**

Clay provides an opportunity for an integration of sensory processes by activating the neural pathways of the primary somatosensory cortex of the brain (Nan et al., 2021, p. 434). One could point to the activity of the thalamus and the amygdala. Our thalamus, often called the “sensation and action gateway between body and brain” (Carr, 2008, p. 48) is stimulated by sensory rich practices, especially ones in which we use our hands, with their dense sensory receptors. All our sensations, except for our olfactory senses, are initially routed through the thalamus, assembled there, then relayed to various processing sites (like the cerebral cortex) (Carr, 2008). A sensory rich experience helps emotionally and cognitively driven connections coordinate and reshape how the thalamic gateway controls our “affective awareness, attention, and consciousness” (Cozolino 2002; Schore, 1994, as cited in Carr, 2008, p. 48). Through frequent engagement via sensory rich experiences, these pathways and brain regions may be strengthened and re-tuned (Carr, 2008). One of the first respondents to the thalamus is the amygdala, our emotions gateway: “[The amygdala] reacts long before conscious awareness begins, between approximately 20 and 100 milliseconds after a stimulus” (Repa et al., 2001, as cited in Carr, 2008, p. 51).

In their art therapy relational neuroscience model (ATR-N), Haas-Cohen & Clyde Findlay (2015) integrated “relational neuroscience and interpersonal neurobiology with the practice of art therapy … The model postulates that novel sensory experiences, which occur during art making in the presence of an art therapist, can promote the emergence of an attuned, mindful, compassionate and integrated state of mind” (as cited in Czamanski-
Cohen, 2016, p. 63 – 64). Mindfulness is a powerful mechanism of change in that it promotes “experiential acceptance (and thus negate experiential avoidance) by showing how mental states, albeit painful at times, can be non-harming and transient if engaged in a non-judgmental attitude of curiosity” (Allen 2012, as cited in Koch, 2017, p. 67).

The Somatic and Kinesthetic Experience

Somatic and kinesthetic experiences are primal means through which we encounter the world. Because touch is the first mode of communication we learn as infants, “clay-work involves a very primal mode of expression” (Sholt, 2011, p. 67). Sholt (2011) pointed to the first internal working model of attachment, our pre-linguistic, unconscious primitive model developed during the first years of our life, as a reason why clay-work can potentially tap into memories and feelings. Jaroch (1973) declared that “The tactile contact that people experience with clay … is a lot like the nonverbal relationship people experience in utero, infancy, childhood, in fact whenever they touch. The skin and clay body are surfaces for projection of inner experience” (p. 2).

This sensory act of artmaking, regardless of the material utilized is recognized as a mechanism of change supported by sensory experience and body-mind connection, (Czamanski-Cohen & Weihs, 2016; Holmqvist et al., 2017; van Lith, 2015). Regarding the sensory-driven body-mind connection, Czamanski-Cohen & Weihs, (2016) pointed out:

The experience of touching and manipulating art materials activates sensory responses to pressure, vibration and temperature. The haptic sense helps an individual understand an object’s qualities such as its shape, weight and texture through sensations experienced in the joints and muscles while manipulating the object and moving the skin over it. The amygdala becomes activated through the
in pour of sensory information via the somatosensory primary cortex and thus this becomes an emotional experience as well, even before meaning is made (LeDoux, 2000; Lusebrink, 2004; Smith & Lane, 2015 as cited in Czamanski-Cohen & Weihs., 2016).

Clay raises our somatic awareness via the touch of the hands, providing instant feedback, bypassing our cognitive impulse (Elbrecht & Antcliff, 2014). “Touch awakens people to the external world and defines their internal spaces” (Jaroch, 2008, p. 1). Clay also requires “active participation and rhythmic movement of the body … during the clay work process, the kinesthetic sensation and rhythmic engagement of the body can stimulate a feeling of inner rhythm which can incite positive emotions and encourage self-exposure” (Kronholm et al., 2007, as cited in Nan et al., 2021, p. 433). This active participation of the body, and our attention to those experiences can “profoundly influence how consciousness arises” (Siegel, 2020, p. 61)

**Clay as a Metaphor or Reflection**

Franklin described art as a “cyclical progression of processes, not a linear, truncated, dualistic working method” (Franklin, 2012, p. 94). Franklin points to his own six-year journey of creating over 80 pots that culminated in a clay piece symbolizing the cancer he was diagnosed with at the age of 47. He shares the object and his own reaction:

…I was horrified by how this decaying, diseased form was confronting me. And yet, it summoned me closer. As I moved in, I was being instructed to open mindedly receive and respond to private aversions that I had avoided … the visual experience awakened understanding of hidden truths related to disease and death which is part of cancer (Franklin, 2012, p. 91).
Siziwe Sotewu, a Xhosa-speaking ceramic artist from South Africa, used clay to express and critique the long tradition of *Ukuthwalwa*, a Xhosa tradition of abducting women to marry them off into a chosen family. Sotewu took a self-reflective, narrative, and socially conscious approach to her work, using it as public commentary on life in South Africa. She was interested in raising disempowered voices through her art in an effort for those voices to become part of a political movement (Dase et al., 2007). She described her use of clay as a way to reference ceramicists of the past, to understand and reflect on aspects of a changing identity, and as a means of connecting to other South African and international clay artists. In her work, she showed the art product in combination with text commentary to help communicate about her cultural heritage and shifting identity (Dase et al., 2007).

Like Franklin, for her, the product is as important as the process—the purpose of her work is to expose the lived experience of women throughout history, and to describe their contemporary experiences in South Africa. She also used her artwork to discover her own perspectives and experiences. During her process of exploring *ukuthwalwa*, she conducted interviews with individuals in traditional contemporary marriages in East London and discovered that while they often begin in happiness they end in sadness. She contrasted this with *ukuthwalwa* unions beginning in sadness and sometimes ending in happiness. One of her final pieces in the *ukuthwalwa* series reflected her revelation of finding herself “… liberated from the need to unquestioningly succumb to patriarchal will as dictated by ancestors and my heritage” (Dase et al., 2007, p. 71). Through her clay work art process, Sotewu has discovered a means to embody her cultural heritage, her activism, and her personal connection to herself as an artist.
Metaphors are a conduit toward meaning making, another mechanism of change (Czamanski-Cohen & Weihs, 2016; Blomdahl et al., 2013; Koch, 2017). Objects often become symbols of non-verbal expression, ways in which we subconsciously process the unknown within. Czamanski-Cohen & Weihs (2016) pointed out “The use of lines, colors, shapes along with symbols and metaphors ease the access to preverbal material that may not be easily accessible through words”.

**Clay Processes**

Nan (2021) described the transformation of clay as a symbolic, alchemical process for our chances to make change. In a 1971 haptic experiment (Fischer, n.d.), blindfolded subjects were asked to describe a calcified shell with references to symbolic objects. Their descriptions grew into stories. Heinz Deuser observed how “The tactile sense opened up a unique dimension in which important events of one’s biography were remembered” (Fischer, n.d.). Both Nan (2021) and Henley (2002) touch on the metaphorical and symbolic processes of clay work, for themselves and in their therapeutic work. Nan (2021) described the transformational process of creating in clay as symbolic for the chances to make changes at any time in life.

Experimentation and making, both mechanisms of change, are fundamental processes of any creative endeavor during which one is transforming medium into product. Clay work, like any medium, requires exploration, experimentation and pleasure and play. These are also recognized as mechanisms of change in art therapy work (Czamanski-Cohen & Weihs, 2016; Holmqvist et al., 2017; van Lith, 2015).

Doing clay work with the intent to produce a final fired and glazed piece is a long exploration requiring painstaking patience, resilience, technique, and an ability to let go if something goes awry. Sotewu described her experiences in clay work: “In a sense, many
of the difficulties of working with clay, such as cracks, breakage, and disappointments after firing are like those of daily living, when one can never perfectly predict what happens” (Dase et al., 2007, p. 69). Nan described how the repetitive practices of clay art making contribute to understanding the meaning of errors in life and the possibilities those errors can expose. He poetically illustrated how “the trial-and-error process is like the firing test on the clay work that ultimately transcends the soul to become more resilient to the adversities in life” (Nan, 2021, p. 69). Henley (2002) discussed how clay offers us a means of understanding ourselves, as each stage of the work provides an element of struggle. Connection with one’s inner self and discovering new insights and understanding via meta-cognitive processes have been described as mechanisms of change (van Lith 2015; Czamanski-Cohen 2016).

An essential experience to the creation process is sharing it with others and understanding their experience of the work. Franklin (2012) argued that sharing the work with an audience is required for “an element of completion” (p. 94). It provides an opportunity for artists to incorporate critique and commentary back into their artwork.

Clay in Therapy

Sholt & Gavron (2006) reviewed 35 reports of clay-work in psychotherapy and identified six therapeutic mechanisms of change: facilitating emotional expression, facilitating catharsis, revealing unconscious material, facilitating deep expression, facilitating verbal communication, and concretization and symbolization. In addition, ritual artmaking has been noted as a mechanism of change (Koch, 2017; Gabel & Robb, 2017).

In regard to communication and emotional expression, Jørstad (1965) described using clay in an occupational therapy context primarily to re-socialize psychiatric
patients. However, he observed the joy and sense of achievement that accompanied clay forming. He described “many patients project some of their unconscious and partly conscious feelings and conflicts in clay and do so in a direct and convincing manner” (p. 492). He also wondered if the cathartic effect he was observing was in part “due to the fact that working with so primitive and original material as clay satisfies previously frustrated needs” (Jørstad, 1965, p. 494). When clay is used consistently in a therapeutic context there is a ritualistic component which provides structure and a reduction in anxiety.

The Clay Field® is a sensorimotor art therapy approach in which a rectangular box of non-gritty clay is presented to the client (Elbrecht & Antcliff, 2014). Therapists encourage clients to use their hands in any way they choose to manipulate the clay, observe the hand movements of the client carefully, and serve as a witness to the client’s experience (Elbrecht & Antcliff, 2014). Over time, Clay Field therapists observed that … there was a tendency in the hands to complete whatever unfolded in the clay field. The manifesto “Movement becomes Gestalt” was coined. Touching and being touched, movement and sensory perception merged in the Gestalt Process, the process of creating form…Every organismic unit develops in this manner. The creative process could from now on be related to the movement through which it had occurred (Fischer, n.d.).

How the hands interact with the clay demonstrates “somatic reality and biographical memory, felt sense and sensorimotor actions reflect the interaction between the internal and external life energy of the client (Elbrecht, 2012, as cited in Elbrecht & Antcliff, 2014, p. 24). Holmqvist & Weihs (2017) pointed out that “improved self-image included changes expressed as reduced self-criticism, more acceptance of oneself, the
ability to engage in self-irony, and the taking of oneself less seriously” (p. 49). Holmqvist & Weihs’ (2017) insights regarding more acceptance of oneself reflects mentalization, perspective taking and acceptance of emotion, which are all mechanisms of change.

**Embodiment**

Being “embodied” could be thought of as being more complete or achieving more wholeness and is noted as a mechanism of change (de Witte et al., 2021). Our development of consciousness and cultural practices such as art contribute to embodiment theories which postulate that the body is the center of our development (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, as cited in Koch, 2017). In the context of art embodiment has been described as “the body’s movements … which transforms feelings, thoughts, and behaviors of individuals and groups” (Gabel & Robb, 2017, p. 129).

Qualities of embodiment are described as “the simple sway of the breath, the gurgle of the belly, the feet on the ground” (Priestman & Totten, 2012, p. 41). Priestman and Totten also described embodiment as the way in which our speech culminates in “a complex modulation of the spontaneous and pleasurable breath. It has resonance, timbre, rhythm; it emerges from the chest … and belly, not just from throat and mouth; in fact, at its fullest it comes all the way from the feet” (2012, p. 38). Sultan (2016) suggested that the more aware we are of bodily experiences such as these, the more we can be present and even accepting of our experiences, becoming more embodied.

**Embodiment and the Body**

Fundamentally, embodiment as a phenomenological experience involves being in touch with what is happening within our bodies and processing our perceptions of those sensations. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, an early 20th century French philosopher deeply explored the concept of embodiment and the nature of perception. His philosophy
stressed the following: “(a) being human is an inherently physical experience, (b) our perception of the world is formed via information received through our bodies, and (c) all experience is embodied” (Sultan, 2017, p. 181). He stated: “It is through my body that I understand people” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 186, as cited in Shaw, 2004, p. 272).

Emotions are expressed through our bodies as they become feelings and sensations (Toombs, 2001).

Our perception of our bodily experience involves moving our attention within and around different regions of our bodies to develop an “experiential awareness” and “sense of “bodily cohesion” (Toombs, 2001, p. 255). This intentional awareness is something that can be practiced and tuned through mindfulness, a mechanism of change. Through this practice and attunement to our sensations we shine a light on our emotional world, connecting to ourselves through our bodies, and opening our relational awareness (Totten, 2011, as cited in Sultan, 2017; Toombs, 2001). Toombs (2011) pointed out that “one of the barriers to grasping the context of another’s bodily experience is the lack of experiential awareness of one’s own body” (p. 254).

Furthermore, the sensory experiences we use through our bodies as well as the mindful connections that occur during artmaking inform and promote factors that support deeper embodiment, a mechanism of change in itself. These change agents include sense of coherence, self-awareness, connection to inner self, increased insight and improved self-image (Blomdahl et al., 2013, Czamanski-Cohen & Weihs, 2016; Holmqvist et al., 2017; van Lith, 2015).
**Embodiment and Empathy**

Empathy is a fairly new word and concept. In 1909 experimental psychologist Edward Titchener coined the word, translating it from *Einfühlung*, a German term meaning “feeling oneself into the place of someone or something” (Burdett, 2011).

Franklin (2010) described *einfühlung* as instinctually feeling and intentionally projecting oneself within or into something outside oneself. This description suggests that the initial source of empathy is an instinctual feeling. Neuroscientists are in fact attempting “to prove that empathy is a product of evolved neural hard-wiring, or of hormonal effects on the brain, or of early environment and upbringing” (Burdett, 2011).

Human beings are neurologically hard-wired to connect, a concept put forth in Relational Cultural Therapy (Jordan, 2018), and empathy is necessary to connect with another person’s experience. Because we feel empathy in our bodies, one could argue that increasing our embodiment, (our awareness of what is happening in our bodies on a moment-to-moment basis), will deepen our ability to empathize with the experiences of another person (Sultan, 2017).

Being in touch with our emotions is essential to the ability to empathize with others. Smith & Lane (2015) proposed a framework that suggested interactions between neural systems are responsible for how we gain access to our emotions. They suggested a “process that is interoceptive (relating to stimuli that arise within the body) or somatosensory (information that is perceived through touch, pain, temperature and body position and muscle length and tension) which is then “translated” to have emotional meaning” (Smith & Lane, 2015, as cited in Czamanski-Cohen & Weihs, 2016, p. 64). In art therapy specifically engagement with materials “may allow for easier access to
emotional material than verbal communication alone” (Czamanski-Cohen & Weihs, 2016, p. 64).

**Empathy, embodiment and the present moment.** Mindfulness appears to be a way toward increasing our ability to empathize, a means of fine tuning our awareness of our bodies. Mindfulness helps to clear what Franklin (2010) called “cognitive debris” and, “offers a way to empathize with suffering by surrendering the need to reject suffering, thereby releasing inner forms of oppression” (p. 162). Siegel (2020) suggested that “learning to pay conscious attention to our own bodily experiences… can profoundly influence how consciousness arises” (p. 61). Practicing mindfulness is a way that helps us tap into our bodily sensations, and perhaps increases our ability to feel another’s emotions. Becoming aware of another’s emotions cannot be accessed through the senses like smell or taste; we must allow those emotions to enter ourselves (Franklin, 2010). One could say we more easily “embody” another’s emotions when we increase mindfulness of our own moment to moment awareness.

**Identity**

Identity has been conceptualized as a complex compilation of our psychological, physical, geographical, political, cultural, historical, and spiritual factors; it has also been described as a synthesis of our drives, abilities, beliefs and histories (Erikson, 1950 as cited in Conti, 2022; Beaumont, 2018; Parisian, 2015 as cited in Conti, 2022). Erikson discusses “ego identity” — a result of identity synthesis during which an individual develops a coherent picture of oneself regarding career, romantic preferences, religious ideology, and political preferences. A higher consistency of this picture leads to a stronger synthesis of one’s ego identity (Schwartz, 2001).
The formulation of identity as postulated by Erikson’s psychosocial development theory (1950) is one of eight stages of life. Each of the eight stages are opportunities for an individual to become competent in that area of life — if competence is achieved, a sense of mastery and ego strength will occur; if not achieved the person can be left with a sense of inadequacy (Conti, 2022, p. 11). There are four phases associated with the stage when an individual formulates his or her identity: diffusion, moratorium, foreclosure and achievement. In diffusion, an individual neither explores nor commits. Moratorium is a time of awareness of adulthood and the upcoming demands, while foreclosure indicates commitment without exploration. Achievement arises if identity exploration and commitment have been accomplished (Pittman et al., 2011).

Erikson (1950) postulated that a first iteration of identity formation occurs during adolescence, and if accomplished successfully the individual reaches identity achievement and subsequently mastery and ego strength. He acknowledged that although the identity process may begin in adolescence it is often not completed (Pittman et al., 2011) and pointed out that all individuals at any point in life can toggle between identity synthesis and identity confusion. Regardless of the point in life during which an individual may be toggling, to achieve healthy functioning, an individual must investigate knowledge of self (Schwartz, 2001).

Mechanisms of change that contribute to identity are self-awareness, self-acceptance, perspective taking, insight and a sense of coherence (Czamanski-Cohen & Weihs, 2016; Blomdahl et al., 2013; Holmqvist, 2017; van Lith, 2015). Van Lith (2015) pointed out “The more the participants practiced and engaged in art making, the more they gained a greater awareness of their own wisdom. Some saw their artworks as
reflections of inner knowledge captured in time; others saw their artworks as a process of piecing fragments of self-identity together to discover new ways forward” (p. 10).

**Identity and Liminality**

Liminality, a notion of being ‘betwixt and between’ two roles or identities, feeling that one is neither one thing nor another, was developed in social anthropology (Beaumont, 2018; Turner, 1967 as cited in Beech, 2011). Beech (2011) described that a liminal process begins with a triggering event. The liminal process is often ritualistic and conducted “in specific places for a specific period of time” (Beech, 2011, p. 287).

The liminal state is like Erikson’s idea of identity diffusion (1950), during which a person feels “unable to enact and maintain lasting commitments to life alternatives and lacking a clear sense of purpose and direction” (Conti, 2022, p.12); it contributes to a sense of being “mixed up”. Liminality is a state often experienced when an individual transitions from one stage of life, or state of being, to another. It has been described as occurring during rites of passage, when an individual has an “ambiguous non-status sense of self” (Beaumont, 2018, p. 63). As one moves through a state of liminality, self-exploration and self-reflection are critical for developing a coherent and healthy sense of identity — assimilation and adaptation of the results then contribute to the self-constructed identity (Schwartz, 2001, as cited in Conti, 2022, p. 3). Liminality is an opportunity to embrace the disruption of self, and to reconstruct one’s identity “in such a way that the new identity is meaningful for the individual and their community” (Beech, 2011, p. 287).

**Liminality and art making.** “Liminality may be partly described as a state of reflection” (Turner, 1967, p. 105 as cited in Beech, 2011, p. 290). During a state of liminality an individual has an opportunity to engage in identity work which is “characteristic of
people who are continuously engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising their identities with the goal of developing greater integration or cohesiveness” (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002, p. 626 as cited in Beaumont, 2018, p. 63). A demonstrated investment and an active search for alternatives are two key components in identity formation (Butterbaugh, 2020, p. 399).

Art making is a powerful and activating mechanism for identity work and being in a liminal state as it “can provide unique access to interior life — it becomes a conduit to intimate self-knowledge and knowledge of others, accessing meta-verbal ways of knowing that are particularly effective in evoking empathy and transformative understanding” (Chilton & Leavy, 2014, p. 407 as cited in Conti, 2022, p. 14). There are aspects of ourselves of which we are not consciously aware, sometimes these aspects are essential facets of our identity. Often unconscious, these facets represent “intrapsychic conflicts between the ego and the id and superego” (Erikson, 1974, 1980, as cited in Schwartz, 2009, p. 9). Through art making one can experience additional mechanisms of change that further a deeper sense of self.

McNiff (2011) pointed out that “using art as a means of psychological inquiry grew from practical experiences in therapy and education where the core premise was that artistic expression could further understanding and resolve difficulties in ways not accessible to spoken language” (p. 389). Engaging in identity work via art making during a state of liminality provides an opportunity to “juggle with the factors of existence” (Turner, 1967, p. 106, as cited in Beech, 2011, p. 290) in an experimental way that taps into what McNiff (1981) called “psychological research of the highest order”. Conti (2022) pointed out that “art can be a powerful meeting point as well as primary source of
identity in itself” (p. 15) while Rubin (2010) postulated that “art therapy is a fine avenue to the developmental task of identity formation” (p.175).

**Clay and Embodiment**

Can clay work increase an embodiment of our own being? Can we become more of who we want to be, or more of who we are as our natural beings, by immersing ourselves in a material that “…because of the earthy, grounding qualities…triggers an impulse…to manipulate it, to mold it and shape it, which in turn promotes spontaneous expression” (Henley, 1991 as cited in Brooke & Avetikova, 2008, p. 61)? Sotewu (Dose et al., 2007) declared “working with the softness of clay fills my heart with happiness” (p. 67) while Nan (2021) described “the sensory and plastic texture of clay helps create positive psychophysiological effects, such as raising body awareness, creating a mindful state” (p. 56).

Clay work by nature is a physical experience in which one must engage their full body. Toombs (2001) suggested that we have limited access to our “lived body from within” and we need proprioceptive and kinesthetic awareness to understand where our bodies are, to engage in connectedness with our bodies (p. 249). Clay work demands this kind of kinesthetic awareness as it requires using our whole bodies to engage with the material. Toombs also suggested that “one of the barriers to grasping the content of another’s bodily experience is the lack of experiential awareness of one’s own body” (Toombs, 2001, p. 254). Daniel Stern (1985) argued that “Language ... causes a split in the experience of the self. It ... moves relatedness onto the impersonal, abstract level intrinsic to language and away from the personal immediate level intrinsic to ... other domains of relatedness” (Stern, 1985 as cited in Totten, 2012, p. 37). Aside from language, ‘other domains of relatedness’ can include the awareness of another’s pacing of
speech, their breathing, posture, and micro expressions, all of which contribute to expression of their internal experience.

**Clay and Identity**

Simply engaging with any art material and process provides opportunities to inform and build our identity (Conti, 2022). Clay is uniquely positioned to provide “access to our inner life…accessing meta verbal ways of knowing that are particularly effective in evoking empathy and transformative understanding” (Chilton & Leavy, 2014, p. 407 as cited in Conti, 2022, p. 14) because of its sensory and kinesthetic qualities and the ways in which we must interact with it physically to create form. Because of the intense sensory materiality of clay, it likely impacts our brain in a way that stimulates our cerebral cortex via the thalamic gateway, which is connected to affective awareness (Carr, 2008). Carr (2008) also suggested that sensory rich experiences may contribute to retuning pathways in our brains.

While working with clay to make art, we have opportunities to enter states of reflection, which are invaluable and necessary for recreating and/or solidifying one’s identity. We reflect on what we’ve created, what it means to us and how to interpret the objects on a symbolic or narrative level. These symbols provide a path for metaphorical interpretation, and a way to better understand our inner voice and identity.

**Identity and Embodiment**

How do we come to fully embody our identity? One could argue that the more solid we are in our identities per Erikson’s ego identity concept (1968)— having a coherent picture of ourselves, and a strong synthesis — the more deeply we embody our identity. However, as we move through life, we encounter crises during which we have opportunities to reevaluate an already established identity and attempt to merge new
facets into our selves. We can embrace the crisis as a time during which we turn inward and confront ourselves or turn away and encounter possible identity diffusion. By embracing the crisis, we have a new opportunity to discover deeper embodiment as we move through transformation. That transformation can include changes in “consciousness itself, one’s thoughts, feelings, perceptions, assumptions, resistances, complexes, values, and motives. It involves not just a change in worldview, but a change in how one feels about the world and oneself, with a movement toward greater acceptance, compassion, and individuation” (Metzner, 2010 as cited in Beaumont, 2018, p. 63).

Traveling through a state of liminality offers us an opportunity to investigate ourselves and to seek a journey through which we may uncover the next phase of our identity. Reaching a destination and moving through a final ritual can bring that journey to a successful conclusion.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative heuristic self-study inquiry was best suited to this personal inquiry. Per Clark Moustakas, “The question is one that has been a personal challenge and puzzlement in the search to understand one’s self and the world in which one lives” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 15). A heuristic research protocol was best suited to this exploration, as it integrated a deep immersive experience, intensive self-reflection and creative synthesis. Maslow declared: “there is no substitute for experience, none at all. All the other paraphernalia of communication and of knowledge—words, labels, concepts, symbols, theories, formulas, sciences—all are useful only because people already knew them experientially” (1965, p. 45-46, as cited in Moustakas, 1990, p. 17).

An interpretive paradigm that investigates a subjective and phenomenological experience was applied (Leavy, 2017). Leavy pointed out that “we all act differently with different people, in different situations, and/or with different objects because of the meanings we attach/ascribe to them” (p. 129). In this case I investigated my experience with clay, and how I thought and felt about that experience, from the phenomenological lens.

Procedure

I followed the six phases of heuristic research as put forth by Moustakas: initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication, and creative synthesis. This project occurred over a period of fifteen months during which time I completed the initial engagement, immersion, and incubation throughout the Spring and Summer of 2022. Illumination and explication followed during Fall, 2022 and culminated in creative synthesis during Spring, 2023.
I began the initial engagement phase, which included experimenting with clay and journaling about my experiences to engage in a self-dialogue: “Self-dialogue is the critical beginning; the recognition that if one is going to be able to discover the constituents and qualities that make up an experience, one must begin with oneself” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 16). This crystallized my desire to follow the heuristic method. Completing the literature review was another step of the engagement phase.

For the immersion phase, I enrolled in an intensive ceramics course for a month in May 2022 and thoroughly documented my experience with voice recordings, photography, and video. I was able to “live the question…to live it and grow in knowledge and understanding of it” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 28).

During the incubation phase, I let the clay and my mind rest. I engaged with other media for artmaking, let go of the pressure to discover embodiment and moved back into my comfortable cognitive expression. I leaned on the description of discovery by Polanyi:

Our labors are spent as it were in an unsuccessful scramble among the rocks and in the gullies on the flanks of the hill and then when we would give up for a moment and settle down to tea we suddenly find ourselves transported to the top … by a process of spontaneous mental reorganization uncontrolled by conscious effort. (Polanyi, 1965, p. 34 as cited in Moustakas, 1990, p. 29)

In the Fall of 2022, I began the illumination phase—a search for an awakening, and an adding on to the knowledge I gathered (Moustakas, 1990). Discovering implicit meaning from the previous three phases was the goal and provided the content for the next phase: explication.
During explication, new information bubbled to the surface. Ideas about identity and liminality appeared and crystallized into my emergent theme. I discovered experiences with several mechanisms of change that are theorized as the reasons art therapy works. This phase was almost an extension or a revisiting of the immersion phase, as the researcher leans once again into “focusing, indwelling, self-searching, and self-disclosure” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 31). I transcribed my voice recordings and distilled them into a narrative about my experience including photos and stills from several stop motion videos. In the final phase, creative synthesis, I created a short film that illustrates the themes I have uncovered, experiences I had, and discoveries I made in this journey. I presented this synthesis during an oral defense.
CHAPTER III
RESULTS

By its nature, clay is fundamentally a sensory material. Simply holding it in one’s hands and molding it into a ball is a sensory, kinesthetic and haptic experience. Clay has a low barrier of entry from a materials perspective — it does not ask for meaning making, it does not require much skill to create a simple, satisfying object such as a pinch pot. Simply interacting with it induces a sense of pleasure and play.

The Somatic and Kinesthetic Experience

Embodiment and the Body

Throughout the immersion I was in a perpetual state of play. I experienced pleasure through the material, smoothing it, kneading it, letting it lead me at first, as I focused on the messiness and sensations communicating through my hands to my mind (see Figures 2 & 3). These sensations contributed to a state of mindfulness during which I became lost in what I was building. I have experienced these mindful states with other materials, but a unique flow state emerged with clay due to its physical and sensual nature. It requires immersing your hands and moving your body in a different way than paint, drawing materials or printmaking.
Flow states are often described in athletes as “a state of mind – achieved when athletes feel completely engaged in their performance, lose their perception of time, concentrate on the moment (without distraction or dilution)” (Del Vecchio, 2010). This flow state is a body mind connection.

While in this state of flow, I felt physically connected to the material and a sense of urgency to bring something so formless to life. My initial intimidation melted away and I felt as if I was having a conversation through my hands with the form that was emerging.

The sensory experience of working with clay also inspired physical movements which initiated feelings of urgency. This contributed to the flow state. The sensation of urgency kept pushing me forward as recorded in the transcriptions below:

May 13, 5:36 p.m.
… that sense of urgency was there today and wanting to just keep going. I was sad I had to leave. I would have stayed probably until … 8 o’clock … it’s definitely got teeth in me, which is a good feeling …

May 10, 4:55 p.m.
… I was able to turn it [distracted thinking] off today … and focus on this coil building stuff which I found extremely mesmerizing and completely engrossed where time disappeared … it’s been a while since that’s happened … four hours went by incredibly fast.

I wasn’t thinking while making — I was listening to the clay through my hands, experiencing haptic perception with the supple, responsive material. I realized the flow was contributing to a seductive body mind experience, as my mind responded to the sensation, then communicated to my hands to complete the movements.
Clay as a Metaphor, Reflection and Meaning Making

Once objects are created, they can become metaphorical, representative of moments in time and take on their own meaning. The first two pieces I created did not have the requirement of functionality. Due to the looseness of the assignment, I found myself pondering their meaning and metaphor more deeply than the functional objects. Primarily I needed them to mean something to me and was not concerned about how they may be perceived by others. This felt personal and powerful — I had a feeling of ownership and pride over what I had made purely by engaging in mindfulness. For the first time in a long while I didn’t care what anyone else thought about what I had made. I contribute this to my mindful consideration of what the objects meant to me.

As the forms evolved, and after they were glazed and fired, I engaged in meaning making. I began to wonder about their connections to my inner world. For example, while working on the first project, the instructor inquired “what is it?” (see Figures 4-7). This question induced a sense of glee (see transcribed recordings).

May 12, 9:38 AM

I really like … what happened with the pieces … and getting the best compliment I think I could have had … what is it? … I think [that] was indicative that I had stayed in my own space and did not get influenced by or feel pressure by making something functional. I just didn’t care if it could be used. I just wanted it to come
from somewhere natural.

The instructor’s question sat with me as I curiously wondered what these first two objects meant. It has taken a while to understand them. Their cavernous physical forms evoke natural places — a cavernous space in which I can feel safe and protected. They also represent those moments in time when I was first learning the material and remind me of the flow I experienced.

Many months after the immersion, while working at a hospital, I was working alongside a patient with clay and a face emerged. I had never sculpted a face — I had no intention in that moment. It simply happened. I began making more heads and faces, mostly grotesque in form. I was making meaning of and externalizing my experiences of witnessing trauma and illness. (See Figures 8-12).

Clay and Process

Any form of artmaking is an experience. Creating something from nothing is powerful and offers a sense of agency with materials, image and form. Experimentation and exploration both play a part, and mindfulness surfaces as we think about how we’re interacting with materials and wrangling them into a physical object.
I was in a highly experimental state during the first project as I had missed the first class and had not seen a demonstration. I felt free and that lack of direction allowed me to remain in a space of experimentation and exploration. In our second project we were instructed to compete 14 functional objects. Initially I felt an incredible sense of delight, as I latched onto the design inspired idea of creating a product. This was my comfort zone, and I was able to apply experimentation and exploration to a method that inspired confidence. However, I also felt disappointed as I fell back into a more black and white state of mind, leaning on my years of working in design as noted in the transcribed recordings:

**May 12, 5:31 p.m.**

…we did slab building today, and I really like coil building… it was much more intuitive … I just felt more emotionally connected to it … Slab building really turned on my cognitive design brain … [I am] sad. It’s different. It doesn’t feel like it … came out of me naturally. I … had to sketch things out and think about balance and form and … geometry … instead of it being just shaping and pinching and pulling and feeling the clay move in my hands much more easily and
shaping a thing out of nothing, instead of drawing a thing and then making a template and then putting it into a clay form.

I was mindful of this seduction back into design and a cognitive approach, and actively chose to return to working with the material in the more sensory manner I had used for the first project. I used my agency to redirect my process, and began experimenting with the material differently, applying cues from the first project to meet the requirements of the second project. I actively pushed myself into a more experimental zone which was more uncomfortable as I created a piece I really hated (See Figure 13 and transcribed recordings).

May 17, 9:27 a.m.

..I got so frustrated yesterday trying to make this fucking mug. It just doesn’t look right. And I know it doesn’t look right because I can see it from a design perspective. The proportions are weird and it’s just ugly. I don’t think it’s interesting at all.

Mindful of my distaste for my awkward mug, I continued to push myself into deeper
experimentation, worrying less about functionality and more about experimenting with other possibilities.

May 17, 9:27 a.m.

I’m … going to move away from that and not try to make something look perfect. Or highly crafted. It’s just not interesting. So in that sense, I’m actively disengaging my cognitive brain, this medium allows me to do that. I feel more of an integration now than I’ve felt with other mediums, that sort of release of cognitive energy versus perceptual, that sensory experience that I have been looking for.

I explored the clay in many ways, creating organic shapes and more architectural forms that are not functional (see Figures 14 - 17).

Clay in Therapy

The steady ritual of the class during the immersion reduced my anxiety about how I was going to get the work done. Although I was anxious about learning clay, I knew I was entering a structured environment with the support of an instructor. Additionally, after the first couple of classes I connected quickly with one of my fellow
classmates. They were incredibly supportive and showed me many techniques: how to use slip properly and how to pull a slab correctly. This contributed greatly to my confidence, and reduced my anxiety about working with clay which can become complex and frustrating when applying new techniques.

I was also greatly inspired by their work (see Figures 18-19) and some of the forms I created are a homage to their aesthetic sensibilities (see Figures 20-23).

May 17, 9:27 a.m.

...I’m really happy that Alisha is in this class because I think they are not just trying to make the perfect cup and get the glaze right and have something look really beautiful [that] you can’t … look at … and be like, oh, that’s so and so’s work … what Alisha’s making you absolutely know [it’s their work]. It’s coming from inside. Someone’s heart and soul versus something that’s just been copied from craft techniques for hundreds of years, which I also appreciate … it’s just not as interesting.
Embodiment and empathy

Embodiment, the moment-to-moment process of emotional awareness as we use our bodies, is enhanced during artmaking. Deep engagement with a material requires being aware of and moving our bodies, while creating evokes emotions that surface on a moment-to-moment basis.

In between the pleasure and play I experienced while actively working with the material, I had times of emotional outpouring during my drives to and from campus. The angst and anxiety I experienced during these moments led to a deeper connection with myself. Over time this connection has evolved into more self-directed empathy which influences deeper empathy toward others.

Identity

Being in touch with our inner self requires insight, self-awareness and mindfulness. Discovering and strengthening our identity is influenced by these mechanisms as well as self-discovery and, self-efficacy.

Throughout the immersive experience, I found myself wrestling with my cognition and my intuition. A strong cognitive approach was always required in my previous career and had become part of my identity as I moved in the world as a designer.
In my voice reflections I became mindful of this divide — I uncovered several insights as I worked through the class. I felt a different kind of intuition when I approached clay from a design-inspired lens, an intuition that was informed by my cognitively inspired design sensibility. This self-awareness led to my active decision to abandon my design approach and return to the more sensory experience I had uncovered during the first project as noted in several recorded transcriptions:

May 26, 9:44 a.m.

*I feel like for so many years, I was forcing things … getting that intuition back, trusting it and embracing it has been a big important discovery I’ve found … trusting the intuition … without looking at anything else.*

May 20, 5:43 p.m.

*I let it be enjoyable instead of thinking too hard about it and I just let things happen as they would.*

May 19, 8:45 a.m.

*I feel like I don’t want to think very much and that’s part of why I like clay … I don’t feel like I have to think very much when I’m doing it. It just kind of happens*
from somewhere else. I’m not thinking about how to make a thing. It just sort of comes ...

There’s a movement that happens with the physical touch experience and it’s different. There’s something there in the sensory application of how the hands move.

May 26, 9:44 a.m.

I just wanted to interact with it [clay] in a way that let it tell me what to… I wanted it to be more of a collaborative effort with the material and more of a dance.

By this time, I had more confidence about working with the material; I felt a sense of self-efficacy and easily transitioned to working with the clay in the way in which I wanted. I was in a state of self-discovery during which I realized I could internally direct my creative approach.

Throughout those three weeks, I was also wrestling with my relationship with my partner, as well as choices I have made in life. On my long drives to and from class I found myself emotional, confused, angry, and regretful about what I have or haven’t done in life. I contribute this angst and self-awareness to the time I was giving myself to focus on art making, and the
mindful decision I had made to approach the material in a more intuitive way. I was feeling more and thinking less, allowing myself to lean into the discomfort of not knowing what might happen. By pushing myself into an uncomfortable creative space with an unfamiliar medium, these distressing feelings were surfacing day after day. The structure and ritual of the experience provided me with a framework to examine and connect more deeply with my inner self.

Although nothing was resolved, I gained insight into the inner workings of my mind and have become more comfortable with the malcontent facets of myself that spill over from my creative compulsions into all areas of my life. I am accepting an undercurrent of a liminal state – I will always be searching for increased self-awareness, wanting to discover more about myself, and finding ways to feel confident.
DISCUSSION

I experienced several mechanisms of change throughout my immersion (see Table 2). The overarching mechanisms were artmaking, embodiment and a supportive relationship. As a result, I established a renewed connection with and acceptance of myself and the liminal state in which I often feel suspended. This has resulted in deeper embodiment and a greater sense of empathy toward myself and my identity.

Table 2

Mechanisms of Change

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Artmaking</th>
<th>Embodiment</th>
<th>Supportive Relationship</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sensory experience</td>
<td>Body-mind connection</td>
<td>Intersubjective belonging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-expression</td>
<td>Sense of coherence</td>
<td>Alliance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pleasure and play</td>
<td>Mentalization</td>
<td>Improved self-image</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimentation</td>
<td>Self-awareness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Body-mind connection</td>
<td>Self-discovery</td>
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<tr>
<td>Distraction</td>
<td>Connection to inner self</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ritual</td>
<td>Perspective taking</td>
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<tr>
<td>Belief in method</td>
<td>Acceptance of emotion</td>
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<tr>
<td>Making</td>
<td>Affect consciousness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>Increased insight</td>
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<tr>
<td>Flow</td>
<td>Improved self-image</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-expression</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sense of achievement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mastery</td>
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Reflecting on my initial fear of clay at the beginning of this journey, I am struck once again by Nan’s (2021) profound description, and how succinctly it illustrated my
experience: “You can make the clay into anything…the process is somewhat like your life” (p. 68). My process of “making the clay into anything” inspired angst, regret, rumination and illumination, reflecting various emotions that we endure throughout our lives. These emotions were heavily influenced by the sensory and kinesthetic nature of clay, interpersonal learning and ritual of the class. I discovered the therapeutic nature of working with clay as it involved an intensive amount of physical smoothing of the material with my hands, something I resonated with deeply and found incredibly soothing. Henley (2002) remarked on how the sensory experience of clay can reach “even the most disturbed individual” (p. 13), and that it is an “ideal process for absorbing strong emotions such as aggression” (p. 55). Hinz (2009) discussed how the healing facet of the sensory component on the Expressive Therapies Continuum is strongly experienced through the use of clay.

I uncovered a new confidence in my intuition as some of the work that evolved truly felt like reflections of my inner world. I connected with a trust in the creative process without a focus on product, and an ability to engage with myself on a deeper level. I began listening to the wounds within myself, not entirely without fear, but with a new understanding and attention. I overcame my fear of clay and discovered a deep resonance with the medium. I believe that engaging in immersion with clay, a highly sensory and kinesthetic material, brought my deepest fears and regrets more poignantly to the surface.

I also became more aware of the dichotomy of my cognition and intuition and how they influence one another and my art practice. By becoming mindful of this push and pull, I will better understand how this influences my interactions with clients.
My discoveries align with the literature regarding the therapeutic nature of artmaking in the context of a ritualistic and supportive environment and how these variables lead to change. Mechanisms of change are theorized as reasons why therapy works (Cuijpers, 2019; Kazdin, 2007; Petrick & Cronin, 2014; Wampold, 2001). The outcome of this study indicated that I experienced several mechanisms during an immersive artmaking experience. These findings show that mechanisms of change are present during artmaking (Holmqvist et al., 2017, van Lith, 2015) and in this instance the material itself as well as the ritual of the experience within a supportive environment were crucial catalysts for me (Henley, 2002; Hinz, 2009).

Because I have a background in art, even though I experience a certain amount of anxiety when I encounter a new medium and the unknown of creating a tangible form or image, I have confidence in my artmaking abilities regardless of material. I am comfortable and enjoy dedicating time to making art — for example in most artmaking encounters I experience a sense of pleasure and play (Czamanski-Cohen & Weils, 2015). The nature of this enjoyment contributed to the mechanisms of change I experienced during the immersion period. Additionally, I have a belief in the method of artmaking as a therapeutic experience which likely contributed to experiencing change (Holmqvist et al., 2017).

**Importance of Heuristic Research**

Arts based heuristic self-studies are a powerful mechanism to uncover a deeper understanding of ourselves and a way to further our embodiment as art therapists. They strengthen our identities as artists and provide an opportunity to become deeply familiar with materials and other methods of working. We are challenged to consider process and product, two essential components of the therapeutic modality of artmaking.
In two similar arts based heuristic studies, Conti (2022) and Arsenault (2009) described several mechanisms of change as they moved through art making and deep reflection. Conti (2022) reflected on how the heuristic approach magnified an internalization and immersion into the theme she was investigating and that the demands of this research “creates a strong connection between the participant-researcher and the theme itself” (p. 58). Conti (2022) described several mechanisms of change such as acceptance of self through self-awareness, mentalization, insight and mastery. Arsenault (2009) described mentalizing, increased insight and perspective taking, flow, connection to inner self, a sense of coherence and achievement. My heuristic research included many parallels with the mechanisms they experienced and furthered my appreciation for the importance of heuristic study. By moving through artmaking on such a deep level as therapists or therapists in training, we can better embody the depth of emotion our clients may experience. I resonate with Henley (2002): “As we ourselves struggle with material, technique and style, we develop a greater sense of empathy when our clients wage these same battles during their own therapy” (p. 25).

**Application to Field**

As for students, Beaumont (2018) proposed that “training in art therapy can prompt a liminal state” (p. 63). She acknowledged how much this state can provoke anxiety and uncertainty, while also providing an opportunity for “identity play” a means by which one can experience personal growth during a liminal experience (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016, as cited in Beaumont, 2018). She points out that her own identity play through art therapy training with its required studio artmaking “fostered greater self-understanding” (Beaumont, 2018, p. 63). In addition to the studio artmaking throughout
the program, my participation in an intensive studio art experience via a heuristic inquiry led me to a much deeper understanding of myself.

Investigating unfamiliar materials and the effects they have on us as art therapists through a deep self-study is a way we can empathize with our clients as they experiment with unfamiliar processes and materials. Part of our responsibility as art therapists is to broaden our material fluency. Materials are our medicine and understanding their effects is an ethical responsibility to our clients and to ourselves. By immersing myself in clay I uncovered a powerful material that allowed me to externalize pain that I have been internalizing in my current practicum. The ability to process our own response to the pain of our clients is also an ethical responsibility; that processing allows us to cleanse ourselves and be emotionally present in every interaction.

Limitations

The limits of this study included the time-bound nature of the incubation period due to the hard deadline imposed by the need for thesis completion. It’s possible the outcome of the incubation was pressured by the underlying realization that I was up against a deadline. When it comes to heuristic studies, credibility is ascertained by diligent self-observation and documentation throughout the process of inquiry. This is not a limitation but one of the strengths of the method. In future arts-based heuristic research, researchers should consider how to demonstrate the mechanisms by which art therapy and art making creates change. To push our field further, we must provide evidence that shows how art therapy works.

Conclusion

The personal nature of my experiences during an extensive artmaking immersion with clay activated mechanisms of change often cited as reasons that any therapeutic
modality creates change. My experience has informed how I will incorporate artmaking and choices of materials into my practice.
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