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Exploring Identity: If Your Soul Could Speak, What Would She Say?

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Abstract

This Arts Based pilot focuses on the author's explorations in music, movement, painting, and words, as she engaged in a self-inquiry into voice and identity. It has been suggested that such reflexive inquiry is necessary so that researchers and clinicians understand their own intersectional and shifting identities before they engage with another person's identities. In order to know what social justice is, we must first understand our own identity. The author used art for self-inquiry as both the method and a way of knowing. She analyzed her process and art through writing, and finally by making a video, with the intention that the resultant video would show enough of the process/result that it could stand on its own. The author shares a link to the resultant video and some of the artwork produced, as well as her context and methods for the project. The paper and video culminate with an invitation to the reader to engage in a similar reflexive process, asking for a response to the prompt "Exploring identity: What would you say?"

Keywords: *social justice, identity, arts based research, video*

An Invitation

I ask you, the reader, to read about my process and view the included [video](#) while holding a curiosity about how you might engage in a similar process. I then invite you to create art, music, and/or a video response, either to the prompt: "Exploring identity: What would you say?" or to your own question. I encourage such responses to follow McNiff's (2015) method of creating a repeated gesture in painting, movement, or music, as described below in the Implementation section. (Of course, I realize that you might view the video first; it is a condensed 6-minute version of my process). Since the video is meant to stand on its own, it merges my research questions, visual art, music, and movement within it; you will read my responses to the art as you watch me create. This paper describes my engagement in an arts based pilot, in which the process was as important as any outcome. Herein, I describe the process, give guidelines on how you might engage in such a process yourself, and suggest future implications.

Introduction

Journal entry, after music improvisation on January 20 2017:

“It is the day after the inauguration of Donald Trump as the President of the US and what my soul has to say, what she wants to share, is fear. Fear that she doesn’t have anything new to say. Fear that it is just the same old chord progression. Not profound or exciting or new. Fear that what she has to say will not be captured by technology. Won’t be liked. Won’t be judged good enough or important enough. There are all these ideas, all these reasons to fear. And she is worried that her voice won’t be heard. She is worried that no one really wants to hear what she wants to, and needs to say. The minor I to minor iv is a secure rocking motion to carry those fears. The piano croons, ‘Rest now child. You need your rest because there is so much work to be done.’ Why are the best lullabies in minor keys?”

Recent personal and political events have caused me to reconsider my role in matters of social justice. I am female, Jewish, middle-aged, and bisexual. Yet as a White, middle-class, educated, able-bodied, married person, I have a great deal of privilege. If, as I am told, the personal is political, that would suggest that in order to be an effective agent of social change I first need a deeper understanding of what that “personal” is for me. This pilot presents one process for embarking on that journey.

This arts based study focused on my own art work; however, it suggests that engaging in art, starting each session with an openness to the experience of art as an expression of one’s inner voice, may allow people to be more open to listening to both themselves and others. If imagination is a faculty that furthers knowing (Allen, 1995), it is imperative that people access their imaginations. Engaging in artwork and subsequently reflecting on the art offers one way of doing this.

In this process there was no boundary between artist and researcher. The art became primary in the research process, as it was both the method and a way of knowing. This was further analyzed through the art of writing and finally by making a video, with the intention that the resultant video shows enough of the process that it could stand on its own. Through this engagement in art-as-research, I became aware of a power of the art to make a personal statement, one that can be shared with others to create understanding and empathy that goes beyond words, labels, or categories. Thus the process gave access to “what I need to say” rather than “what they want to hear”.

Inspiration

Personal Context

The present pilot research grew out of questions about the intersections of the arts, meditation, and one’s inner landscapes. I have meditated twice a day, every day, for almost 20 years; I have been a musician all my life. For me music offers an expression beyond words, beyond the known, often leading me to spaces of my unconscious that I would not otherwise notice. Some of these spaces seem similar to the inner spaces I encounter when meditating. What is that space? Do I access the same space with music as I do in meditation?

As I pondered those questions I began to explore painting as a means of self-expression rather than as a tool to represent what I was seeing in front of me. This offered another door to my inner spaces and suggested further questions. What is similar about the practices of meditation, music, and the arts that lead to inner spaces? What is similar about those spaces? Do other people experience this? Can these self-explorations, and encounters with one’s inner landscape foster empathy for others/the other?

Georgia O’Keefe said that one cannot paint spirit but that one can experience spirit through art (Springgay & Irwin, 2004). As I examined my inner landscapes, my initial prompt lay close to spirit: “If my soul could speak, what would she say?” The project started in January 2017. I did not intend it to be political, but it became politicized because of the proximity to the inauguration of Donald Trump as President of the United States. There seemed to be an explosion of activity on Facebook and Twitter. I was reading and hearing about women and people from underrepresented groups expressing fear about their voice in politics and fear about being seen. The Black Lives Matter movement was particularly vocal at that time, as were other groups concerned with

civil rights. As I and other people reacted by marching and writing letters, I also needed to turn inward. There I heard fears about my own voice: As a Jewish female do I have any power? As a White, married person do I understand oppression; do I realize the extent of my unearned privilege? In either case, do I have something of value to share? If I am afraid of not being heard, and at the same time am afraid of being seen, then what are other people's fears? According to Springgay and Irwin (2004), making art is a political act of personal and social change; as we make art we perceive the unknown in new ways. As I continued with this project I began to wonder about art as a tool for exploring my identity as someone who is not a visible minority; and I wondered about art as a tool for exploring identity for those who are more visibly a member of minority groups.

Clinical Context

Reflexivity in research and in clinical work is essential if we are to deliver appropriate interventions and conduct ourselves in an ethical, responsible manner (Lahman, Geist, Rodriguez, Graglia, & DeRoche, 2010). Furthermore, Bolton (2014) suggested that reflective practice is a social and political responsibility, as it enables professionals to learn from their experiences, and to learn about their own relationships and responses to those with whom they work. Reflexivity provides us an opportunity to understand ourselves, our own identity, our interactions, and our values; thus it leads to the development of responsible and ethical action. Hadley (2013) suggested that such self-reflection and self-understanding is necessary before we can understand another; that we must examine how various aspects of our identity impact our relationships. She noted that as therapists "we are not dealing with just one part of a person's identity, but the entirety of their 'subject-in-process'" (p. 380), just as those we interact with are dealing with the entirety of ours. If, as Bolton suggested, reflexivity requires us to stand outside of our habitual day-to-day situations and engage at levels beyond the cognitive, then the arts might give us a unique opportunity to examine our whole identity, to hear ourselves amongst the din of social media, and to locate our own narratives.

Implementation

I entered this arts based research pilot with the question: "What are my experiences of art, music, and movement as means of self-exploration?" In order to begin to understand this I videotaped myself improvising in music, art, or movement, with one session for each medium. The sessions each lasted 30 to 60 minutes and were each in response to the prompt: "If my soul could speak, what would she say today?" After each session I reflected on both my art and the experience itself by writing poetry and prose in a journal. The sessions were spaced one week apart in the following order: painting with acrylics on canvas, improvisation on piano and flute, and "performances" of repeated movements. Parts of each session were video recorded, resulting in six short clips of my painting process, over 40 minutes of improvised music, and seven clips of movement vignettes that are one to five minutes in length.

Process

Although I have some experience improvising in music, I have very little experience improvising in art or movement. Thus I used guidelines given by McNiff (2015) to instruct my method for all three media. McNiff suggested starting by leaving the ego and thinking mind aside, making a simple natural movement, and then repeating that movement. He further instructed to continue that repetition, relax into it and allow unrealized or inhibited ideas to come up. To complete the process, one should pause to reflect upon what was created. The next improvisation might then be a response to, or reflection of what was just created (McNiff, 2015). Accordingly, I entered each session with my prompt, relaxed into it, and started by making a simple gesture with paint, at the piano, or with my body. I relaxed into the process and repeated the gesture, letting



Figure 1. Pieces of Me

it stay the same or evolve, staying with it until I felt done. If my thinking, analyzing, or judging mind entered, I gently asked her to leave and I returned to the gesture; if my thinking mind stayed, I took a break from the art. During such a break, or when I felt done with an improvisation, I either paused to reflect and write, or I responded with another improvisation.

Creation

The painting seemed like it would be easiest, so I chose to complete this session first. I have no formal training in painting, and therefore had no expectations or concerns regarding whether I could paint something “good.” The painting did not have to resemble any actual object; it would simply be a response to the prompt: “If my soul could speak, what would she say today?” The concrete nature of the task was appealing - I would be able to see the product as I was working. The first painting, “Pieces of Me” is shown below.

For the second session I again chose the easier medium; for me this was music rather than movement. Using the same prompt as a referent, I improvised freely, not planning to use any particular tonal or harmonic structure. I played piano first because it felt easier to improvise freely on the piano. My improvisations on flute tend to be more intellectual. I stopped to write after each improvisation and repeated this until I seemed to be done with what there was to express.

Even though the idea of improvising in movement was not appealing to me, I planned for the third session to be movement. Thus, for this improvisation I was most in need of a method, and I relied heavily upon the guidelines from McNiff (2015), fo-

cusing on simple, repeated, natural movements. I videotaped six short vignettes, pausing to reflect after each, and writing after the sixth. I chose not to watch them until later, although others might have chosen to view each and then respond to their own movements.

It was crucial to the process that I started each session with a prompt rather than an intended outcome or image. In this way, the Arts Based Research was no different from any other type of research: I started with a prompt/question and then looked to see what I would uncover.

Reflection

Writing after engaging with each form of art became the bridge from my internal unconscious to the external paper, and this step seemed essential; without it I could not have articulated or communicated what I experienced. I painted and then wrote, and it was in the writing that I thought about colors and labels and my associations with colors. I first played music; it was in the writing that I reflected about the mode, identified the emotion, identified my fear, and related those elements. I first moved; it was in my writing after the movement vignettes that I thought about being seen, and reflected on my concerns about body image. Each session informed the next as I explored concerns about labels, then about seeing and being seen, and finally about body image.

When all three sessions were complete, I created a video as a presentation of the material so that I could share the work with others. The presentation included clips of me making art and moving, audio of my music, and parts of my reflexive writing. After creating the video I returned to paint and canvas in order to respond to my video. I then re-edited the video to include this painting. This final response became an image of my identity against a backdrop of other identities. I wondered how my artwork, my willingness to speak, or my need to speak would be changed if I identified differently. The image, "Beyond Words" is shown below. The youtube video can be seen here: <https://youtu.be/B1iaJkmqDI>

Illumination

My research question was, "What are my experiences of art, music, and movement as means of self-exploration?" I found the experiences to be intensely personal. I entered a space in which I was willing to let go of expectations, and, as I find with meditation, I entered a space of calm focus and awareness. Each medium brought up different thoughts or emotions; each time the outcome was unexpected. If an exploration involves traveling through an unknown area to learn something new, the arts were an ideal tool for me to do this.

My self-exploration and creative process reflected my feelings of strength, my sources of strength, as well as my fears around being seen and heard. I revisited old and persistent concerns about my body image and about my importance. This led to an examination of my personal intersectional identities: what is seen and what is unseen; what I choose to show and what I am able to hide; how I am (and am not) privileged or empowered. I considered issues of social justice as I more deeply acknowledged what I can say, what I choose to say, and why/when I choose to be silent. My position of unearned privilege does not invalidate my personal social concerns, but it does imply a responsibility to be aware of whose struggle I can claim to know. Yet, at the outset of this pilot I did not know that I would explore any of this. Much of what I encountered surprised me as I processed it, as if I had reached into myself and pulled out something new.

Although the result of this pilot may appear to be a video, I would like to suggest that the result is an invitation and recommendation. A pilot study examines the proposed methods and procedures. The value of this examination was that I found the act of engaging in the arts to be an effective tool for self-exploration. For the reader there is more value in learning about the process than in learning about my personal growth.

The arts provide a decisive tool for individuals to see and hear themselves: not how they are defined by others, but how they are defined by the narratives and images they hold for themselves. The arts allow one to “perceive the unknown in new ways” (Springgay, & Irwin, 2004, p. 75).

The prompt “If my soul could speak, what would she say?” encouraged the act of listening to myself. This was important at a time when I was hearing and reacting to many events in the news and on social media. The intentional act of honoring my own voice, not as a reaction, but as its own statement, felt radical. I took the opportunity to explore my own identity and began to create my own narrative. I am not suggesting that you will find the same thing through your explorations, only that by entering the artwork not knowing what you will find, you are likely to learn something about yourself.

Bolton (2014) suggested that reflexivity is a social responsibility. A reflexive stance lies partway between our inner experience and the culture in which we live; as we explore this transitional space, we might be able to let go of assumptions, question ourselves, and ultimately find the ability to relate to others with more authenticity and less judgment. This space of critical reflection and engagement in levels beyond the cognitive offers an opportunity for students, supervisors, clinicians, researchers, and educators alike to understand their own stance, and ask their own questions. Music therapists are expressive arts therapists; I would like to suggest that there is tremendous value to a reflexive practice that includes all of the arts as tools for exploration. When I used movement, I experienced a dread similar to that which clients might experience when I ask them to play a new instrument, yet while using that medium I deeply reconnected with my issues of seeing and being seen. As a clinician and educator it was helpful to use and learn from a less-preferred art form. When I used music as a tool for reflection I re-connected to the reasons that I chose to become a music therapist. If we are expressive arts therapists because we believe in the power of the arts to heal and teach, it stands to reason that we should explore the arts in our own healing, learning, and teaching (Kossak, 2012).

The next direction for this pilot study is to turn it over to you, the readers. Can we start an arts-based conversation in cyberspace, exploring social justice and our individual personal narratives/identities using the prompt: “Exploring Identity: What would you say?” I invite you to join us!

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