

A heuristic and art-based inquiry: The experience of combining mindfulness practice and art-making

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KEY WORDS

Art Therapy, Mindfulness, Insights, Existentialism

ABSTRACT

By utilising concepts of heuristic and art-based research, this project aims to examine the experience of combining mindfulness practice with art-making. The researcher has combined art-making with her experience as both a participant and a trainer in the Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR) course. This project has generated three hypotheses, through which implications for further research are propositioned: Firstly, art-making can help to consolidate insights that are attained through mindfulness practice and therefore enhance one's self-knowledge. Secondly, a combination of art-making and mindfulness practice may not only evoke existential anxiety but may also help one to address and confront existential dilemmas. Thirdly, as mindfulness practice can be disconcerting, art-making can be a grounding concentration activity that supports the process.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this research project is to closely examine the experience of combining mindfulness practice and art-making. The research and its methodologies are exploratory and descriptive in nature. The researcher has combined art-making with her experience as both a participant and a trainer in the Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR) course. The process of the inquiry is recorded as research findings, from which hypotheses and implications for further research have been generated.

Mindfulness practice in the context of the MBSR model

In this project, the term 'Mindfulness Practice' is defined and informed by Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Program (MBSR). Founded by Dr Jon Kabat-Zinn, the MBSR is a well-defined educational training program.

The MBSR program is conducted as an eight week course for groups who meet weekly, in which participants were instructed to practice and discuss mindfulness meditation skill.

On top of the weekly training, participants are instructed to practise these skills outside group meetings for at least 45 minutes per day, six days per week (Baer, 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Klatt, Buckworth & Malarkey, 2009; Praissman, 2008).

Mindfulness has been used in psychotherapy under different names since as early as the 1900s (Hirst, 2003; Mindfulness Therapy, 2010).

Specifically, mindfulness-based psychotherapy refers to models that explicitly teach clients how to practice mindfulness. Other more recent mindfulness-based psychotherapy treatments include Dialectical Behavioural Therapy; Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy, and Acceptance and Commitment

Therapy. The MBSR is chosen in this study for it is the most frequently cited method. (Baer, 2003; Lazer, 2005; Germer, 2005b).

'Mindfulness practice' as defined by the MBSR

Mindfulness meditation practice is not limited to the operation of particular techniques. As Dr Kabat-Zinn (2003) instructs, it takes a variety of forms, from "formal" practices such as sitting breathing exercises, to "informal" practices that aims at cultivating a continuity of awareness in one's daily living. In MBSR the term 'mindfulness practice' is also understood as "a way of being" and "a way of seeing" (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p.150) – referring to a direct engagement that allows mindfulness to be inhabited and grown into ones' life.

Current research on mindfulness practice

Beginning in the 1970s, a large body of research and literature has indicated that mindfulness practice could promote self-awareness. During the process of mindfulness training, one learns to observe their thoughts and emotions and to let them pass without judging them or becoming immersed in them. Resembling the introspective experience one would have in psychotherapy, mindfulness practice redirects the mind to a level of higher awareness (Christopher, Christopher, Dunagan & Schure, 2006; Germer, 2005b; Kabat-Zinn 2003; Lazer, 2005; Praissman 2008; Orzech, 2007).

Over ten years of medical research and extensive critical reviews of the clinical outcome have shown the MBSR as a powerful form of complimentary medicine. Literature on the effect of mindfulness training suggests that it leads to reductions in a variety of medical conditions and symptoms including pain, stress, anxiety, depressive relapse and

disordered eating (Baer, 2003; Christopher *et al*, 2006; Ekblad, 2008; Germer, 2005a; Kabat-Zinn, 1987; Klatt, 2008; 2003; Morgan & Morgan, 2005). Indeed, it is believed that meditation's role in deep inquiry and cultivation of insight might provide a unique perspective that can inform critical issues in cognitive science (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Driven by the possibility of acquiring new dimensions of therapeutic benefit in mind/body interaction, research on mindfulness is currently sparking considerable interest.

The call for descriptive research in mindfulness practice

Despite the growing popularity of mindfulness practise in psychotherapy, research that seeks to understand the mechanism of mindfulness is lacking (Dow, 2009; Ekblad, 2008; Lazer, 2005; Praissman, 2008). Though there have been a growing number of quantitative research studies, there have been very few qualitative studies on mindfulness. For example, until 2009 there had been no research studying qualitatively the experience of mindfulness (Dow, 2009).

While studies suggesting the effectiveness of mindfulness-based interventions continue to mount, few studies have examined how mindfulness practice enacts it's effects on individuals. In response to this gap in current research, the founder of the MBSR technique Dr Jon Kabat-Zinn (2003) calls for research that could tap into the "phenomenological nature" (p.145) of the MBSR experience.

Within the twenty-first century, a clear philosophical paradigm supporting the development of new, mindfulness-oriented models of psychotherapy has emerged. New treatment strategies are being derived from the basic elements of mindfulness; and the

therapeutic benefits of mindfulness practice are continuously shaped by various forces: clinical, theoretical, and physiological. Research in this area is expanding rapidly and generating interesting cross-disciplinary dialogue (Baer, 2003; Germer, 2005a; Lazer, 2005).

Mindfulness-based treatment is on its way to becoming well established, and we are on the threshold of intriguing possibilities. The need to understand the many relevant facets of mindfulness practice, especially when it is combined with other disciplines such as art therapy, has never been more pressing.

The value of combining mindfulness practice and art-making

The many commonalities between mindfulness practice and art-making lay the ground for a new dimension of therapeutic benefits.

Art therapy and mindfulness practice both foster the interaction of the conscious and the unconscious, and of the body and the mind.

In art therapy, clients create and externalise the problematic issue in order to gain strength. In a similar way, mindfulness creates the distance for one to step back from a problem. As a result of both practices, one is enabled to examine thoughts, feelings and actions without escape and avoidance in a framework of openness. It is believed that by noticing and acknowledging a full range of emotions and experiences, one could break reactive patterns associated with them and as a result attain personal growth (Fulton & Siegel, 2005; Morgan, 2005; Wallace, 2010).

The various similarities shared by mindfulness practice and art therapy have been of interest to many art therapists. Art therapists including Allen (2005) and Malchiodi (2007) have been using and suggesting the use of meditation before art-making. By incorporating

mindfulness into art therapy, one learns to be patient and to continue to attend to the image despite the potential negative feelings that might emerge (Allen, 2005; Malchiodi, 2002, cited in Lecompte 2008, p.9).

Current attempts in combining art-making and mindfulness practice

Art therapists become increasingly aware of the limited research that had been done on the role of meditation in art therapy. Author of *Art-Based Research*, McNiff (1998) proposes that new studies connecting meditation practice to physical health have made this area a credible and practical focus for art therapy research.

In 2006, a quantitative study was conducted to measure the effectiveness of Mindfulness-based Art Therapy (MBAT) (Monti, 2006).

The format of the MBAT highly resembles that of the MBSR except that it integrates aspects of art therapy into the program.

The MBAT group is found to have induced significant improvements in participants' quality of life. Garland (2007) conducted a study comparing the therapeutic effect of MBSR and art-making. Results showed that both programs were therapeutic for those who experienced trauma in their lives. Despite the above-mentioned results, no further research was conducted to follow up or examine the therapeutic effects of having the two modalities combined.

Rationale: Autobiographic reasons

“In heuristic research the investigator must have had a direct, personal encounter with the phenomenon being investigated. There must have been actual autobiographical connections” (Moustakas, 1990, p.14).

To me, this research project is a journey of personal inquiry. Both meditation and art-making strike me with the unpredictable insights they uncover. I have in the past struggled in the push-pull trap of my own mind until I found the answer in a disciplined practice of meditation. My personal experience has inspired me to incorporate mindfulness practice into art therapy.

As a future art therapist, it is important for me to understand fully the uncertainty, novelty and complexity associated with the creative process. A heuristic art-based inquiry corresponds and recreates the connection between the client and their art experience, helping me to understand the creative process as an autonomous force. Research has indicated that counselling students' reflective art-making, especially through visual journaling, results in increased psychological-mindedness and professional maturation (Deaver, 2009). It is suggested that the personal character of the therapist and the ability to examine one's own experience are primary indicators for future success (McNiff, 1998; Morgan, 2005). For these reasons, I see a first-hand research with the creative process as a vital element of training and a rite of passage into the profession of art therapy.

Factors affecting the choice of methodologies

Given the experiential, fluid and unpredictable nature of both mindfulness practice and art-making, it seems that only process-oriented research methods could respond to the complexity of the project. Both heuristic research and art-based research methods are non-linear in nature. They both lead an unfolding process of discovery and dialogue.

The research project aims to study and describe a human condition. As the 'human problem' is unpredictable and ever changing in nature, it could be better understood by inductive, rather than deductive, insights that an open-ended research method can produce (Poulter, 2006).

When little is known on the subject of combining art-making and mindfulness a rich description is needed. In order to provide a close examination and a vivid description of the experience, a personal and direct engagement in the process is required (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985; Moustakas, 1990). As the primary researcher, I must experience the subjects in a full, vital and intense way.

Due to the interpretive nature of human experience, subjective biases of the researcher are unavoidable. From a postmodern perspective, each individual is located in a historical, cultural, political and biological space that inevitably affects one's attitudes and responses to new knowledge. Therefore, the methodologies for the proposed study should be able to acknowledge the inevitability of the researchers' subjective interpretation of information (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985; Poulter, 2006; Sumara, 1998; Moustakas, 1990).

'Clinification syndrome'

Pat Allen (1992, cited in McNiff, 1998) coins the term 'clinification syndrome' to describe a sense of inferiority she finds in art therapy students when they compare themselves to more institutionally dominant scientific mental health professions. It pinpoints an urge to justify oneself or one's project by an external standard that is not necessarily relevant. The danger of this is that by doing so art therapists

would lose the artistic nature, the depth and uniqueness of the art therapy discipline.

I agree with the notion that “images and processes of artistic creation are always at least one-step ahead of the reflecting mind” (McNiff, 1998, p.27). If we continue to follow the standard behavioural science methods of establishing what we plan to do before we do it, we may undermine the power of our discipline to offer something distinctly new and useful. The solution offered by Allen (2005), which forms the basis of this study, is to anchor art therapy students more firmly in an art-based practice.

METHODOLOGY A: HEURISTIC INQUIRY

Heuristic inquiry is a form of exploratory research. It exists to describe a phenomenon or developing a theoretical proposition in relation to a given subject about which little is known (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985; Moustakas, 1990). It is also a method of research that particularly resonates with inquiry into counselling and therapy related issues (Hiles, 2001).

Usually a heuristic model is chosen because it provides the researcher with a meaningful and deep understanding of an experience. The findings of a heuristic study depict the qualities, themes, essences, and meanings of the experience.

In heuristic research, biases are acknowledged rather than avoided or denied, and the heuristic methods encourage researchers to try and recognise and manage bias in a non-judgemental way (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985; Poulter, 2006; Sumara, 1998; Moustakas, 1990).

Heuristic inquiry was developed by Clark Moustakas (1990). A few major process

guidelines known as ‘phases’ and are being adopted in this project (Moustakas, 1990, pp.27-37).

Immersion

This refers to the conscious and deliberate process of turning inward to seek a deeper comprehension of a human experience. In this phase, the researcher “lives the question in waking, sleeping and even dreaming” (Moustakas, 1990, p.27). The researcher would be alert to her surroundings. People, places, nature – all become a source of information for understanding the phenomenon.

Incubation

During this phase, the researcher retreats from the intensive, concentrated focus on the question. It is believed that growth and understanding would take place subconsciously, as “a seed has been planted (and) undergoes silent nourishment” (Moustakas, 1990, p.28).

Illumination

This stage is understood as the ‘ahha’ moment when insights are gained. As intuition provides the bridge between explicit and tacit knowledge these moments usually occur naturally when the researcher is open and receptive to intuition.

Explication

The purpose of the explication phase is to fully examine what has awakened in the consciousness in order to understand its various layers of meaning. In explication a more complete apprehension of the key ingredients is discovered. One can then bring together discoveries of meaning and organise them into a comprehensive depiction of the essences of the experience.

METHODOLOGY B: ART-BASED RESEARCH

Art-based research is research that uses the art process as a tool to understand an experience. These inquiries are distinguished from research activities where the arts may play a significant role but are used as data. Rather than simply reflecting upon the arts created in case studies, art is used as a psychological method (McNiff, 1998).

Art-based research grows from a trust in the intelligence of a creative process. In an arts-based project goals and issues are less well defined, more diffused and broad in scope. As a result, the breadth and depth of the project are widened and deepened (Berridge 2007).

Art-based research expands traditional heuristic research in many ways. Although immersion, a core concept in heuristic research, is a fundamental condition of art-based research, the use of art could expand the experimental process by introducing a second element (McNiff, 1998).

Research in action

True to the nature of heuristic research, I, as the researcher, have from an insider's perspective reviewed the experience as both a participant and a trainer in the MBSR course. I was first enrolled in an eight-week MBSR Introductory course, then a professional training course known as the Practicum. Both courses were organised by OpenGround Australia, recognised and taught by trainers that are accredited by the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine in the University of Massachusetts Medical School.

THE FINDINGS

The results are presented here as they were found stage by stage.

Stage 1: A summary of my experience during the eight-week MBSR course

The first stage of my research consisted of the eight week MBSR program. Apart from the weekly meetings, I carried along with me a drawing journal at all times to record personal insights that emerged during the day. This process corresponded with the immersion phase of a heuristic inquiry. By reviewing my journal I began to conceptualise my experience, and other processes of a heuristic inquiry – illumination, explication – took place simultaneously.

Immense anxiety at the start

An image I titled 'Burst' (Figure 1) was being developed during the first few weeks. My initial experience with mindfulness meditation had revealed to me a very uncomfortable sensation. I was confronted by a strong sense of loss, loneliness and fear. The bubbles in the image represented anxiety that was about to implode and my wish to contain and control them.

A yearning to return to home emerged as a result of the sense of loss I experienced during mindfulness practices. I wrote: "Maybe it is the boredom or hollowness that arises from meditating, but in order to escape from it I hide back into my memories".

One of the images I drew during this time depicts me looking at my hometown in Hong Kong (Figure 2). I found the process of indulging in memories comforting and relieving.

It became increasingly clear to me that reminiscing about the past was a tool I had been using, both in meditation and in life, to avoid certain unpleasant experiences or sensations.



Figure 1: Burst.



Figure 3.



Figure 2.



Figure 4.

I have also witnessed my restlessness, tendency to self-criticise and my compulsive desire to exert control over situations. For instance, I was often frustrated with myself for not drawing the lines exactly how I had wanted. Sometimes I would fiercely tear the artwork I did not like. I was exasperated by the futile attempt to erase my 'mistakes'.

Groundlessness and responsibility

In the following weeks, I was confronted by a sense of loss, loneliness and fear that stem from existential anxiety. I began to question bigger questions about the meaning of life. As I wrote in my journal:

Every time I meditate, I felt restless; ...every time I try to sit still and draw, I question the meaning of it. I began to question not only the meaning of my practise but also deeper issues in life: I based my whole life around trying to achieve something ... today as I struggled through art I felt scared – what if all this is leading no where?

A feeling of 'groundlessness' emerged as a central theme. Art therapist Bruce Moon (1990) describes 'groundlessness' as a sense of "having no foundation, no cause and no promise", which clashes with our longing for continuation, external order and groundedness.

Two images that were being created during this period stood out as a sharp explication of the sense of chaos. The first image depicted a lack of ground, with all people and objects floating in mid-air having nothing to 'fall back on' (Figure 3, see page 57).

The second drawing was of a young girl with no legs (Figure 4, see page 57). As the girl wearing what appears to be the uniform of mine when I was in elementary school, it occurred to me that this was an emotional self-portrait.

Through the heuristic process of immersing in and explicating my feelings, a new level of self-understanding emerged. I realised that the drawing of my hometown and myself as a girl both expressed a desire for regression. I was intimidated by the responsibility that came with age and maturation. I struggled with the difficulties of taking charge of my life and making decisions for myself. I wrote:

I used to live a very easy life, blaming everyone else for controlling me. Yet as I grow up I have attained the freedom to make all decisions for myself. It is clear that I am now responsible for my own fate, happiness and sorrow. It is not as easy as it seemed... I feel that I need somewhere to fall back on and someone to blame.

Yalom (1980) has called the discovery of responsibility during meditation as a "moment of illumination" (p.219) because through which an important existential concern is being addressed. He also agrees that groundlessness is a common term for a subjective experience of responsibility awareness: "To experience existence in this matter is a dizzying sensation. The very ground beneath one seems to open up". He proposes that to be aware of one's responsibility in creating one's own self, destiny, life predicament... and one's own suffering is a "deeply frightening (existential) insight" (p.221) that cuts deeper than death anxiety.

At the end of the eight week MBSR course, I felt that I have attained new levels of insights about myself. The process of being confronted by existential fear was unnerving, but I have unveiled my fear for the responsibility that came with age and maturation and began to address deeper issues about the meaning of life. I began to realise that the narrow and compulsive patterns that I have held for years have blocked me from living fully. More than any other time, I felt the pressing need to

address the existential concern of freedom and choice that was inherited in life.

Stage 2: A summary of my experience throughout the five day intensive professional training in the MBSR practicum

After having maintained a regular mindfulness practise for about three months, I attended the MBSR Practicum – an intensive five day residential training. It was held in a rural retreat centre in New South Wales, Australia. During this time I received very intensive training based on the MBSR model. At least 15 minutes would be set aside per day to work on my drawing journal, and any insights that emerged during the day were being recorded.

On day one of the intensive program, I struggled with agitation and restlessness during the group silent meditation exercises.

I recorded:

For thirty minutes I could not pull my attention away from the distractions: ... the breathing of my neighbour, the noise made by the air conditioner. Unlike when I was practising at home, I had no choice but to stay...

However, as the day proceeded, it suddenly became clear to me that I could have no control over the surroundings, I could only control my inner experience. An insight emerged: “Maybe it is time for me to take charge of my inner experience”. I was determined to sit with the imperfections the situation had presented to me. I tried to breathe and hold my agitation in mindfulness without feeding them. Surprisingly, after a while the noise began to subside and I felt more at peace.

To celebrate the new insight; I created a visual reminder for myself. In this image, I saw myself sitting in the middle of a constantly changing environment (Figure 5, see page 61). The sharp

edges and the bleeding ladder symbolised the external stimulus and my agitation. In the midst of that, however, I was able to maintain calm and still. The halo symbolises the process of me gradually gaining wisdom and insights through the process.

Relinquishing the need to control

On the third day of the intensive retreat, we learnt about the ‘Choiceless Awareness’ exercise, in which one was to cultivate an “evenly hovering attention” to all – positive or negative – mental experiences. I eased into the exercise by distancing myself from my mental activities. I remained a mere ‘observer’ of my own mind. By doing so, I began to see the coming and going of different thoughts and emotions and was surprised by how my mind-states were indeed constantly shifting. I saw the fluid and ever-changing nature of my mind, and I realised that every experience, good or bad, would eventually pass. Once I understood this, I gave up trying to control or stop any emerging thoughts. By doing so, the uncomfortable sensations and the fearful emotions immediately became less threatening.

The image (Figure 6, see page 61) depicted me in a meditation stance, calmly witnessing the rising and falling of different thoughts and emotions, including the unpleasant ones that were represented by the ‘heavy rocks’.

At the end of my retreat, I felt revitalised, alive and free. With more acceptances towards negative sensations and feelings, I felt that I had the courage in embracing the whole spectrum of my inner experience. In my last journal art piece during the retreat (Figure 7, see page 61), I included the following texts: “It’s a no-failing situation. Even when it’s horrible and ugly and frustrating... whatever you are sensing, thinking (and) feeling, just notice. If

you could, hold it with love and kindness.” My experience was captured in a final piece of drawing (Figure 8) I created after I left the retreat. The image depicted a warm, feminine figure overseeing the coming and going of people, and the changes of nights and days. She, representing my revitalised self, was calm, warm, and accepting.

I was delighted by the insight that whatever arises will pass, and that I could simply ‘sit back and watch’ – as I did in the drawing. The initial desire to ‘blame someone’ or have someone be responsible for my actions has decreased.

In art I practised what I learnt from mindfulness practise – to surrender to and to embrace what reality presents to us; to relinquish resistance or the urge to control what is. As I practised mindfulness meditation and applied the insights of art-making, the occasions when I felt that things had ‘gone wrong’ were lessened. Through not resisting, the drawing process immediately became more enjoyable. As Malchiodi said: “One of the things that artistic creativity has to teach us is to let go and go with what emerges... we need to continually relearn how to create with a beginner’s innocence, curiosity, and exploration” (2007, p.47).

To conclude, I have gained self-understanding, insights and revitalisation through the process of combining art-making and mindfulness practice. Initially the unpleasant sensations and negative emotions overpowered me, yet through the exercises and guided meditation introduced in the MBSR course I learnt to mindfully observe them – without denying or getting lost in them. In the end, I felt that I was able to experience feelings in their own right. I have encompassed peace and contentment through witnessing my changing mind states and claiming ownership of them.

DISCUSSION: THE ROLE OF ART-MAKING

During the course of this project art-making has intertwined and supported my mindfulness practice in the following three ways:

1. Self-knowledge

Increased self-knowledge was the first and foremost of the many benefits of keeping a visual journal throughout the process. Not long after I combined a mindful examination of my mind states with art-making have I become aware of my thought patterns and immediate responses to stress, things that I had lived with but was never aware of. For instance, I witnessed my desire to extend complete control over the external environment and my tendency to reminisce when unpleasant emotions arise.

Art-making helped me to explicate and externalise my internal states, which were often intangible and difficult to grasp. When reviewing my drawing journal, I have the time and space to look into my avoidance and resistance. Such self-review has laid a solid foundation to the changes and growth I later, where I learned to endure the uncertainty that was ingrained both in life and in art-making.

2. Collision with existential art therapy

The collision of my experience with existential themes was an outcome that I did not expect. My experience resembles that of an existential art therapy process: an existential approach to art therapy emphasises liberating one from fear and anxiety and thus lives life to the fullest. It offers the experiences of free choice and the opportunity to make sense of what often seems senseless and meaningless (Malchiodi, 2003).

As I learnt that I was intimidated by the responsibility that came with adulthood, I have particularly addressed the existential theme of freedom and responsibility.



Figure 5.

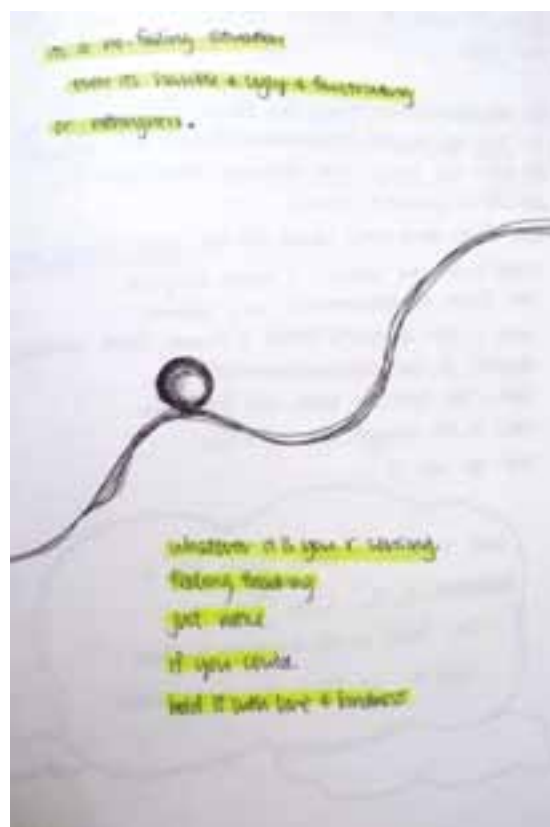


Figure 7.



Figure 6.



Figure 8.

Whilst mindfulness practice brought out the existential anxiety inside me, art-making served as a metaphor for the existential dilemmas, allowing me to explore, experiment with and experience confronting such anxiety.

To counteract the sense of chaos presented by an empty page I must progress with artistic decisions. Each decision I made began the process of structuring and content forming; it was through the multiplicity of decisions that I began to give form to the chaos of endless possibilities. As philosopher Rollo May (1994) suggested, artists gain pleasure and a sense of ease by “putting chaos into form” (Moon, 1990, p.38).

Through the making of artistic decisions I addressed the deeper existential theme of freedom and choice. Making an artistic decision not only exposes one to the anxiety of groundlessness but also lead one to a state of mindfulness (Yalom, 1980).

The choice of ink pen as my art medium had revealed to me the challenges of taking on responsibility: I found the irreversible quality of pen lines liberating, yet at the same time frightening.

Through constant practise and by using the art process as a metaphor for choice and free will, I have eventually learned to own the choices I make – not just in art but also in life.

The combination of art-making and mindfulness practise has helped me to breakthrough the state of “restricted existence” (Corey, 2005, p.146). Before, I had a limited awareness of myself and was often vague about the nature of my problem. I saw few options for dealing with life situation and tended to feel trapped or helpless.

3. Drawing as a concentration practice

As insight meditation – as followed by the MBSR model (McCown, Reibel & Micozzi, 2010) – tended to be difficult and disconcerting, many mindfulness teachers (Bhante Gunaratana, 1985; Ingram, 2008) advised practicing insight meditation with a concurrent ‘concentration practice’. It was suggested that the concentration states could stabilise the mind, and as concentration states cultivate deep clarity and stability, they were very useful for promoting deep and healing psychological insights.

Originally proposed by Csíkszentmihályi (1975) as the idea of ‘flow’ and later agreed by many artists and scholars, art-making produces a high degree of concentration (Rappaport, 2009). It was found that as artists work they go into a trance-like state, become absorbed, and have the focus of awareness narrowed down to the activity itself.

I found the concentration required from drawing grounding. I tended to focus on very refined details in the objects I drew, working with a fine black pen; my art process required immense focus and attention. By sinking into the rhythm of making marks on paper and cultivating a laser-beam like focused attention, I was immediately absorbed in the present moment, relinquishing all past concerns or future worries.

In addition, the act of making marks on the paper acted as a ‘safe place’ that I could fall back on when my mind wandered to the verge of threatening emotions. Knowing that I could also go back to concentrating on my drawing gave me more courage to explore the inner realm of my mind.

In short, drawing alongside the MBSR process has helped to stabilise my mind. It acted as a point of focus that I could go back to, offering me a sense of comfort, which I desperately craved in the unsettling mindfulness practice.

Limitations of research methodologies

The standard of ‘usefulness’ of this research project may not conveniently correspond to the values of current science. Although heuristic research is a clearly defined method that can be used by others (McNiff, 1998), it is characterised by endless variations of style, interpretation and outcome. Generalisation cannot be made, as there is only one researcher. The result, therefore, is not conveniently replicable.

As a heuristic research project that aims to illuminate, this project has produced more “metaphorical conclusions”, rather than the more “literal oriented conclusions” of conventional research, and therefore might be not as readily accepted (Eisner, 2005, p.15).

Implication for further research

Since a heuristic art-based research is introspective and personal in nature, the next step would be developing bridging research that explains how this can be of use to others and how it connects to practices in the discipline.

In this project, I have offered a description of how art-making and mindfulness practice act together to enact their effects. The role of art-making and its specific effect on the course of mindfulness practise – whether as a complimentary tool or a supporting tool – is worth deeper examination.

Further research on the following areas would most likely induce valuable findings that follow up the propositions of this project:

- The effectiveness of using art-making to help one to explicate and consolidate insights gained through a mindfulness practice;
- The relationship between mindfulness practice, art-making and existential art therapy;
- The use of art-making as a ‘concentration practice’ that supports a potentially disconcerting mindfulness practice.

CONCLUSION: ART-MAKING REINFORCES THE LEARNING OF MINDFULNESS

Through a combination of art-making and mindfulness practice as informed by the MBSR program, findings of this project suggested a circular formula that is consistent with art therapist Moon’s (1990) experience: “Artistic expression leads to mindfulness, mindfulness leads to creative anxiety, which leads to change/ action, which fosters expression that deepens mindfulness” (p.7).

This project has generated three hypotheses that explore the role of art-making relation to a mindfulness practice. Firstly, art-making might help to explicate and consolidate insights that were attained in mindfulness practice, thus enhance one’s knowledge of self. Secondly, a combination of both art-making and mindfulness practice could bring up and help one to address deeper existential concerns in life. A potential linkage between art-making, mindfulness practice and existential art therapy is being proposed. Thirdly, it was found that art-making can be a grounding concentration activity that supports the potentially disconcerting mindfulness programme.

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