CONTINUING BONDS THROUGH ART MAKING: A HEURISTIC EXPLORATION OF

THE LOSS OF AN ATTACHMENT FIGURE

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ABSTRACT

CONTINUING BONDS THROUGH ART MAKING: A HEURISTIC EXPLORATION OF

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This inquiry explored the experience of the researcher's bereavement of her mother. The aim was to see if the use of art could help sustain the existence of an inner relationship with the deceased. The theory of attachment and the continuing bonds bereavement theory were used to support this research. Looking at how involvement in creative art making might affect the connection with the attachment figure that passed away, the researcher engaged in a heuristic art-based research. This way of committing to cognitive, affective and visual spheres influenced personal reflections and art work. The process is described through the six phases of Moustakas's (1990) heuristic methodology. Data was collected in the form of paintings and journal notes. The researcher discusses the awareness and experiences that surfaced during and after the practice of art. The main theme that stood out was the illness that led to the loss. New insights and understandings embodied with painting revealed that the attachment style with the caregiver influences the continuing bonds post-death. Here, an avoidant attachment response with the deceased did not grant the art making to promote a continuing relationship with the mother that passed away. Nonetheless, this disillusionment allowed the researcher to integrate the reality of her loss. The findings confronted the author with her truth.

Key Terms: Art therapy, Attachment figure, Bereavement, Grief, Continuous bonds, Art practice

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Chapter 1. Introduction

I was just entering my teen years when my mother was diagnosed with polycythemia vera, a type of blood cancer that cause the bone marrow to increase the number of red blood cells. She had been given a life expectancy of nine years. I grew up with a mother whose time was running out. My mother passed away when I was in my twenties. This loss changed my identity forever and became part of who I am as a woman today. This missing attachment figure is now also influencing who I am as a mother. The process of bereavement continues to evolve and my self-awareness of it increased as I entered the master's program to become an art therapist. As a means of exploring the relation to a deceased mother I have selected heuristic arts-based methodology research. Through this inquiry I try to understand if art making can serve as a way to create a bond with the attachment figure whom I've lost.

Art has always been an activity I enjoyed doing as I grew up. My mother would fill the cubby with art materials, making sure I had easy access to them. She would encourage me and often join me in my drawings. In the month following her death I enrolled into photography classes. Art seemed to enable me to maintain an affective tie with my mother. Today, when I look back at this life changing event I realize it was traumatic for me. I was, therefore, very interested in how my creative production can manifest as an experience of that recorded reality. My purpose is to better understand what my artwork has to share about my bereavement experience and what my images have to reveal about the attachment to my mother. The research, based on attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982), is looking into the grieving approach of continuous bonds (Silverman et al., 1996). The intention being to better understand in what ways creativity allows an ongoing relationship with my deceased mother.

This paper will define bereavement and examine the continuing bond grieving model which refers to an inner relationship to the deceased (Stroebe et al., 2010). Following this,

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literature on the effectiveness of art therapy on the grieving process will be introduced to demonstrate how creativity can help one adapt to bereavement. The chosen methodology, which explores my own lived experience, will be described next. Art making and journaling will serve as the research data. The process of collecting notes and artworks as well as their analysis will be presented in a subsequent chapter. Finally this paper will discuss the findings on art making and continuing bonds with an attachment figure.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

The following literature review will present research on bereavement, the condition of having lost a significant loved one through death. It can bring up a complex set of emotions such as anger, sadness and distress but may also contain moments of joy and laughter (Berzoff, 2003). Overall, bereavement presents very unique responses for each person. The phenomenon's expression is broadly variable and must be considered in the context of an individual's personality, family, culture and relation to the deceased person (Hagman, 2001).

This paper will introduce research on the loss of an attachment figure. As a starting point, Bowlby's (1980) attachment theory will be reviewed. Then the attachment system will be explored through the separation with the caregiver—here, for the purpose of my research, the mother— and its consequences on the child. These theories will serve to explain some of the current bereavement approaches that have been inspired by the child-caregiver bond and its influence on the possibilities of adaptiveness, security and affect-regulation (Silverman et al., 1996; Stroebe et al., 2010). After losing an attachment figure, people frequently maintain a bond with the deceased (Clabburn et al., 2019)

Attachment Theory

Wallin's (2007) review of the attachment theory literature highlights the impact of early experiences on relationships and how attachments we create throughout our lives are

influenced by our very first relationships, such as a newborns' relationship with a mother or a caregiver. This primary attachment relationship is an indispensable concept and plays a critical role in the physical and mental development of the self (Wallin, 2007). A child's relationship with their mother or primary caregiver is necessary for survival and will influence all future attachments of the child (Parkes, 2006). Bowlby (1980) was one of the first researchers to investigate the relationship between the caregiver and the child, theorizing that the bond between the mother and infant acts as a significant organizer for the infant's psyche; it is crucial for the psychological and physical growth of the child. This process establishes deep and enduring connection between the mother and the baby and structures each component of the developing infant's life: emotionally, cognitively and behaviourally (Levy & Orlans, 2014).

The behavioural system motivates the child to seek proximity to their primary caregiver at times of threat; their primary caregivers can provide security from the exterior environment and model the ability to self-regulate (Harris, 2004). In attachment theory, the role played by the attachment figure in offering security is fundamental (Stern, 1985). Field et al. (2005) emphasized the importance of the availability of the caregiver in times of threat, need, and discomfort and stated that this availability is a major factor that will determine the child's state of safety or distress. When their attachment needs are met by their caregiver, children gain a sense of security and start building an identity with the feeling of self-worth (Levy & Orlans, 2014). This belief of being worthy of love and having the ability to trust others will provide children with internal working models of relationship and influence their future behaviours (Toof et al., 2020). The children use these early attachment experiences to create working models of relationships and to develop a secure base for real world explorations and learning (Field et al., 2005). In other words, primary relationships will provide

"psychological growth, integration, and the emergence of an internalized secured base" (Wallin, 2007, p.144). A consistent, accessible and responsive attachment figure will encourage a child's exploration and learning (Shear & Shair, 2005).

Attachment and Loss

Bowlby (1980) studied the influence of attachment style on stress reactions, including bereavement response. He associated mourning rising in moments of loss as a direct consequence to a child's degree of connection to his or her mother (Bowlby, 1980). Therefore, loss— as understood from a attached based psychodynamic stance— is a process that starts from the very beginning of life and continues until death (Racamier, 2016). Winnicott (1974) explains that the child, from birth, perceives the external reality as being part of the self and will experience early feelings of loss as they age, slowly separating from the mother and learning that she is not part of the self. This disillusionment and loss of the symbiotic state with the "love object" can be seen as the beginning of the early process of mourning (Griffin, 2001). Shear and Shair (2005) who reviewed the literature on attachment and loss insist that the behaviour and psychological functioning of the infant is profoundly impacted by the maternal separation. They found that bereavement produces several losses such as the loss of proximity and sense of comfort from the attachment figure as well as the loss of caregiving behaviors and satisfactions (Shear & Shair, 2005)

Melanie Klein (1984), a psychoanalyst who worked with children, whose work in object-relations theory was based on the interdependent mother-infant relationship. She hypothesized that the separation from the mother leads to a considerable shift in ego evolution (Klein, 1984). Klein (1984) further theorized that a child's growth brought loss as well as gain.. Klein (1984) affirmed that the separation from the "breast-object" (the mother) helps the child gain a separate existence, a feeling of identity and a sense of ego integration.

Therefore, the mourning process can be conceptualized as a re-enactment of "the early separation/individuation efforts as the mourner attempts to shift internal representations of self and other following the loss of the loved object" (Anson, 1994, p. 15).

Loss, Grief and Bereavement

Bowlby (1980) researched the ways that children who were deprived of their fundamental bond to their mother reacted to loss; he came to understand that the experience of grief was present throughout their attachment histories. According to Bowlby (1980), healthy mourning takes place when the grieving individual is able to reorganize their attachment behavior after the loss. Tidwell et al. (2020) also concluded that the bereavement process is highly linked to the attachment theory and influenced by the individual's attachment style. Silverman (2000) states that when a parent dies the child loses the typical way of living that was shared with the deceased, in addition to the self-investment that existed in the relationship. The mourner's ability to find new ways of living is then solicited (Silverman, 2020). The child's ways of making meaning of the death of their parent will be revisited many times over their lifetime (Silverman, 2000). Worden's (1996) work *Children and Grief* discusses how this type of loss transforms the essence of the child's life and how losing an attachment figure has tremendous outcome such as sadness, confusion, anger, withdrawal, denial and depression. This experience triggers grief. Grieving is seen as a process of resistance to the great disruption caused by such a separation (Bowlby, 1980; Weiss, 2001). Keenan (2014), who investigated the impact of parental loss in early adolescence, stated that bereavement during this developmental phase was very complicated since it already involved a separation from the parental figure. The loss of a parent, which can be one of the most stressful life events for many, can affect later psychological development when it occurs in adolescence (Keenan, 2014).

Grief can be seen as a lifelong dynamic process that does not end at a precise time (Keenan, 2014; Silverman, 2000). At different moments over the lifetime, such as anniversaries, births, and other meaningful events, the individual will revisit the meaning of the attachment figure's death (Edelman, 1994). Through the numerous stages and various period of life the loss will then be confronted in diverse ways (Silverman, 2000).

Bereavement

Christ (2010) raises the idea that bereaved children can show resilience and stress-related growth after losing a parent while also putting them at risk for adverse mental health outcomes. They state that this kind of loss contains the loss of the loved one, the loss of self-invested relationship, and the loss of part of the self (Christ, 2010). Shear and Shair (2005) define bereavement as the period of grief and mourning following this loss. The state of being deprived is the origin of the word bereavement (Attig, 2001). Bereavement generates loss of proximity, loss of sense of comfort from the attachment figure, loss of adequate bio-behavioral regulation and loss of fear regulation system (Shear & Shair, 2005). Stroebe et al. (2001) describe bereavement as the objective situation of having lost an important person. The emotional reaction to loss is grief (Corr, 2000). Weiss (2001) defines grief as the serious and prolonged pain caused by the "loss of an emotionally important figure" (p. 47). Subsequently, Bowlby (1980) explains that grief is not a private response to loss. Instead, it is an attempt of the bereaved to reinstate the connection with the lost object (Bowlby, 1980). In addition to feeling distressed, saddened and angered, the bereaved individual will experience cognitive, physical, behavioural, social and spiritual responses (Corr, 2000). Additionally, intensity in the grief reaction may be determined by the extent to which the parent was perceived by the child to be the child's major source of protection and security" (Shaver & Tancredy, 2001, p. 75).

Although grieving is generally painful and stressful, it can also be meaningful. Hagman (2001) states that "bereavement results in a crisis in the meanings by which a person's life is given structure and substance" (p. 25). Despite literature on bereavement exploring children's reactions to the death of a parent (e.g., Corr, 2000; Silverman, 2000; Worden, 1996), there is still insufficient research that looks specifically at the experiences of young people, such as adolescents to early adults (Brewer & Sparkes, 2011). This research draws on concepts from children's bereavement literature n to illustrate ways children may attempt to establish an ongoing relationship with the dead parent.

Research on attachment has contributed to deepening the understanding of bereavement by studying the influence of attachment style on the bereavement response (Baker, 2001; Shear & Shair, 2005; Tidwell et al., 2020). Schaeffer and Moos (2001) state that a predictor of the outcome of the bereavement process is the "kinship" relationship between the bereaved individual and the deceased which influences the bereavement adaptations. The severity of the loss may be directly connected to the nature of the relationship, wherein conflicted, ambivalent, or dependent relationships can contribute to more intense grief reactions (Schaeffer & Moos, 2001). Mourning, a fundamentally subjective process, can at times be a lengthy and painful process but a healthy part of bereavement can be when the individual adapts to the loss of a loved one by re-engaging with their daily life (Hagman, 2001; Attig, 2001).

Bereavement is an adaptive process because it restores the secured base that was lost with the death of the attachment figure (Field et al., 2005). Hagman (2001) defines mourning as "the transformation of the meanings and effects associated with one's relationship to the lost person the goal of which is to permit one's survival without the other" (p.22) and adds that there is also the experience of a continued relationship with the deceased. When a child

establishes an internal representation of the dead parent it allows the relationship to be continued and is considered as a positive aspect of the mourning process (Worden, 1996). Establishing a mental representation of the attachment relationship provides a connection with the attachment figure from whom the child is separated and can be activated as a component of coping (Shear & Shair, 2005).

Continuing Bonds

Silverman et al. (1996) developed the continuing bonds model which argues that people do not get over the experience of bereavement but are instead transformed. If a life ends with death, it does not have to be the same for the relationship. A continuing bond is the internal relationship that exists between the deceased and the bereaved individual (Stroebe and al., 2010). According to Worden (1996), the act of "letting go" of the deceased is no longer imperative since this "constructing process" (p. 27) suggests that the meaning of loss is revisited throughout the child's life experience. Furthermore, this model conceptualizes bereavement as a non linear process of transformation and adjustment (Clabburn et al., 2019).

The findings made by Yu et al. (2016) suggest that it can help the bereaved to make use of the deceased as a valued reference point in decision-making and continuous role model. This continuous bond may be well influenced by the relationship to the deceased and the "attachment theory provides a generic framework for understanding patterns of individual differences in the impact of continuing bonds" (Stroebe et al., 2010, p.259). In their research on continuing bonds in adaptation to bereavement, Stroebe et al. (2010) summarize that securely attached persons may well continue their bond to the deceased in an adaptive way and those with insecure styles would benefit to change the nature of their bond with the deceased to be more adaptive.

My investigation draws on this active grieving approach of continuing bond with the deceased as a way to access fond memories of a diseased attachment figure. Maintaining and continuing the psychological proximity with the deceased offers emotional comfort, felt security and warmth (Rochman, 2013). Children and adolescents may retain the bond with the dead by revisiting the collective memories of comfort and by identifying them as a role model and as a guide (Baker, 2001). Clabburn et al. (2019), in their systematic narrative review, investigate how bereaved young people continue bonds with deceased family members. They found that young people might maintain connection with the deceased by "internalizing characteristics of the deceased's values, beliefs, personality, and identity" (Clabburn et al., 2019, p. 11).

The internalized continuing bonds can be expressed in many different ways such as talking to the deceased, dreaming of the deceased or feeling the presence of the lost one (Hall, 2014). Tidwell et al.'s (2020) research on attachment security and continuing bonds state that these alternative bonds expressions "are based upon the notion that individuals regulate distress and seek to comfort themselves through activation of the attachment system" (p. 3). These continued bonds with a deceased parent can assist adolescents in giving meaning to their loss and therefore better adjust to their life without their attachment figure, achieving an effective bereavement (Hansen et al., 2016)

Art Therapy and Bereavement

Bereavement is a very personal experience that changes one's personality, emotions and social identity, as it influences one's worldview (Broadbent, 2013). It is conceptualized by some theorists as a transformative process where self-development, personal growth, and sense of self starts forming in the bereaved individual (Brennan, 2015; Broadbent, 2013). The symbolic connections with the deceased can promote psychological growth that can

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transform the mourner (Berzoff, 2003). Transformation of burdensome feelings into knowledge and wisdom can happen through the creative process (Fry, 2000). Brennan (2015) describes creativity as the predisposition for invention, innovation and the ability and inclination to create:

> Creativity serves here as a bridge, between a life dominated by the pain and suffering of loss, and the future possibilities by which these feelings can be used to provide the raw material that can be fashioned into something new, into something that can help sustain rather than destroy life. (p. 301)

The act of creating can allow the re-experience, resolving and integration of a conflict (Ulman, 2001). Creativity, by increasing self-consciousness, may broaden the ways of dealing with difficulties (McNiff, 2008). Brennan (2015) understands creativity as a pathway to reconstruct "meaning and ideas that served to transform existing reality" (p. 294). In *Art is a way of knowing,* the art therapist Pat Allen (1995) shares from her own experience how creating can provide a way to give the internal images an external form. The creativity gives inner imagination a pathway to explore the unconscious life and to understand its primordial importance (Jung, 1964). For the art therapy pioneer Edith Kramer, the creative process becomes a vehicle that allows the individual to widen the range of human experience by creating equivalent experiences (Ulman, 2001). According to Levy (2009), the art process provides space to investigate and offers new communication tools to inform the emotional condition of one's life.

Brennan's (2015) article surveys the literature on bereavement and creativity, explaining that grieving can be thought of as a creative activity to recreate an image of the lost loved one. Creative practice following bereavement can help enhance the mood and overall well being of the bereaved (Arnold, 2019). Creative art making may provide a safe

opportunity to delve into feelings that are difficult to express and facilitates nonverbal communication of the grieving experience (Bat-Or & Garti, 2019). Furthermore, Anson (1994) explains that "mourning requires a rearrangement of the internal representations to reflect a change in the external reality; creativity externalizes the internal representation of the world" (p.13). Working with personal symbols in the visual art product can help reveal desires, hopes, conflicts and emotions. Therefore, the art medium can serve as a witness of the grieving sorrows and can remind the bereaved of their relationship with the deceased (Fry, 2000).

Literature on art therapy and the loss of a parent tends to focus more on the child demographic; additional research would be needed to underline the particular challenges that adult children face with the loss of an attachment figure. Therefore, the findings of art therapy and child bereavement have guided the frame of my research. Art therapy can help ease children's apprehension of death, facilitate their desire to confront it and help them navigate through the grieving experiences of the death of a parent (Sossi, 2019). The use of creative therapy with grieving children may offer them a way to process their expression of grief (Fry, 2000). The art process can provide "relief from internal pain through an activity felt to be enlivening and reparative" (Abella, 2010, p. 168).

Bereaved children can channel their memories of shared places and moments and remember traits of the deceased and through drawing (Fry, 2001). This process can help support them with a sense of power and develop their self-esteem (Graham & Sontag, 2001). The artwork, created in art therapy, can help maintain, "the bond between these children and their deceased loved ones, thereby endowing a sense of safety and accessibility in the midst of foreign terrain" (Buser et al., 2006, p. 177). Weiskittle and Gramling's (2018) systematic review of twenty-seven studies of the use of visual art with grief demonstrated the

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effectiveness of using art therapy with the bereaved individuals, finding that art interventions facilitated their continued bond with the deceased. Art can allow mental transformation and growth, therefore promoting new ways to experience and understand reality (Abella, 2010, p. 177).

Today, different ways of considering the grief process are continuing to develop, allowing the experience of bereavement to be conceptualized less as a process of steps to follow (Hall, 2014; Lister, 2008). The nonlinear model of grieving, such as the continuing bond approach, can be applied in art therapy as a way to pursue the attachment with the deceased and deepen the understanding of the bereavement process (Brennan, 2015; Weiskittle & Gramling, 2018). The creative process in art therapy invites bereaved individuals to reorganize meaning and revisit the relationship with the lost one, which helps them alleviate negative grieving (Lister et al., 2008). In addition, artistic expression can help facilitate new growth in personal meaning and self-awareness in bereaved individuals that eventually leads to self-actualization and wellbeing (Brennan, 2015; Hinz, 2020). Art therapy's approach is instrumental as it guides grieving client towards externalization of feelings, emotions and facilitates self-exploration (Lister et al., 2008). However, research on bereavement and creativity still needs to be explored and studied: Arnold (2019) argues that there is a significant limitation in research focusing on bereaved art therapist; Weiskittle and Gramling (2018) states that existing literature on visual art modalities' effectiveness with bereaved individuals is scant and heterogeneous; Bat-Or et al. (2019) underline that the few empirical studies in the field of creative art therapies with bereaved clients have focused mostly on music and creative writing therapies while none have concentrate exclusively on art therapy effectiveness in encouraging bereavement adaptation; Brennan (2015) points out the lack of clinical studies exploring the relationship between complicated grief and

creativity. In addition, further research would need to address the gap in the literature surrounding the loss of an attachment figure and its challenges for a young adult. Particularly a need to increase the awareness of the experience of the loss of a mother is recommended.

Chapter 3: Methodology

When we use language, we make sense of our different life experiences and our words allow us to communicate our knowledge, thoughts, and hope. Image making, however, can also permit expression that do not need words or language and furthermore reveal our most intense, raw and complex feelings.

When facing bereavement, art "can serve as a powerful tool that allows the person facing death and trauma to work through the painful mourning that comes with the loss" (Dreifuss-Katan, 2016, p. 13). The use of art can serve as a way to release the intense emotions associated with grief and offers an alternative for the nonverbal experience of bereavement.

Rationale for Methodology

While reflecting on the research methodology, a few ideas emerged that led me to choose a heuristic art-based research.

First, my reading of *On not being able to paint* (Milner, 1957) came to mind. With her self-inquiry art-based method, Milner (1957) studied her own difficulties with painting in an attempt to explore factors that facilitated and inhibited her own creative process. Like her, I wanted to answer my question on bereavement through my own art creation experience, in order to recognize the fundamental purpose of art as contributing to a lasting representation of an internal experience (Milner, 1957). I was interested in looking into how losing a mother and going through the grieving process could engage a different state of creativity and how this creative state could incorporate the "capacity to bear loss" (Brenman-Pick, 2014, p. 13).

Would my creativity translate into an aspiring desire to soothe the feeling of emptiness and loneliness of being deprived of a mother?

Secondly, I was influenced by Pat Allen's (1995) *Art is a way of knowing,* where she records her exploration toward self-insight through imagery and art process. Allen (1995) shares her own story about losing her father, writes about knowing grief and reveals her artistic process that helped her cope with the loss. Like her, I wished to make contact with my feelings, intuition, and sense inner being: I wanted to welcome my images and the stories they brought into my life. It appealed to me to use the arts as way of caring for my loss (Allen, 1995).

Finally, Arnold's (2019) inquiry question "how might an art therapist navigate personal loss through their own expressions of art making?" (p.7) also influenced my research. I would examine the effect of art making on meaning making about loss. I wanted to investigate deeper the relationship between the professional and personal identity evolution for a bereaved therapist (Broadbent, 2013). I would use my own subjective experience to deepen the understanding of bereavement by addressing the following question: How can creative self-exploration foster a continuing bond with a deceased significant attachment figure, or specifically, mother? This inquiry would be explored using a heuristic, art-based methodology.

An Art-Based Heuristic Self-Inquiry Research Design

This research method uses exploration of the arts and creative process through a sustained self-inquiry in order to discover what my felt responses are to the loss of my mother. This process may help me in gaining personal knowledge of the bereavement of an attachment figure. The chosen methodology seemed well adapted to expand my awareness of this phenomenon, as my artworks would embody a symbolic representation of my grief. It

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would allow me to create new meanings and different ways of assimilating the bereavement experience. As Allen (1995) puts it "there is no way around grief, it doesn't go away on its own, or with time, I know I have to travel into it, and the only way I know how to do that is through the art process" (p. 130).

Moustakas' (1990) heuristic research method will help to structure the investigation in which artistic means will form the initial mode of collecting data. I will use my own lived experience to try to answer my question. The method can help me gain insight into the role of creating art and the relationship with the art work as a means of better understanding my bereavement process. This research might bring new development in personal meaning and self-awareness that could positively influence my future role as an art therapist. Although based on a single case study and centered on my personal experience, this research can be helpful for others as it might facilitate the understanding of mourning and perhaps aid in the development of art therapy interventions.

Heuristic Methodology

Heuristic inquiry is a qualitative method that studies the researcher's experiences. It is based on systematically studying one's subjective world and tacit knowledge (Moustakas, 1990). Furthermore, Moustakas (Moustakas, 1990, as cited in Sela-Smith, 2002) states that the researcher needs to practice a dialogue with the self and allow intuition to bridge the structures of tacit knowledge. To explore the phenomena of the bereavement of my mother, I will delve into my thoughts, my internal experience, with the aim to uncover new meanings. My involvement and participation with art media, art making and art work will support my inquiry. Investigating bereavement feelings and continuing bonds with my mother will emerge in an art response form.

Moustakas' Six Steps. I will be using Moustakas's six phases of heuristic inquiry to engage myself in an art-practice, with the only intention to discover what this subjective journey has to reveal (Sela-Smith, 2002). It is through my senses, perception, beliefs, judgements and sense of being that I will inquiry my own self (Kapitan, 2018). Following Moustakas' (1990) method described below, I will commit to intensely and continuously engage with my research question until new findings are revealed.

The method provides a step-by-step process that facilitates the opening of one's unconsciousness, the creative learning process, and a gain of knowledge. The first step is the initial engagement where I will be reflecting, engaging in personal awareness as well as in tacit knowledge and intuition. I will research through the literature what is relevant to the bereavement of an attachment figure and furthermore linking it to the context of art therapy. Keywords such as *mother*, *caregiver*, *loved one*, *attachment figure*, *parents* will be searched in relation with the words *bereavement*, *grief*, *mourning* and *loss*. I will be seeking those key concepts through Sofia, ProQuest, Psych INFO, PubMed and Google Scholar databases.

The following step, immersion, involves the process of indwelling where I will turn inward to surround myself to feelings of loss to convey significant association through art. Journaling will be used to support my findings. This step is where the data will be collected.

Data Collection Procedures

By observing intimately my own involvement, through art making and writing, I will establish a self-dialogue. I shall have regular art painting practice over a period of two weeks. Letters written by my mother and sent to me the year before she passed away will be used as prompts to engage in art response. The data will be collected through this routine of art exercise that will respond to the questions such as "how do I feel at this moment about having

lost my mother? How am I relating to her in this present time?". This process will include personal reflections made in the form of journaling.

I will be using acrylic paint and oil pastels for all my art works in order to develop an approach to painting that promotes the emergence of a personal practice. Acrylic paint has been described as a means of confronting the inside and the outside, the internal and external life, the imaginary and the reality with its possibilities of reliefs, forms and colors (Dubois, 2017). Furthermore, Hinz (2020) identifies acrylic and oil pastels as fluid materials that "encourage experimentation and are likely to elicit emotional responses" (p. 27). My goal is to undergo the experience of an original and authentic pictorial production on my research subject. With my inquiry question in mind, I will try to become aware of the importance of perception, imagination and invention in my practice of painting. By establishing these materials parameters, I would like to broaden and refine my knowledge of my bereavement experience in relation with the fundamental pictorial components—form, color, and space—so as to develop visual acuity and critical sense.

Carrying out this project, through which personal content is developed, I wish to become aware of the importance of painting as a reflective approach on bereavement. The development of a personal working method will serve as an introspective process to this topic of intimate interest. The study of my paintings' compositions will be initiated in relation to the intention I use to guide my work (McNiff, 2011). The series of art work and journaling process reflections will be the data used for the research. Documented thoughts will disclose my background, my reality, my art practice as well as my struggles and obstacles along the way.

During the step that follows, the incubation phase, I will put the question aside temporarily to allow the tacit knowledge to push the inquiry further in an unconscious way

(Kapitan, 2018). When the breakthrough into conscious awareness arrives, the illumination step will be launched. It is at this moment that new experiences, interpretations and meanings might emerge (Sela-Smith, 2002). The fifth step, is about communicating to others what was discovered (Kapitan, 2018). It is at this stage, in my research that I will revisit, gather, and reflect on all the produced data in order to analyze them and bring my attention to the rising themes.

Data Analysis Procedures

Supporting bereavement and art making Allen (1995) writes:

There is no way around grief, no waiting it out: it doesn't go away on its own, or with time. I know I have to travel into it, and the only way I know how to do that is through the art process. (p.130)

Pat Allen's (1995) witness process will be used to discuss the images in order to gain insight into the more tangible meaning produced by the imagery. According to this method, I will sit with my images and observe my work, recall my intention, describe my work in my journal and notice my memories and feelings as they rise (Allen, 1995). Time will be taken to contemplate my image in order to self-reflect on the art making and thought will be recorded in a journal. All this raw material will be grouped into identified main themes that will have shown up along the way in the art production and in the journaling process. The images will be put in relation to each other and the leading arguments will be brought to light through a psychodynamic lens. Reading my journal, I will identify pertinent statements and impressions that will be grouped and coded for objective features and semiotic analysis (Potash, 2019). The image will be looked at through space, symbolic and metaphorical content, material, and color used. The final step is the creative synthesis, which will offer a possibility to make

meaning of the whole heuristic process. This will take form when I create my synthesis and write my thesis.

Art-based Research

The use of art in research can serve as a way to explore the experiences that exist in this specific context of the loss of a mother. Feelings engendered by bereavement can defy comprehension and the experience can be unspeakable. Studying artistic media and processes allows the research question to be looked at through the perspective of pictorial language. The arts become both the object of investigation and the method of inquiry. Levy (2009) mentions that art-based practices are beneficial for studies that intend to describe, explore, or discover and it has the potential to raise consciousness. Images can provide metaphors and symbols that can lead the researcher to new insights and knowledge.

I will be exploring the phenomenon of the loss of a mother using my own experience entering a creative art process. Through this journey, I will be searching within my own art practice to grasp a deeper meaning of bereavement and its continuous bond. Art research can be understood as an "inquiry into how to experience and transform the unifying quality of a given experience in search of deepened meaning, enhanced freedom, and increase of connections and relations" (Johnson, 2010, p. 150).

Validity and Reliability

Since the methodology I chose for this research is based on my subjectivity, self-inquiry and direct experience there are some limitations in regard to the validity and reliability. The main risk lies in "the tendency toward self-immersion or solipsistic reflections on artworks that easily spiral into labyrinths of personal feelings" (Kapitan, 2018, p. 195). To avoid this the data will be gathered in a methodized approach that addresses subjective experience and the results will be "organized, integrated and presented in a manner that

seems convincing" (Carolan, 2011, p. 193). Since this research is based on my personal experience the question of validity is one of meaning and by my "constant appraisal of significance" (Moustakas, 1990, p.28) and "checking and judging" (Moustakas, 1990, p.28) I can "facilitate the process of achieving a valid depiction of the experience being investigated" (Moustakas, 1990, p.28).To further address the validation process, I take responsibility for the depiction of bereavement experience and continuous bonds, for their derived meanings and for their analysis into themes (Moustakas, 1990). Additionally, Kapitan (2008) states that the art-based research validity lies in obtaining a public critique in order to debate and to assess if the researcher objectives were met.

Ethical Considerations

This research is based on a personal subject that is being inquired; it will be important to examine my own bias of the bereavement phenomena. I will consider the limits of what I will personally disclose and stay aware of areas of exploration that may trigger difficult emotions and memories. To remain faithful to the experience Potash (2019) states that "there needs to be enough information for the results to be coherent and transparent, while also allowing researchers to determine how much they share personal experiences" (p.134). My potential vulnerability is a challenging consideration for which I will make sure to get personal therapy to help support throughout the step of the process while working with sensitive experiences. There is a need of awareness that art-based heuristic inquiry involves some risks such as emergence of distressing ideas, revisiting unpleasant experiences and revealing family histories (Potash, 2019). Another ethical point will be the dissemination of my project through an exhibition, being mindful about who the audience will be and how they might be affected by it.

Position of the Researcher

The term "bereavement" implicitly refers to a situation of losing someone significant and its expressions are highly subjective but also dependent of the cultural norm (Stroebe et al., 2001). For the research to be considered in context I shall be transparent about my own culture. I come from an upper-class French-Canadian household. I was sent to Catholic school for all my education. During my early childhood my family was practicing Catholicism. There was history of bereavement in my family and I personally faced grief at the age of ten with the loss of my aunt. I was 23 years old when I lost my mother to a long-term illness. She was sick for nine years and received treatment abroad. It has now been almost twenty years since she passed away. Back then I had initiated analytical therapy to help make sense of my experience.

Undertaking a heuristic art-based research requires from the researcher to embody several roles: artist, researcher, participant, adventurer, and witness (Potash, 2019). To this list of roles I will have to add *daughter* as I will wear that hat to delve into my research. Furthermore, I would have to integrate my role as a mother of four children and consider the impact of motherhood on my understanding of the mother and child attachment. And last it will be mandatory to be conscious about the roles of *student* and *art therapist intern* that will be solicited throughout my research.

Chapter 4: Data Collection and Analysis

My research investigation is set around Moustakas's six phases of heuristic inquiry. The procedure offered an "organized and systematic form for investigating human experiences in which the attention is focused inward on feeling responses of the researcher to the outward situation" (Sela-Smith, 2002, p. 59). I therefore engaged in an art-based activity for a period of three weeks to explore my own experience of the phenomenon.

Phase I: Initial Engagement

As I began to think about research, I examined my domain of interest in the field of art therapy. I had been at a practicum site for almost a year helping individuals with intellectual/developmental disabilities. Art provided them a way of expression and a way to experience themselves as capable. At that time, my art practice was mainly art responses. I remember how I try to contain in my drawings all the emotions that had come up in session for which grieving was often present: grieving to be understood, grieving family members; grieving the loss of sight, of mobility, of cognition. It brought me to think about my own relation with loss and to evaluate my coping mechanisms.

I had lost my mother two decades ago and since then I had been in contact with art through my own practice: photography and drawings as well as work in a museum. I had, however, never explored my creative process consciously considering my experience of bereavement. Furthermore, embarking in the Master's Art Therapy program had made me think of my mother's own return to school at the same age. She too was looking to acquire knowledge to help others by studying social work. I came to understand that there was a part of me that was identifying with her. As Field et al. (2005) argue, the representation of the deceased can become "an important role model and a valued part of the bereaved's autobiography" (p. 284). Overtime I had internalized some aspects of my mother's values and identity and I had found ways to connect with her. That process helped me through my grieving. "It is through identification with the lost object that aspects become part of the mourner's self. This is what makes mourning possible, bearable, and ultimately, potentially transformative" (Berzoff, 2003, p. 276).

Throughout my art therapy studies, I had thought a lot about the loss of my mother and how it had affected me. I often looked back at my life experience to understand how it

was shaping me as a future art therapist. In the few years after my mother passed away I had sought the support of a therapist. I embarked on analytic psychotherapy which involved art therapy from time to time. Discussing art during my therapy had allowed me to relinquish some of my defensive posture. This therapeutic engagement would help develop new boundaries of the self and offer tools to navigate the loss. With my research project, this loss would have a chance to be revisited through a heuristic inquiry. A process of my "intentional use of self-awareness to discover new, in-depth meaning about an intensely experienced phenomenon" (Kapitan, 2018, p. 192). The bereavement phenomenon, my tacit knowledge of it, would be explored through art making.

While reading about this subject I came across the continuing bond model developed by Silverman et al. (1996) that suggested that bereavement is a nonlinear process that mainly involves adaptation and change. As I had now become a mother myself, I wondered how the relation with my deceased mother might have evolved. I was interested in deepening my understanding of what art production can reveal to a motherless daughter. Motherhood and creativity had been compared in the literature, just as creation and procreation (Anzieu, 1996; Arnold, 2019). Creativity can be an aspiring desire to soothe the feeling of emptiness and loneliness that a girl deprived from her mother can feel (Edelman, 1996). I was curious to look into my art making to see if it would serve as a way to develop new and alternative bonds with my mother. I wanted to understand if losing a mother and going through grieving could engage a different state of creativity. The most confronting work would consist in staying with the painful subject

Phase II: Immersion

As described by Ogden (2000) "successful mourning centrally involves a demand that we make on ourselves to create something — whether it be a memory, a dream, a story, a

poem, a response to a poem — that begins to meet, to be equal to, the full complexity of our

relationship to what has been lost and to the experience of loss itself" (p. 65). During the

immersion period I would collect data by doing artwork and journaling.

Preparation

To enter the phase of immersion I gathered emails that my mother and I exchanged

the year before she passed away. At that time, I was working in Paris and we were writing to

each other almost every other day. When the day came that I had to leave to be by my

mother's side, I had printed all our correspondence. I had never read them since I had lost her.

While reading them during this part of the research process, I began recording my impression

in a journal. This was the starting point of living the research: "question in walking, sleeping,

and even dream state" (Moustakas, 1990, p.27). In fact, the journal was a place I could record

those dreams and thoughts that filled me. When words did not come easily, I expressed

myself through quick sketches of watercolors. I was becoming very sensitive and highly

emotional. The words 'figure of attachment' stuck with me and as I was investigating it

through the literature, I struggled with heavy heartburns. These bodily sensations were

familiar since I had experienced them in the early weeks of my bereavement. Here I was

experiencing again the powerful emotions and physical reactions of grief. I therefore solicited

support from my therapist to look into this somatization.

During the early immersion phase I also played piano again. I came from a family

where music was very present and was introduced to the instrument at a young age but had

stopped and never learned another piano piece until now. I chose Beethoven's Piano Sonata

No.14 known as the Moonlight Sonata. Before starting to play it, I listened to many

interpretations and was fascinated by how the pianists expressed their own emotions,

translating and using their own insights to their interpretation of the piece. It made me realize

I could use the intermingled emotions I was having about the bereavement of my mother to practice piano. It became a daily routine that would soothe and comfort me as I lost track of time. Music serves as a "healing companion throughout the journey …relieving anxiety reinforcing feelings of identity and self-concept, and promoting relaxation while providing both a source of comfort and an opportunity for self-expression" (Burgess, 2007, p.101). Furthermore, it helped connect me with memories. A few years before my mother died, I had offered her a song compilation and went back to it. I played in loop the song "Everybody hurts" and all the lyrics awaked my pain.

> *When your day is long*
>
> *And the night, the night is yours alone*
>
> *When you're sure you've had enough*
>
> *Of this life, well hang on*

- R.E.M. (1992)

Listening to music allowed the bereavement to be experienced without any precise thoughts or words and often brought tears. As Forsyth (1999) described it "a musical experienced shared with a loved one enters the history of a relationship" and songs "that remind us of a lost love can bring a vivid awareness of that loss" (p. 267).

Setting up

All the sources of immersion served me as prompts to enter the creative mode. My journaling process enabled me to keep track of my emotional awareness. As I slowly move into the process of creating my data, I first started by setting up the room where I would work. I brought out all my art material, added curtains for privacy and covered my work surface. That way, I would be able to freely work without thinking too much about the mess I would make. In addition, I hung on the walls all the images I spontaneously had created since

I started my research project. Those would help me to welcome my imagination, slowly

holding off judgement and opening myself to the capacity of being in uncertainties and

doubts (McNiff, 1998).

Creating

I had planned to work with acrylic and oil pastels. Then, a staggering synchronicity

occurred: I was gathering my oil pastels and came across a set my mother had given to me as

a child. I had kept them all that time and was about to use them to create my data. I was about

to use my mother's heirloom to uncover repressed material. That made me think how close

she still was, especially now that I was questioning myself about her lost.

My work would start by applying gesso to the paper and once dried I would use a

roller to cover the surface with acrylic. That was beneficial as these both kinesthetic art

experience released tensions and allowed afterwards my "imagery to flow more

freely" (Hinz, 2020, p. 42). The way the creative process unfolded itself was in two parts,

spread over two days. The acrylic paint, mostly applied with a spatula, would be the first

step. I would live with the painting until the following day where I would work on the dry

surface with oil pastels, working with my fingers. This sensory-based experience would help

to bring my attention to the present moment and focus on the feeling of the sensation keeping

me away from controlling the outcome of the image. Therefore, this tactile interaction would

be helpful leading me to "the realization of an internal state or emotion" (Hinz, 2020, p. 63).

Phase III: Incubation

The immersion phase had been more difficult than I anticipated. Creating art works

with the focus on my loss was a roller coaster of emotions from anguish and pain to pride and

satisfaction. My head and body warmly welcomed the incubation phase where I would retreat

from this intense sustained attention on my research question. This period allowed me to

breathe and sleep better. It made me realized how my subject had absorbed me completely. I found myself being available again for my children. Grounded in my family life and enjoying activities without thinking of the work helped me to recharge and appreciate what I had built.

At the same time, I started taking a summer class: Introduction to Dance and Movement Therapy. It felt good to focus on the body, to free the mind and to trust the wisdom of the movement. As McNiff (2015) stated "movement is subtle as well as overt. It incorporates elements of stillness, quiet and reflection — but in keeping with nature of any living thing, kinesis is ongoing, even if unseen" (p. 32). This paralleled the incubation phase where I had taken a pause from the expressive effort but nonetheless would provide me with a "creative awareness" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 26).

Phase IV: Illumination

Mother's Day came and a family gathering at the park took place for a picnic. That evening I felt sick and was left the following day with an upset stomach, stuck in bed. I saw my children worry and that stayed with me. As I was thinking that I really needed to lay down those thoughts on motherhood by journaling, I started questioning myself on my own perception of my mother's sickness. This is when the illumination came. All this time I was focusing on my bereavement experience, I was evaluating the continuous bond with my deceased mother but her illness was not taken into account. She had been sick for nine years and there never had been real serious discussion at home about it. Now I knew that this time around I wouldn't be able to deny it. Her disease had changed our relationship and influenced my grief. This insight would bring "a new awareness, a modification of an old understanding, a synthesis of fragmented knowledge, or an altogether new discovery of something that has been present for some time yet beyond immediate awareness" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 29).

Phase V: Explication

I had started to create thinking that I would need to produce a lot of artwork to be able to answer my question. Throughout to process I realized how much energy it required from me and how intense the emotions were. At times I had to stop as I felt lightheaded. When I felt overwhelmed, I let the painting sit for a while until I was willing to dive back into the subject. At the end I came up with seven pieces. During the next phase, I repeatedly returned to my images to create "a more complex knowing of the discoveries" (Kapitan, 2018, p. 194). I will here describe the most relevant part of the creative process highlighted in my journaling as well as "fully examine what has awakened in consciousness, to understand its various layers of meaning" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 31). I would initiate my daily work by reading a few pages of McNiff's (1998) book *Trust the Process.* I realize I did not trust myself when I started to create. I was afraid of my controlling self and my self-censorship.

My initial painting (Figure 1) started with a very dark background. Mixing colors helped me focused on the present moment. The paint would be applied vertically as if it was dripping. It made me think of tears. A diagonal shape seems to be piercing the image. I would associate that movement to the desire of freedom. A wish to engage with the space and fill it with my most personal expression (McNiff, 1998). The oil pastels would draw the circles and would influence the title "Galaxy" of this piece. The artwork would be finished and hung up on my mother's birthday.

Figure 1

Galaxy

1

The following image was first covered in pale blue. Almost as a way to respond in lightness to the darker previous work. The acrylic colors appeared to me as continents and was titled "World map, the origin" (Figure 2.1). It spoke to me, making me think of my family revolving around a terminal illness and then drifting away through the bereavement. The second phase of the painting appeared as boxes (Figure 2.2). My art became more structured, geometrical as maybe a need to hold all the emotions that were emerging. It left me with a feeling that all my shapes were crooked and that there was a lack of balance. In addition, I had trouble knowing if I was done with the picture, hesitating to add more but being doubtful to do so. I would sit with these considerations for a while. I came to understand that my art reflections could also have been applied to my bereavement process. The loss had shaken my emotional equilibrium and that was not something I was through with.

Figure 2.1

World map, the origin

Figure 2.2

World map, the origin

For my third artwork (Figure 3) there was a sudden urge to use a lot of material. The red paint was spread to create volume and texture. I kept adding more and realized how good it felt to splatter color as it was mirroring my emotional spilling. The image left me with an impression of a stain. I would meditate on the term until the following day where I would use my pastels to create organic shapes. Those forms seemed to want to fill the voids between the acrylic lumps of painting. I remember not feeling well finishing my picture. The pain was vivid just as the color. I named this image "Necrosis" as it made me think of a microscopic view of a vein. I would link it back to my mother's thrombosis issues. I came to understand that her disease had tainted our relationship.

Figure 3

Necrosis

The painting that was created next (Figure 4) shows a softer image with lighter shades of colors. The background was painted in a geometric process gaining back a control over my lines. The pastels glided on the surface creating what looks like petals. I was dissatisfied with

the result as I felt it didn't match my mournful state and I was afraid that I was getting away from my subject. I therefore used taltine (a paint solvent) to loosen the oil and used my fingers to allow my colors to flow. This tactile experience helped me to get back in tune with my internal emotion. The flower's boundaries are leaking and it became more satisfying. I titled it "Ephemeral."

Figure 4

Ephemeral

I contemplated this satisfactory feeling over a weekend. I got worried I was losing my attitude of appreciation and becoming critical, controlling the outcome of my work (McNiff, 1998). It is with these thoughts that I entered the creation of my fifth painting (Figure 5). I wanted to gain back the ability to play with the material and see what happens, proceeding as instinctively as I could with no judgement. I used as usual the spatula but for the first time reached out for a paintbrush. This tool felt less comfortable and pushed me to forget about the outcome and better engage in the uneasiness subject of my bereavement.

Figure 5

Mountain

Even though the image didn't please me, I was able to recognize the aesthetic quality of it. I could see two characters emerged for which I felt the need to circle them in. I took notes in my journal that it could represent my mother and I as two ghosts in the beyond. Looking at this image, I understood that there was a part of me that had also died with my mother. The painting would come to represent a continuous bond in death rather that in life. I would come to name it "Mountain" using the metaphor of seeking to reach the summit of awareness of my bereavement experience.

This new insight would carry onto the subsequent artwork. The paper was covered in black with a roller and shades of blue were applied, this time only with the paintbrush. I approached my painting with the goal of expressing movements that would come naturally (McNiff, 1998). Large circular bands were created, accentuated with red color rendering a perceptible form of a mummy's head in the bottom right corner (Figure 6.1). This representation of death scared me. This is when I fully recognized the power of personal

symbol. My first thought would be to cover it once I would work with the pastels because it was hard to stay with it. In the contrary, the experience of accentuating the skeleton (Figure 6.2) would relieve the bodily sensation of being compressed. If the image became easier to look at, it would be harder to understand if the zombie figure was depicting my mother or myself. That question would be left unanswered but would deeply nourish my future reflections. I would come back often to the painting "Skull" hopeful it would reveal more insights.

Figure 6.1

Skull

Figure 6.2

Skull

      After emerging from the darkness of bereavement I felt in need of light. Without any

other intention then conveying brightness, I started to work on my next piece7. Yellow was

the only luminous color I could think of for covering the paper. A tree came next (Figure 7.1).

The oil pastels came to change the course of creation emphasizing its deadliness.

Furthermore, the red pastel underlined the burning ground and the flames that caught the

branches. I named it "Crematory" (Figure 7.2). At this point I knew this would be my last

painting. As the incineration is the last goodbye to the body this artwork would be the last

goodbye to this intimate disclosure.

Figure 7.1

Crematory

Figure 7.2

Crematory

Phase VI: Creative Synthesis

This final phase of this process made me nervous as I didn't quite know how it would present itself. Surprisingly, the creative synthesis did indeed spontaneously occur. I was writing some self-reflective thoughts in my journal on my heuristic experience about how art making had made me highly emotional and therefore vulnerable. Furthermore, investigating my bereavement of my mother through art helped me to see the phenomenon in a very different perspective. I came to understand that I needed to consider my mother's illness in the grieving process. I was still questioning the continuous bond component when I felt the need to switch my pencil for a paintbrush. I went back to watercolor and intuitively created an image. That painting (Figure 8) beautifully depicted the authentic "comprehensive expression of the essence of the phenomenon investigated" (Moustakas, 1990, p.27).

Figure 8

My image helped me see that, as I was going through this painful journey of revisiting my bereavement, my mother was in a way very close to me. I saw the image as a means of saying that it was not because my previous images did not display continuous bond that it had not been happening. I did indeed feel closer to her after bringing awareness to this final creative synthesis.

Chapter 5: Discussion

I have started this research with the intention to create and document a series of personal art works as a response to the bereavement of my mother. Through this heuristic art-based inquiry, I shared my experience that helped me gain a deeper understanding of my relation to my mother. I have come to know my bereavement in a sensory way. Expressing this knowing in words has been very demanding. However, I found that this research supported previous affirmations found in the literature. In line with attachment theory (Bowlby, 1980), the continuing bond expression is limited for individuals with avoidant-dismissive attachment pattern (Field et al., 2005; Tidwell, 2020). Furthermore, death-related memories, in contrast with the recollection of found memories of the deceased, demolishes the opportunities for continuing bonds (Roshman, 2103). These findings are described through the themes and symbols found in my paintings.

In my research process I tried to set an intention for my art making: explore my bereavement in nonverbal expression to see what it had to reveal about the inner relationship to my deceased mother (Silverman et al., 1996). Creating my data really embodied Allen's (1995) idea that "image making allows for staying with something while making staying bearable through the pleasure available in the use of the materials" (p.17). It helped me connect with my sorrow, physical symptoms and fear surrounding loss and bereavement. I spent some time contemplating my work, positioning myself as a witness and adopting a

"perspective of wonder and discovery" (McNiff, 1998, p. 38). It gave me access to unconscious symbols and themes that were represented in my art.

I found that focusing on the whole series of artwork helped me understand that images seemed to develop from one another, and they were telling a story: a narrative with its own symbols. Simon (1997) states he understands "creative initiative to be an instinctive response to mental conflict, and creative art to be a symbolic container for unassimilated experiences" (p. 1). My artistic products clearly showed me that my bereavement had been initiated with my mother's illness.

Symbols

Figure 1 displays circles, a symbol for which there are many possible interpretations. Simon (1997) conceptualizes it as the symbol of the self as an entity. Here some lines are breaking through the circles, letting the inner and outer reality unite as a wish to shed light on some life events. The circles are luminous and can be seen as an attempt to circumscribe emotional and affective zones. The squares that come next (Figure 2) appeared to be containers for the floating island shapes of the background: a symbolic representation of structure and balance longing to contain my emotions. Those shapes could uncover how I unconsciously dealt with death, putting my memories in boxes, not allowing them to flow but control and tame them. The structured shapes shifted in my third painting (Figure 3) bringing a more organic organization. The color red became the emerging symbol representing pain, blood, and ultimately the disease itself. I came to see these symbols as well in the following image (Figure 4) with the flowers. They would make me think of the bouquets brought to my mother's hospital room. The image (Figure 5) that responded to this memory brought the symbol of motherhood with what appeared to be a mother and a child. This symbol can be linked back to Bowlby's (1980) attachment theory where the infant instinctively seeks

proximity and resists separation (Shear & Shair, 2005). This separation would be definite with the skull emerging in the next artwork (Figure 6) symbolizing death. My encounter with the death symbol would be sustained through the representation of fire in my last painting (Figure 7): the fire that burns, destroys and incinerates. A symbol that would mark the end of the physical presence of my mother.

Themes

Unresolved conflicts surrounding my mother's death were noticeable in the themes of my paintings. Loss had been a persistent thread within my artwork but it was loss related to illness that first showed up. The disease became the main theme, followed by the need to contain; then came in the pain, the death, and trauma. My creative expression might not have been effective to depict the continuous bond in a positive way but instead it provided a visual record of an unresolved mourning. I had set my intention to explore my relation to my mother post-death. Though I revisited a tremendous number of memories, what came out in my art was mainly my relation to the illness itself. I became more conscious of how much of a traumatic experience it had been and how little I had been connected to it. I realized that "adversity and loss may change who we are and how we see ourselves" (Berzoff, 2003, p. 295).

After creating, I experienced relief as the painful affective experiences were discharged and continued within the work. Even though my work didn't serve as a way to memorialize my relation to my mother, it helped me discover a place for feeling bereft. Art provided a tangible record of internal experiences. I better understand how grief is profoundly connected to our attachment history (Bowlby, 1980). My mother was pregnant when she received her terminal illness diagnosis and the child never made it to life. I disclose this, as I understand now that my mother was grieving her baby and her health. Our

relationship was deeply affected, and I no longer could secure emotional comfort from her. Therefore, my attachment style became more avoidant as I relied on myself. Bowlby (1980) states that "some of those who proclaim their self-sufficiency are in fact relatively immune to loss" (p. 213). Furthermore, I realize that I used art as a wish to enable an affective tie with my mother. The process, however, showed that expressing continuous bond was not the outcome. As Tidwell et al. (2020) state "bereaved individual may not be likely to seek comfort or support from their deceased attachment figure if they did not typically seek out and rely upon their attachment figure to meet their needs while the attachment figure was living" (p. 12). I came to understand that the mental representation of the deceased didn't serve me as a secure base or function as a safe haven and therefore I was not able to make effective use of continuous bond as a way of coping (Field et al., 2005).

 Limitations

As described by Potash (2019) portraying life experiences in art is risky but deepens one's knowledge and intimacy as well as providing interpersonal connections. Art provided the means for me to maintain an unconscious tie to my mother. It helped me reflect on how my grief had changed in the present moment. However, it is important to underline that this heuristic research was based only on my own personal experience with bereavement and is highly subjective. Bereavement's response is unique to each person and needs to be welcomed with an openness to psychological individuality (Hagman, 2001). To stay focused on the explication of the phenomenon I engaged in sharing my artwork with my entourage encouraging their perspective.

Furthermore, losing a parent to death has consequences in the home and in the family (Worden, 1996). Even though these consequences changed the core of my existence and influenced my bereavement, I avoided disclosing certain information surrounding my family

situation. Another limit for this project resided in the time frame. Only a certain number of artworks could be produced and I wonder what would have been the complete narrative based on a longer period of creation. Lastly my research was done in English which is not my mother tongue and, in its way, this restrained my ability to freely access my emotional vocabulary.

Implication

I proposed to answer my question through my own experience using art making to study my subjective bereavement difficulties exploring the factors that facilitated and inhibited my creative process. These personal insights can contribute to the existing research on personal bereavement of art therapists. Personal bereavement influences the use of the therapist's self in therapy (Broadbent, 2013). Kapitan (2018) describes how an artistic inquiry has the power to transform the art therapist's relationship to the self and to its environment. Indeed, art therapists who went through the grieving process can experience a deeper level of empathy and can relate more with their clients (Broadbent, 2013).

In my research on the bereavement of my mother, exploring the artistic and imaginative involvement served as a method to engage my "natural reservoir of healing" (Arnold, 2019, p. 6). In addition, using art connected me to my aim of being an art therapist. By navigating through my own experience and analyzing my artwork, I gained new awareness for which others might recognize within themselves thereby benefiting from my discoveries. The role of the therapist in art therapy is instrumental as they guide grieving client towards externalization of feelings, emotions and facilitate self-exploration (Lister et al., 2008). The way art therapists handle personal loss adds to the effectiveness of interventions in therapy (Arnold, 2019). To have a good awareness of one's own bereavement response might help the art therapist in their countertransference. This research also

demonstrates that understanding the client's individual grieving attachment style in art therapy could help make sense of their bereavement and choose adapted art interventions. Remaining connected with the deceased does not always provide comfort and support at first and might not always be appropriated to ease their transition from past to future. The experience of art making, however, can reconstitute meaning and can transform the existing reality (Brennan, 2015).

Chapter 6. Conclusion

As I am completing my research, I realize I have as much difficulty to leave the subject as I had entering it. Finishing this project involves a termination and therefore a loss. I am more aware of my reaction to loss after my personal inquiry through an art-based method. This research delved into attachment theory and continuous bond grieving approach. The aim was to understand if the experience of art making could serve as way to maintain bond with the deceased attachment figure. This heuristic inquiry highlighted that the continuity resided in my creation that unleashed me from a grief that was mobilizing my psychic energy. Finding sense in my images helped me access unconscious knowledge of my bereavement experience. Putting words on my artwork brought conscious awareness of what had been truly sinister in mourning. It led me to revisit my past wound. The whole process allowed me to give emotional shape to my bereavement. My images can be seen as a self-portrait of my unconscious bereavement process. My artistic mediation over the last year, my analytic therapy, my internship and my studies all enabled me to be the observer of my personal process of spontaneous art production. Revisiting my bereavement helped me relearn about my relationship to my mother (Attig, 2001). I truly wish more research would be done to explore the loss of a mother through art, bearing witness to the bereavement story.

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