

Delivering a visual narrative arts-based program to promote resilience in Queensland's Central Highlands communities: An exploratory pilot study

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Abstract

This paper reports on the impact of a local government-funded art therapy-based pilot project that aimed to promote the resilience of people living in rural communities of the Central Highlands in Queensland, Australia. The introduction will talk about the theoretical position taken. The remainder of the article will discuss the geographical context of the workshops, methodology, how participants were recruited, the demographic of participants, the tools and approach used in a series of workshops, and the findings including the impact on participants' resilience scores that indicated the sessions had a very positive impact. Participants both recognised their own abilities for resilience and learnt skills to promote and enhance these skills for themselves and others.

Introduction

This paper reports on the impact of a local government-funded art therapy-based pilot project that aimed to promote the resilience of people living in rural communities of the Central Highlands in Queensland, Australia. It assumes a socio-ecological and posthumanist perspective; the latter because it acknowledges the agency of things, materialities and spaces, the force which these more-than-human agencies have, and the way they act relationally with humans – something arts therapists have long understood and have recently begun to incorporate into the theoretical foundations of practice (Fenner, 2017; Thomson & Linnell, 2020). The former because it considers that human and environmental systems cannot be separated from each other; people, organisations, the political and the natural environment are entangled and their resilience impacts on each other, an important consideration for all of us working in the domain of arts and health (Neville & Varney, 2014). The socio-ecological resilience approach (Folke, 2006) fits especially well with our theoretical position, because it “emphasizes non-linear dynamics, thresholds, uncertainty and surprise, how periods of gradual change interplay with periods of rapid change and how such dynamics interact across temporal and spatial scales” (p.253) and “the idea of adaptation, learning and self-

organisation in addition to the general ability to persist disturbance” (p.259). Folke (2006) argues that the literature tends to define resilience as a boundary object in linear terms from a positivist, steady-state, single-equilibrium viewpoint, framing resilience as “the capacity to absorb shocks and still maintain function” (p.253). It defines social resilience “as the ability of human communities to withstand external shocks to their social infrastructure” (p.259). But non-linear dynamics also apply; a creative “capacity for renewal, re-organisation and development” (p.253). Human communities and individual people are creative and self-organising, and have the capacity to transform. Resilience is “a dynamic interplay between sustaining and developing with change. Too much of either will ultimately lead to collapse” (p.259).

This paper strongly advocates use of the creative power of metaphor in art therapy (Moon, 2007), particularly when it comes to defining the term ‘resilience’. An intellectual definition does not help people to make a felt connection with the term ‘resilience’. An intellectual definition lacks the power of metaphor. Metaphors help people to make sense and meaning of terms that have an intention. People appreciate metaphoric language, which powerfully impacts on other aspects of cognition (Lai et al., 2019). Different people use different metaphors to

describe their perceptions because we experience resilience in different ways. Metaphor can be used to express and communicate those experiences of resilience, for example through the representation of a tree that survives the dry in the desert, or a tree that shapes itself according to prevailing winds. DeVerteuil and Golubchikov (2016) argue that resilience is a primordial, prefigurative and embryonic social and spatial foundation (p.148). All people can recognise it inside themselves. Recognition of this groundwork helps us to draw from and rely upon it.

Some arts therapists have approached the relationship of resilience and creativity through the lens of contemporary neuroscience (Hass-Cohen & Findlay, 2015). A heterogeneous, de-neoliberalised reading of resilience through using metaphor can promote a different and complementary approach to resilience that foregrounds social justice and addresses power relations in an intra- and interpersonal way. The use of metaphor supports a socio-ecological, posthumanist perspective on resilience, important in this era of the Anthropocene, because human society may be able to deal with change from a social dimension lens but will not survive if human adaptation takes place at the expense or in denial of ecosystems. "Not only adaptations to current conditions and in the short term, but how to achieve transformations toward more sustainable development pathways is one of the great challenges for humanity in the decades to come" (Folke, 2006, p.263).

People's lived experiences and personal descriptions of resilience, using metaphoric language and making use of arts-based methods, is a priority for me as an art therapist, to assist people in identifying with and strengthening their inner capacity to transform their lives. Art therapy, according to the American Art Therapy Association, can be defined as follows:

Art Therapy is an integrative mental health and human services profession that enriches the lives of individuals, families, and communities through active artmaking, creative process, applied psychological theory, and human experience within a psychotherapeutic relationship.

Art Therapy, facilitated by a professional art therapist, effectively supports personal and relational treatment goals as well as community

concerns. Art Therapy is used to improve cognitive and sensory-motor functions, foster self-esteem and self-awareness, cultivate emotional resilience, promote insight, enhance social skills, reduce and resolve conflicts and distress, and advance societal and ecological change. (AATA, 2017, paras.2–3)

The Australian and New Zealand and Asian Creative Arts Therapies Association defines creative arts therapy as:

[A]n experiential, psychotherapeutic approach utilising many creative modalities within a therapeutic relationship with a trained therapist. It is holistic, attending to emotional, cognitive, physical and spiritual well-being – and aligns well with Indigenous models of health and well-being. (ANZACATA, 2019, para.1)

The remainder of the article will discuss the geographical context of the art therapy-based workshops, our methodology, how participants were recruited, the demographic of participants, the tools and approach used in a series of workshops, and the findings. These included the reception of the workshops and the impact on participants' resilience scores, which indicated the sessions had a very positive impact. Participants both recognised their own abilities for resilience and learnt skills to promote and enhance these skills for themselves and others.

The Queensland Central Highlands context

The rationale for offering art therapy-based workshops to people living in rural communities of the Central Highlands is related to the local government having raised as a major concern mental health, depression and suicide issues in Central Queensland communities. It welcomed alternative therapeutic methods to help improve people's individual and community resilience, and approved of the fact that we also wanted to measure the impact on people's resilience.

This exploratory pilot study aimed to deliver experimental visual narrative art-based workshops to promote resilience in three Central Highlands communities. The focus was on exploring participants' sources of stress to self and others, the intersection of participants' creativity and resilience, and how their creative expressions and communications enhanced personal and community

wellbeing. Further goals of this exploratory pilot study were to: 1) inform a future, larger-scale project focused on promoting and strengthening community resilience; and 2) to discover the pros and cons of offering art and narrative therapy-based activities to regional communities in the Central Highlands.

A flyer was sent out to facilitators of community groups, who recruited participants in each community. The Central Highlands Regional Council (CHRC) provided the names of the facilitators. About a week before the first workshop started, the identified participants received an information sheet and filled in a consent form. The proposed research was approved by the Central Queensland University's ethics committee. De-identified data is stored securely in the researchers' locked filing cabinet.

Methodology

A mixed method was used for this study that consisted of four two-hour workshops, which were offered to each community fortnightly. Each workshop session was delivered in turn to the three communities over a period of two days, with a fortnight's break before the next session.

A Resilience Measure (ARM-R) (Resilience Research Centre, 2018) and an evaluation survey provided the quantitative data. The evaluation survey was presented to participants a week after the last workshop had been completed. Responses to this survey aimed to inform the future development of the program. The ARM-R is a self-report measure of social-ecological resilience, used by researchers and practitioners worldwide. This measure helped identify whether participants had increased their capacity to find and/or negotiate resources to bolster their resilience in meaningful ways. Participants completed a pre-event Resilience Measure at the start of the first workshop. They also filled in a post-event Resilience Measure one week after the fourth, final workshop. Qualitative data, collected during workshop delivery, consisted of participants' photographs, researchers' observation notes and a creative diary. While making audio-recordings of conversations is common practice in qualitative research, people's conversations were not recorded in this research as recordings would have been very difficult to transcribe. As a result of not having any transcripts, it is impossible to include participants' verbatim responses in this article.

Powerful analytical questions for participants that facilitated reflection during the workshops included: What am I witnessing? What is happening in the picture? What do I feel when I look at the picture, and why is this so? What is not included in this image (trapped in an air bubble)? (Reader, 2012).

The project was initiated, designed, developed and refined on an ongoing basis (formative evaluation). The evaluations took place in collaboration with an academic colleague and local Central Highlands 'on-the-ground' community member who participated in, and from time to time co-facilitated, the workshops – as such, helping to frame my work as a trained art therapist and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) migrant from an external community. As a research team, we travelled to the three communities in one car to deliver the workshops. The three communities were located 65 to 120 kilometres apart from each other, so this both encouraged and provided time for discussion and reflection between us as qualified researchers. At the end of the pilot study, and during the evaluation phase, I unpacked the efficacy of the workshops, drawing on the Resilience Measures and the feedback received from participants.

Participants' demographic

The participants in this research were predominantly female and living in the Central Highlands – 18 females and three males signed up for the workshops. Three participants identified themselves in the 25–34 age bracket, four in the 35–44 age bracket, six in the 45–54 age bracket, seven in the 55–64 bracket and two in the 65+ bracket.

Participants' education levels were reasonably high, with many working in the community services sector and some having senior professional jobs that required a university degree. A female participant, referred by a disability services officer, attended one workshop accompanied by her disability support worker. The carer recognised that the workshops were not suitable for her client's specific intellectual disabilities and they subsequently chose to discontinue their participation.

Tools and approach

In the first workshop, participants worked with different media, such as oil pastels and watercolour, to experience the 'resilience quality' of each medium and express whatever they wanted or needed to express. They were encouraged to talk with each

other and/or share the experience with the group. They were then encouraged to record their reflections in their notebooks – the process of art-making, and the artwork itself, and how this related to their personal conception of ‘resilience’. Participants experienced a safe space, as facilitated by the research team, to assist them to become fully immersed in the process. Most participants also seemed to become energised by the experience of art-making and by the fact that they weren’t restricted in time or required to focus on a particular outcome, but were free to simply let their hands ‘do the talking’ for as long as they needed or wanted. Some were challenged by the process and appeared to struggle with making an artwork that was not aesthetically pleasing or resolved. Gentle ‘unpacking’ questions assisted these participants to understand that the objective was not to make ‘beautiful’ objects, but to explore the concept of ‘resilience’ in their own way with different media. A male participant who had a strong affinity with a local sacred space created the image below (Figure 1).

In the second workshop, participants in each group (each community) explored natural materials such as leaves and sticks, and manufactured materials such as beads, paperclips and foil, examining their ‘resilient’ qualities. Next, participants created a representation of their ‘resilient self’ using these materials. Figure 2 is a sculpture made by one of the female participants.



Figure 1. A male participant's image of ‘resilience’.

Upon completion, the participants reflected in their personal notebooks on the artwork and their findings around resilience.

In the third workshop, participants created a collage representing their resilient body. They first drew a rough body-outline. Participants were then encouraged to flick through magazines and old



Figure 2. A female participant's representation of ‘resilience’.

journals for images to paste in and around this body outline. The images would represent the challenging and enabling contexts that surrounded their experience of ‘resilience’.

In the fourth and final workshop, participants shared their reflections on their own collage, and contributed observations and reflections toward each other's work. During this process, participants were free to make changes or amendments to their own work, to more accurately reflect aspects of their personal context that challenge and enable resilience.

Findings

The four interactive workshops all consisted of individual activities and contained strong elements of peer support. The group dynamics were markedly different in each community. One group, consisting of four people who already knew each other, appeared close-knit and were very supportive of each other in the workshop processes and reflections. The second group consisted of six people who were mostly acquaintances and came from the same small community. There were elements of strong support but also tensions in the group related to past experiences in their community. These tensions were resolved during the last workshop, when participants felt safe enough together to be frank and open with each other. The third group consisted of ten people, few of whom knew each other. This third group appeared to be the most challenging, due to size. Participants started to support each other mainly during the last workshop, with only five participants present, the others having had to cancel due to work commitments. This smaller group exhibited trust in sharing personal information; participants were supportive of each other's artworks and their self-reflections.

Participants' reception of the workshops was positive overall and the impact on participants' resilience scores indicated that the sessions had a very positive impact on their resilience; they recognised their own abilities for resilience and learnt skills to promote and enhance these skills for themselves and others. The Resilience Measure consists of a series of statements that participants rate from 1 to 5, in terms of the extent to which they apply to them, ranging from 'not at all' to 'a lot'. The most important improvements found in the Resilience Measure related to the following statements:

- Getting and improving qualifications and skills is important to me.
- I talk to my family/partner about how I feel (for example, when sad or concerned).

Some improvements, though slightly less important were found with respect to the following statements:

- I feel supported by my friends.
- My family/partner stands by me when times are hard.
- I have opportunities to show others that I can act responsibly.
- I have opportunities to apply my abilities in life (like using my skills, working at a job, or caring for others).
- I like my family's/partner's culture and the way my family celebrates things (like holidays or learning about my culture).

Drawing on my personal notes written during and after the workshops, I reflect that participants liked the safe space the workshops offered: they could express and communicate personal issues, they were given as much time as they needed to explore issues through the use of art materials, and they experienced no pressure to perform in a particular way or have to live up to a certain standard. They did not need to be 'positive', for example. They had the opportunity to focus on the topic of resilience, explore it in more depth and get a better understanding around it.

Feedback from the evaluation forms suggests that participants enjoyed being able to focus on the important things in their lives in a creative way. They loved the workshops in their entirety, even when feeling vulnerable and challenged. They felt safe with the ability of the art therapist (Researcher 1) to subtly guide them to discover, challenge and recover things about themselves, their inner thoughts and belief systems. They were able to recognise their inner

resilience or strength amidst the chaos. They enjoyed the exposure to a variety of art media, as well as the organised time and themes of activities, and the time for verbal feedback and written reflection. They loved the quiet time, group conversation, relaxed environment, and the art therapist's (Researcher 1) calm effect on the group dynamics and ability to let them evolve at their own pace. They loved that the groups were small and grew to become more open, with honest communication, allowing the inner resilience to shine through. They loved the individual sculptures that represented and reminded them of their resilience, and relating this to aspects of their life and life events. In this blend of participants' separate comments together, art therapy is seen to be something of value for them:

A gentle form of therapy that allows you to reveal yourself to yourself through creative expression. Allowing yourself to be your own guide, realising that resilience holds a very different meaning for each individual, coping with the challenges and bouncing back from these was addressed by individuals in different ways. (Participant comments)

Conclusion

The feedback received suggests that participants from the three Central Highlands communities identify resilience as an 'inner' quality that each person experiences and represents differently. Interestingly, participants also related resilience to people's commitment to participation, as a sense of group (community) safety. The comments provided on group dynamics suggest a need for community members to explore in more depth the way resilience relates to community support.

Drawing on the outcomes of the Resilience Measure – which showed that participants' resilience had improved – it is concluded that the art therapy workshops gave participants the opportunity to explore and reflect on what resilience means for them, and how they challenge and enable their own resilience. The qualitative results also imply that the workshops helped them to take responsibility for their own resilience, and to take steps to improve their situation; for example, to open up communications with those who matter.

This pilot study also concurs with the results listed in the WHO report (Fancourt & Finn, 2019), which states that over 3000 studies have shown that playing

or listening to music, dancing and art-making have been found to aid people's emotional expression, produce cathartic effects and professional awareness. Non-verbal and non-linguistic communication via art-making also fosters understanding among professionals (pp.46–47). The participants, as visual storytellers, appeared to narrate their experience of resilience the way they did because they experienced a safe space, with no pressure to perform, which allowed them to express and communicate personal issues. Participants were able to experiment with the art materials whilst experiencing the psychological impact of using those materials, which helped to identify and explore issues at their own pace and at their own level of comfort. One participant, for example, stated: "To be able to recognise strength amidst the chaos or inner resilience is a game changer for me!" Another participant said: "The process of art therapy provided me insights about my own coping and internal world."

A particular outcome (i.e., the need to be 'positive') was not expected or required. Further, the topic of resilience helped participants focus on a particular issue they wanted to explore in more depth and/or get a better understanding of. Finally, smaller groups – between four and six people – seemed to work best, with participants having more time to get to know each other and establish a higher level of trust in a group setting.

This pilot also revealed that participants' relationships with their family members improved. Participants who were also community care professionals expressed the need to engage in more art therapy-based workshops so they would be able to continue to improve their personal awareness and understanding of people in the community using a patient and considered approach. They also expressed a desire to be trained and mentored in the delivery of similar art therapy workshops to help improve community resilience.

Endnotes

The success of this pilot has prompted me to deliver more of these workshops and refine the work as time goes on. If the reader would like to receive updates on this progressive development, and/or collaborate with me in some way, feel free to contact me: myarttherapy2015@gmail.com

Readers who wish to adopt the survey methodology used in this project can contact the Resilience Centre via their website to register their interest: <https://cyrn.resilienceresearch.org/>

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