

Explainer – Arts-based research: A tentative and general introduction

Deborah Green

For many creative arts therapists (CATs) the experience of companioning clients in creative therapeutic capers is prismatic, parabolic, poly-sensory, and paradoxical. This variegated practice can, however, fall prey to rigid and reductive research processes. And while these more traditional forms of quantitative and qualitative research still generally hold greater credibility than emergent methodologies, new approaches such as arts-based research (ABR) have been steadily gaining ground.

JoCAT is dedicated to bringing our wide readership a rich buffet of CAT-focused research from a variety of countries and contexts, and carried out using a range of research methodologies. Approaches span established quantitative and qualitative forms through to emergent post-qualitative and performative research – forms that Haseman (2006) calls the ‘third methodological distinction’, Lincoln and Denzin (2003) name the ‘performative turn’ and Adams St. Pierre (2014) refers to as the ‘ontological turn’ within research. While the more conventional research approaches need little introduction, some of the more contemporary forms, including ABR, may, however, be less familiar – hence this brief introduction.

Simultaneously a practice, process and product, ABR is an ‘aesthetic way of knowing’ (Greenwood, 2012): the researcher investigates a research question through artistic creating during data gathering|generation and/or analysis|translation and/or presentation. ABR is located within the ‘performative paradigm’ (Haseman, 2006). Performative researchers create new artistic forms to carry out intrinsically experiential practice-led research, ultimately understood “in terms of the performative force of art, that is, its capacity to effect ‘movement’ in thought, word and deed in the individual and social sensorium” (Bolt, 2016, p.130). Performative research recognises research acts are generative; they don’t simply dis/un/cover what is already there, they create and/or transform both the researcher and researched (Adams St. Pierre, 2014; Green, 2018; Green et al., 2022; Haseman, 2006) – in much the same way as CAT transforms both therapist and client.

Shaun McNiff (1998) offers a strong call to ABR, stating that “the process of research should correspond as closely as possible to the experience of therapy” (p.170). Such resonance between *what* and *how* we research also invites more congruent reciprocity between the skill sets we cultivate via both research and therapy (Leavy, 2018; McNiff, 1998, 2013). ABR

offers this congruence and skills-growth to CATs by inviting researchers to simultaneously gain new content knowledge while developing aptitudes that markedly enhance their clinical practice. Both ABR and CAT draw upon poetic creativity. Both involve the considered use of visual, performing and/or literary artistic practices to generate, analyse and communicate knowledge (Kapitan, 2018; Leavy, 2018; Manders & Chilton, 2013; McNiff, 1998, 2013). Both stimulate ‘flow state’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), an optimal engagement that activates explicit and implicit/tacit information systems to process and integrate stimuli. According to McNiff (2013), using the arts as research falls into two general categories: *arts-based* research (ABR) engages the researcher as artist, while *arts-informed* research (AIR) sees researchers exploring the arts made by others. These methodologies thus also resonate with CAT by inviting intimate examination of self-and-other allowing clients and clinicians to know themselves in more meaningful ways (Gray, 2011).

This ‘performative turn’ in research orientates towards recognition and embrace of researcher subjectivity and participant and reader inter-and intra-subjectivity (Barad, 2007; Lincoln & Denzin, 2003). This brings into the ambit of research an interest in and commitment to ‘deep journeying’ speaking to ways in which engaging in and being moved during the reading of research may strengthen the clinical capacity of CATs. This sometimes challenges but more often parallaxically enhances the traditional trajectory of ‘outcome/efficacy/evidence-based’ research, aimed at professionalising the field of CAT by providing legitimising evidence for CAT’s disciplinary and applied status (D. Fleming, personal communication, 2019).

Engaging ABR may form part of the practitioner’s learning triangle, combining personal experience and academic research to inform future practice and enhance the development of therapist identity (Skovholt, 2012). In addition, ABR encourages the repurposing of CAT processes into research methods (Green, et al., 2022; McNiff, 2013) potentially gifting new creative research approaches to the broader research world. While these forms of research still jostle for appreciation, there is therefore growing support championing “the idea that knowledge of the world cannot and should not be reduced to words and numbers alone” (O’Connor & Anderson, 2015, p.23). Recognition is mounting for research that works from insider knowledge while disrupting and making taken-for-granted constructs visible. Such research forms are being increasingly valued as they foster engagement and create intersubjective response, offer expression to silenced voices and topics, and render academic knowledge more accessible to non-academics by turning social science inquiry into a non-alienating practice (Bochner, 2016; Gerber et al., 2020; Holman Jones, Adams & Ellis, 2016; Kara & Khoo, 2022). Plus, to “overlook the beauty of the soul’s speech by turning exclusively to empirical analysis...is to expel the soul from art therapy” (McConeghey, 2017, p.19).

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