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Arts-Based Research in Cultural Mental Health

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Abstract

Arts can be employed as a powerful tool to elicit thinking and discussion (thus generating and gathering data), as well as a means to report and disseminate findings. The arts have been used for decades in research and practice and they are increasingly being used, also because of a counter-movement to the dominance of positivist epistemologies. However, health sciences continue to be reticent toward embracing the application of art in research. This has resulted in limited art use even in disciplines such as Psychiatry and Psychology, which could arguably benefit most from such practices.

During her presentation, Colucci illustrated the way in which arts, and photography and film in particular, can be implemented to (re)present a research experience by showing a short-documentary from her latest fieldwork in India. The short-documentary provided an insight into her journey through the spiritual life of an ashram and University in Haridwar (North India) where Colucci conducted research on spiritual well-being and suicide. Colucci argued in favour of a greater use of arts-based and creative tools in Cultural Mental Health research.

Arts-Based Research

The use of arts in therapy is something that we, as mental health scholars and practitioners, are more or less familiar with. Such use derived from the recognition - as argued, for instance, by Estrella and Forinash (2007) - that we have in the arts a tool that can break through, uncover, penetrate, and reveal, while at the same time support, sustain, and nourish.

While creative methods in therapy are now rather accepted, the same cannot be said for the use of arts in our research activities. However, “as we hold art forms at the center of our clinical practice, it follows that the arts can also be the foundation of our research method and lead us to new insights and understandings” (Austin & Forinash, 2005, p. 460). These authors have defined arts-based inquiry as a research method in which the arts play a primary role in any or all of the steps of the research process. Art forms such as poetry, music, visual art, drama and dance, they argued, are essential to the research process itself and central in formulating the research question, generating data, analysing data, and presenting the research results.

“Art is a mode of knowledge”, stated Seeley and Reason (2009). In fact, arts have been used for decades in research and practice partially, as Daykin (2009) underlined, out of a counter-movement to the dominance of positivist epistemologies. The story of arts-based research practices, wrote Leavy (2009), is one about:

(...) holistic approaches to research from the point of view of the knowledge-building process and the researcher who is able to merge an artist-scientist identity. The story began at the intersection of social justice movements, theoretical advances and paradigm expansion. But now is unfolding in new and exciting directions as the qualitative paradigm shifts and the formerly segregated roles of self, artist, researcher, and teacher are allowed to fuse. As borderlines and borderlands change and ever rupture, new spaces for arts-based inquiry emerge. (...) The merging of the world of the science with the world of art has caused a renegotiation of the scientific standards that traditionally guided social scientific research practice while also highlighting the points of convergence between these two formerly disparate worlds (p. 253).

In some ways arts-based research might have found its origin in, and still today is “fueled” by, an act of rebelling against structured, rigid, “objective”, deductive and nomothetic measurements of people’s feelings, behaviours, values and beliefs. This is a different way of doing research, of inquiring, of accessing the knowing,

where “different” means stepping out of the conventional approach to knowledge or, using Heron’s and Reason’s terminology, *conceptual knowing* (Colucci, 2009).

Art forms that have been used in research spread from drawing, painting and sculpture (e.g. Guillemin, 2004, Guillemin & Westall, 2009; Thorburn & Hibbard, 2009), poetry, narrative and ethnographic fiction (e.g. Davis and Ellis, 2009; Diversi, 2009; Furman, 2007), photography and film (e.g., Frith & Harcourt, 2007; Parr, 2007) to dance/movement and theatre (e.g. Bagley, 2008; Cancienne & Bagley, 2009) and music (Aldridge, 2009; Daykin, 2009). It is not unusual that more than one art form is used in the same project (see, for instance, drawing and narrative in Keeling & Nielson, 2005 and the “multimodal conversations” by Thorburn & Hibbard, 2009). In Foster (2007), the arts were employed throughout the research process: visual art, poetry and short-film making offered innovative and emotive methods of collecting data and of encouraging self-reflection in research participants while drama was used as a means of disseminating the results of the research to a wide and varied audience.

Some arts-based research methods have been associated with a distinctive discipline (for instance, visual methods in Anthropology), or have been integrated in well-established research methods, generating a new method of inquiry (see *Photovoice* in participatory research, e.g. Wang & Pies, 2004).

Arts in Mental Health Research

Although arts-based/visual methods have been widely used in Anthropology, their use has had very limited applications so far in disciplines related to Cultural Mental Health. More in general, health sciences are reticent towards embracing the arts in research, which as a result has seen limited use even in disciplines that deal with people’s mental and existential problems (and that perhaps most could benefit from them), such as Psychiatry and Psychology.

This is made evident by searching for peer-reviewed articles in Psychiatry or Psychology that applied arts-based inquiry as the main means of research. Only a handful of articles can, in fact, be found. If we look at photography (a means I am particularly interested in, as I will discuss later), for instance, Eedner and Andersson, Magnusson, and Lutzen (2009), recently carried out a study with the purpose to explore views of life among people with long-term mental illnesses. The study, based on an ethnographic framework, involved photographs and interviews. The idea underlying this approach was that the photographs would encourage the participants’ narrative reflexivity and narrative dialogue. The following is an extract from the authors’ recount of the methodology they opted for:

The participants’ possible cognitive inability to express such views dictated a research design that was both fit for purpose and respectful of their integrity.

The participants were the photographers, as well as the authors of their own narratives, and the photographs served as a starting point for the interviews (...). At their first meeting with the researcher, all the participants were given disposable cameras and asked if they would be interested in photographing objects, situations or people that were important, or meant something, to them. Each camera contained a film with 10 exposures. The participants were also guaranteed that the pictures would be kept confidential and not shown without their permission. By each participant’s second meeting with the researcher, the film had been developed. The pictures were the point of departure for a dialogue between the researcher and the participant. The participants were asked to describe what they thought about these pictures (p. 54-56).

As commented by the authors, this method provided a material expression of the individual’s unique perspective in the photograph. The combined data collection method, using photos as a starting point for the interview, was thought to enhance the potential for finding out the informants’ views of life.

Another recent study, again using photography, was carried out by Syson-Nibbs, Robinson, Cook and King (2009). This project aimed to improve the self-esteem and self-efficacy of participants. Photography and interviews were used by participants to record their feelings and experiences of farming and convey them to a wider audience. In the authors’ words:

Participants (n=100) acquired new skills and demonstrated increased self-confidence. (...) A photographic collection was produced and exhibited across the UK including the House of Commons. (...) Photography was successfully used to engage young people and enabled them to take their views to the heart of the government. Empowering young farmers may mitigate against future mental health problems in this vulnerable occupational group (p. 151-164).

A method based on photography that has received some degree of attention is *Photovoice*. This is a qualitative method of inquiry (community-based participatory research) that provides a forum for the presentation of participants' experiences through images, language, and contexts defined by the participants themselves (Streng et al., 2004).

In its most basic form, *Photovoice* refers to a research tool in which photographs, taken either by participants or researchers, are used as a means of understanding human experiences. As an ethnographic method of inquiry, *Photovoice* is a fairly recent technique that has been used successfully in a wide variety of research settings and populations (Fleming, Mahoney, Carlson & Engebretson, 2009). A great deal of work incorporating *Photovoice* has been done in the public health arena and collectively referred to as a participatory health promotion strategy (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001). Although a relatively new research method, *Photovoice* has already been proven to be a valuable asset for participatory inquiry (Wang, Morrel-Samuels, Hutchinson, Bell & Pestronk, 2004).

As argued by some scholars (e.g., Collier & Collier, 1999; Prosser, 1998; Rose, 2001), because a photograph exists as a universally understood visual medium, *Photovoice* as a participatory co-learning process is especially suited for culturally diverse populations, or those who are traditionally overlooked, such as individuals with mental illness (Fleming, 2009). Thus, it might be expected that at least this well-established method has found its application in disciplines related to Cultural Mental Health, such as (Trans/Cross) Cultural Psychiatry and Psychology. On the contrary, only a few exceptions can be found, such as the study by Fleming and collaborators (2009). The aim of this study was to explore the use of *Photovoice* as an innovative methodology for understanding aspects of the mental illness experience. An iconographic approach from Visual Anthropology was used to analyze the photographs. This approach systematically focuses the analysis from lower to higher levels of abstraction. The findings suggested that a *Photovoice* project offers a useful lens from which to examine experiences associated with living with mental illness (Fleming et al., 2009).

Although the presence of scientific literature on arts-based/visual inquiry in disciplines related to Cultural Mental Health is scarce, in the last few years I decided to investigate if this meant that scholars in these fields were not interested in such methods or, as I believed, if even those few scholars who did use arts in their work were not disclosing or publishing about it. Thus, in 2009, I organized a photo exhibition for the World Association of Cultural Psychiatry congress, which was held in Italy. I was aware of the passion for photography that two of my colleagues/friends shared with me, and we exposed three series' of photographs (a selection of these photos were shown during the presentation). One series of photos was from research on spiritual health by Dr Ikali Karvinen (Post-Doc researcher at the School of Public Health, University of Kuopio, Finland). Karvinen's doctoral research (2010) was carried out as focused ethnographic research in Kenya. The research data was collected with the methods of observing, interviewing and photographing. The data included over 800 photographs, taken by the researcher with the consent of the participants, and a small part of them was used in the data analysis and reporting of the findings. The basis of the photograph analysis was Suojanen's (2000) criteria of what a researcher should consider when collecting data of religious language and communication.

A second series of photos was from Dr. Hans Rohlof's (Psychiatrist, Centrum ,45, Oegstgeest, Netherlands) fieldwork in Morocco on traditional healing. A group of 20 psychologists and psychiatrists travelled to Morocco to study psychiatric symptomatology and mental health care. Hans used photography to document/report what he and his colleagues saw during this trip.

The third series of photographs were taken over the last few years during my research carried out in India on the cultural meanings of youth suicide and on spiritual well-being and suicide. A selection of these photos (which may be viewed at the web address <http://ermiphotoniac.weebly.com/>) were recently exposed in the solo

exhibition *Atman: The Soul of India* organized in a mainstream art gallery in Melbourne.

During the IACCP presentation, together with a few of these photos, I also showed extracts of a short-documentary that was recently projected in a public space. The synopsis of this short-documentary can be found in the box below.

Haridwar: A spiritual journey

Short-documentary

Length: 6' 16" Country: India Year: 2009

Filmed and co-edited by Erminia Colucci

Supported by Manjula O'Connor

In Hindi, Haridwar stands for Gateway to God. Situated at the foothills of the Himalayas, Haridwar is regarded as one of the seven holiest places in Hinduism. Every year millions of pilgrims and devotees make their way here and perform ritualistic bathing on the banks of the river Ganga. This is in fact the opening scene, which shows the essential elements of the Ganga Aarti in Haridwar's Har-ki-Pauri: the diya pack (composed of flowers, lamp and incense), the fire, the sacred waters of the river Ganga and the sound of bells. From here the scene moves to the ashram Shantikunj and the DSVV University, both inspirations of Gurudev (Pandit Shriram Sharma Acharya).

Shantikunj is the headquarters for All World Gayatri Pariwar, a spiritual organization located in Haridwar with more than twenty million devoted disciples and seventy million followers in 80 branches worldwide.

This short-documentary offers a glimpse into the life of this community and the rituals and activities that take place in this ashram: from the laboratories and Ayurvedic garden in the Brahmavarchas Research Institute to the treatments in the Psycho-spiritual clinic and the yagyopathy (sacrificial fire) offered in remote villages. This is believed to have preventive and curative properties on several ailments while resulting also in spiritual attainment.

The prime objective of the clinics and research centres is "to revive the golden era of Indian medical system, that is the Vedic medical science covering physical, mental and spiritual problems as compared to treatment of only physical body under the modern medical science" (from their flyer). Nevertheless, the approach of this organization is to offer complementary/spiritual therapy systems based on the thousands of years old Vedas in coordination with modern scientific tools and testing methods.

A selection of the images that appeared in the short-documentary and from the exhibition were also exposed as part of the Cross-cultural Psychology Photo exhibition I organized for IACCP: "(...) It is not unusual for cultural researchers to take photos of what they are seeing and experiencing. Aware of this common practice, for IACCP 2010 I would like to give conference attendees an opportunity to share with others their work (so to also increase the status of the use of visual media in research)", (from the handbook, p. 121).

I was impressed by the number of conference participants who accepted the invitation to contribute to the show and by the quality of their work: sets of photos span from an Indonesian study on children's wellbeing, to photos from a cross-cultural study on maternal socialization strategies with small infants in Cameroon and North-Germany, and from an Indian Parikrama (a circular pilgrimage around a holy and religious place). During the presentation, I showed some of the photos that were displayed as part of the IACCP Cross-cultural Psychology Photo exhibition and then moved on to the contribution made by Patricia Greenfield. This is what Greenfield (Distinguished Professor of Psychology at UCLA) wrote about the photos she submitted:

"These photographs were taken in connection with my longitudinal research project on social change and human development carried out in the Zinacantec Maya hamlet of Nabenchauk in the highlands of Chiapas, Mexico. The context in which learning and cognitive development were studied was the activity of weaving. Most of the photographs are part of the book *Weaving Generations Together: Evolving Creativity in the Maya of*

Chiapas. The photographs were taken for the National Geographic Society by my daughter, Lauren Greenfield, who has since become a highly acclaimed documentary photographer.”

I then introduced Lauren Greenfield’s work (named by American Photo as one of the 25 most influential photographers working today) on eating disorders. Descriptions of the project (e.g. the extracts below) and a number of educational resources, including an open-forum, can be found in her website (<http://www.lauren-greenfield.com/index.php?p=Y6QZZ990>):

“Her first feature-length documentary film, THIN, is accompanied by a photography book of the same name. In this unflinching and incisive study, Greenfield embarks on an emotional journey through a residential facility in Florida dedicated to the treatment of eating disorders. The feature-length documentary premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2006 and won several awards. THIN is also a travelling museum exhibition. (...)

The HBO documentary film focuses on four young women struggling with anorexia (...). The camera follows these women to places most have never ventured: one-on-one and group therapy sessions, emotionally wrought mealtimes, early morning weigh-ins, heated arguments with staff, and tense encounters with family members. In following their stories, we come to learn that each woman’s fight for recovery is unique. (...). What emerges is a portrait of an illness that is frustrating in its complexity and devastating in the pain it inflicts on its sufferers and those who care for them.

Unflinching and incisive, THIN offers an experiential and emotional journey through the world of eating disorders and, ultimately, provides a greater understanding of their complexity: that they are not simply about food or body image or self-esteem, but a tangle of personal, familial, cultural and mental health issues.”

Lauren and Patricia beautifully represent that collaboration and reciprocal influence between Cultural Psychologists/Psychiatrists and artists that I so strongly advocate. As a further example, I showed sections of the short-film “Understanding suicide through artists’ eyes” that come out of a collaboration between the Australian visual artist Mic Eales and myself. Mic and I have co-organized seminars and workshops to increase people’s understanding of suicide and suicidal feelings through the use of arts. Currently, we are organizing an exhibition to display his works as well as a collaboration between him and an Australian poet (Jessica) who also has struggled with suicide.

In the last part of the presentation, I indicated some of the benefits and the pitfalls of using arts-based and creative methods.

Pros and cons of arts-based methods

Several scholars have highlighted the benefits of arts-based inquiry. For instance, Estrella and Forinash (2007) observed that narrative and arts-based approaches to research have allowed us to explore the marginalized, controversial, and disruptive perspectives that have often been lost in more traditional research methodologies. They offer the possibility of disruption to the dominant discourses within theory and research. “Research is meant to be at the cornerstone of meaning making, validation, and searches for knowledge” (p. 377), the authors stated. Arts-based/visual methods can be a tool to engage participants in a more empowering research process (Close, 2007).

Foster (2007) also pointed out that the arts offer a way for researchers and research participants to examine their lived experience, to reflect creatively upon this, and to know themselves more deeply. In addition to these qualities, Foster asserted that “the arts can also guide an enriched writing of research and vivify the dissemination of results, stirring the audience’s imagination with the outcome (...) of effecting change on a variety of levels” (p. 361). Austin and Forinash (2005) argued that new perspectives, insights and understandings cannot always be translated into words. Daykin (2009) presented the implications of using music as an arts-based research method, highlighting several positives of arts-based research: this may assist in eliciting rich information and generates insight and understanding of complex, multifaceted issues).

Leavy (2009) listed a number of positives of arts-based methods, including the following:

1. The appeal of the arts extends beyond academia: the turn toward artistic forms of representation brings social [and health] research to broader audiences.

2. The arts can grab hold of people's attention in powerful ways, making lasting impressions. Arts is immediate.
3. The arts have the capability to evoke emotions, promote reflection, and transform the way that people think. Many scholars using arts-based practices are doing so with the intent of increasing a critical consciousness, promoting reflection, building empathetic connections, forming coalitions, challenging stereotypes, and fostering social action. Research conducted or presented via arts-based methods retains a transformational capability.
4. In addition to accessing and (re)presenting subjugated voices, these methods are well suited to projects in which the researcher is after multiple meanings: arts-based practices lend themselves to multiplicity (in contrast to positivist research) (pp. 255-256).

Several other advantages of using arts-based/visual methods can be indicated (which partially overlap with what I previously wrote on activity-oriented focus group questions in Colucci, 2007):

1. Might provide an alternative and better way to access meanings and systems of beliefs, people's views and opinions that might be otherwise inaccessible.
2. Challenge preconceived ideas more than any other method.
3. Build high levels of intimacy, empathy and mutual understanding with other human beings.
4. Make sensitive topics less threatening. Respect and involve people who do not use writing and reading as a primary means of communication or cannot use them at all. The use of nonverbal and/or oral answers makes it an ideal method for illiterate or lowly literate populations and potentially adequate across ages and languages.
5. Make participation in research a more enjoyable experience and avoid boredom (especially important with children and youth)
6. Increase the chance of participation of less confident people who are not at ease with direct questioning and of people who prefer "doing" or using their creativity.
7. Arts can reduce the 'distance' between researcher and researched.
8. Participants may keep their artworks, exchange them or these may be used to realize a public event/project such as an exhibition, non-academic book, and video.
9. Arts can make it easier to report the findings, because an image, a drawing, and so on might be able to convey in a more direct and straightforward way meanings that would require several words (thus the saying "a picture is worth a thousand words". These can also make reports more interesting (and less boring) to read.

Too often academic writing is detached from the "real" life of people. Too often academic writing is sterile, removed from stories, experiences, feelings: arts and creative means can make our writing closer to people, to the everyday of our lives. Karvinen (2010) also noted as in cultures like Luo-culture, arts can also facilitate the contact with local people because they are interested by the "western technologies". In other words, holding a camera per se might function as a way of finding volunteer self-selected participants!

As for any research method, there are some pitfalls worthy of consideration in arts-based/visual methods. First of all, using arts might increase the time and cost of the data collection. Some participants might have more difficulties in "doing" than "saying" or less confident people might refuse participation for fear of being unable to accomplish the artistic/creative task. Furthermore, while the employment of an arts-based method makes the data analysis a more interesting process, it is also true that it might be more difficult to compare answers and interpret them. This is especially so if the researcher does not or cannot invite participants to describe their artworks, provide more details, interpret them. There is a lack of scientific literature on such methods, especially on the use of these methods in cultural studies or in disciplines related to Cultural Mental Health. Thus, there is a lack of information on how to analyse data collected with these methods. Karvinen (2010), for instance, for his PhD dissertation had to adapt the analysis procedure used in other disciplines to medical science in order to evaluate the photographs he collected. Analysing and reporting using arts-based methods (or any activity-oriented research, see Colucci, 2007) can also be very time-consuming and requires the development of new skills. In regard to this last point, however, I would like to point out that Cultural

Psychologists/Psychiatrists could be mistaken if they distanced themselves from arts-based method because of the assumption that such methods are only for artistically skilled researchers/practitioners. I would recommend to these people to read the journey of Bagley, a “non-artistic ethnographer” (as he defines himself) who learned to “dance the data” with the help of a professional dancer (Cancienne & Bagley, 2009). Also, the collaborations I described above between Patricia and Lauren or Mic, Jessica and myself can be examples of how joining forces with artists can reach amazing results.

Conclusions

There is no doubt that arts, as a way of eliciting thinking and discussion (thus generating and gathering data) and/or to report/disseminate findings (i.e. arts as a way of knowing and showing in Foster’s, 2007, words), can be a powerful tool (Colucci, 2008). Cross/Trans-cultural research that ought to contribute to a clearer understanding of the ethnocultural dimensions of an understudied phenomenon (e.g. suicide), necessitates dissemination through a variety of formats in order to engage diverse audiences and publics. Arts and creative methods must be one of such formats.

I would like to conclude this paper with an invitation not just from me but many other scholars who -before me, in several ways and in diverse points in their careers- have decided to expose themselves, step out and start asking questions, to themselves and to others, differently. People who, embracing postmodernism, welcome the notions of ambiguity and contingency, and concepts of situated knowledge, contextualized, not-excluding/exclusive and self-indulgent “truths”. This paper is our invitation to students, researchers but also health and social sciences practitioners, to step out of the ‘comfort zone’ of tradition and convention and re-think our ways of inquiring, investigating and knowing: Re-think who is our audience and how can we reach a larger audience (i.e., greater impact of our research) and in a more powerful way!

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