

# Demystifying Art Therapy: Using Response Art to Enhance Reflexivity, Professional Knowledge, and Collegiality in a Grounded Theory Methodology Design

Dimitra Theodoropoulou

School of Health and Social Care, University of Essex, UK

\* Corresponding author's email: dt18782@essex.ac.uk

doi: <https://doi.org/10.21467/proceedings.168.3>

## ABSTRACT

This paper is part of a professional doctorate research in Health and Social Care aiming to advance practice-based knowledge of Art Therapy. The literature review highlighted the need for more qualitative research with children addressing the question 'how Art Therapy works'. The study was conducted within a children's mental health charity in the UK exploring conceptualisation of change through the Art Therapists' perspectives. The overarching methodology used was Constructivist Grounded Theory including the methods of Intensive Interviewing and Response Art. Five Art Therapists were interviewed twice to allow for deeper exploration of case studies. Researcher and participants created response art images between the interviews to visually reflect and capture symbolic nuances of change in the children's journey. Presented in the findings are the author's response art images, accompanied by selected excerpts of shared reflections with and from the participants illustrating the process of visual exploration. The discussion lays out the author's insight into the benefits of the researcher sharing their own Response Art with the participants for bringing about collegial vulnerability and collaboration. The conclusion is focused on how visual reflexivity methods, such as response art, can create conditions of time, space and hope in stimulating research and advancing professional knowledge.

**Keywords:** art therapy, constructivist grounded theory, response art

## 1 Introduction

This paper presents part of the findings from the author's professional doctorate research in Health and Social Care at the University of Essex in the UK. The author was interested in developing a research design that would advance practice-based knowledge in Art Therapy. Art Therapy is one of the creative arts therapies that uses visual art media as its primary mode of expression and communication to address emotional issues that may be confusing and distressing (BAAT 2019). It is a profession regulated by the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) in the UK and Art Therapists are represented by the British Association of Art Therapy (BAAT). Waller (1991) recorded the Art Therapy journey in the UK and identified its pitfalls until the success of becoming a profession in 1982. Following on this official recognition and to find its place as a 'newborn' profession in the field of psychotherapy, there were numerous publications, mainly narratives based on case studies, anecdotal evidence and experts' opinions, to illustrate how Art Therapy can support people with various psychological needs. This need to document theory and practice of Art Therapy became especially important in the UK due to the advances of the National Institute of Health and Care Excellence (NICE). According to NICE published guidelines for evidence-based practice which started in 1999, there was, and still is, a push for health and care professionals to make informed decisions about their service user's needs based on available research evidence.



© 2024 Copyright held by the author(s). Published by AIJR Publisher in "Proceedings of the 8<sup>th</sup> International Visual Methods Conference" (IVMC8). Organized by Sapienza University of Rome - Saperi&Co. and Melting Pro, Rome, Italy on 29-31 May 2023.

Proceedings DOI: [10.21467/proceedings.168](https://doi.org/10.21467/proceedings.168); Series: AIJR Proceedings; ISSN: 2582-3922; ISBN: 978-81-970666-6-5

---

As a more recent illustration of this struggle, Val Huet et al (2014) explained in their paper on how the Art Therapy Practice Research Network was created as a response to the paradigm change in the UK health care sector due to funding and commissioning crisis. In their view, this new paradigm created a culture of fear, negatively impacting the development of practice.

based research which is what most Art Therapists can realistically engage with, since they are engaged with on-the-ground clinical work supporting service users. The potential problem therefore is that the less Art Therapy research is taking place, the less evidence for Art Therapy in health and care is available resulting in exclusion of Art Therapy from health guidelines and recommendations with the risk of the profession being decommissioned.

To explore the lack of recent research evidence of Art Therapy with children and young people, the author conducted a preliminary scoping literature review. This exploratory review aimed to identify recent research (2013-2018) focusing on Mental Health Outcomes of Art Therapy interventions facilitated by qualified Art Therapists working with children and young people in mental health educational and community settings in the UK. One key finding was that Art Therapy research seemed to struggle with methodology, often failing to fit in randomized control trials or other quantitative designs with standardised outcomes measurements. Systematic reviews recommended more qualitative or mixed methods designs that can identify better the nuances of Art Therapy. Another key finding was that there was limited number of published Art Therapy research in the years 2013-2018 with children and young people in the UK. This indicated reduced engagement of Art Therapists with research, perhaps due to ethical barriers in conducting research with children and young people.

Based on this literature review, the author's assumption was that the challenge for Art Therapy research is how to consider methodology designs that can explore the multi-faceted nature of Art Therapy by identifying the tacit elements that can bring about change. Recent systematic literature reviews examining mental health outcomes in Art Therapy (Kelly et al 2015, Van Lith et al 2016), identified that Art Therapy mechanisms remain a 'mystery'. Their suggestion was for more qualitative or mixed methodology studies to be conducted to explore the question 'How Art Therapy Works'. Following on from these suggestions, the aim of the study presented in this paper was to further demystify the Art Therapy process by exploring how the tacit mechanisms of change can become more tangible. One of the underlying assumptions was that Art Therapists hold 'tacit knowledge', a term used by Polanyi (1966) referring to the art of knowing and that we can know more than we can tell. Based on this, the study aimed to explore the Art Therapists' practice-based knowledge to conceptualise how Art Therapy works with children and young people in a UK based mental health charity organisation.

## **2 Methodology**

Since the overarching research question of this research was 'How does Art Therapy work?', a qualitative design seemed appropriate to explore the topic through the Art Therapists' perspectives. Grounded Theory methodology has been identified suitable for exploration of 'How' questions and the expectation was that it could support the aim of this research proposal to make the tacit tangible: 'Grounded theory methods demystify the conduct of qualitative inquiry -and expedite your research and enhance your excitement about it. The method fosters gaining both analytic control and momentum.' (Charmaz 2014: 4). The author's underpinning ontological and epistemological position was based on Critical Realism (Bhaskar 2017, 2018). According to this there might be: changes we can see, for example in the client's behaviour and the art making process (the empirical); changes we can't see but we can somehow know, for example in the

therapeutic relationship or the symbols and meanings in the art products (the actual); changes we can't see or we can't know, but exist nonetheless (the real).

The research was conducted in a charity organisation which offers therapeutic interventions to children and young people in the UK to support them with their mental health and psychological wellbeing. The organisation employs an interdisciplinary team of various therapists, including Art Therapists. It has a structured system of supporting the service user: from referral to assessment of individual needs, to recommended treatment plan, to review and evaluation of outcomes, through monitoring and supervision processes. This system aspires to evidence-based practice principles but cannot claim to be one in a strict sense; it is better described as a practice-based evidence model. Different methods were employed to explore the different layers of Art Therapy practice in this setting: interviews, documents, response art.

Constructivist Grounded Theory approach suggests the method of Intensive Interviewing for an in-depth exploration and co-construction of concepts. This is a semi-structured but flexible approach to interviewing that gives emphasis on the participants' perspective, meanings and experience (Charmaz 2014: 56). This approach also encourages follow up on the initial interviews to reach deeper exploration of emerging concepts (Birks & Mills 2015). The approach of two interviews per participant is also encouraged by narrative methodologies (Hollway & Jefferson 2000). Response art is used systematically in Art Therapy practice and supervision as a tool to hold challenging experiences in response to the clinical work, investigate them, and communicate them to others (Fish 2017). Alongside Art Therapy, there has been an increased interest in how Visual and Creative Methods in Research can enhance participation, collaboration, co-production and emancipation; evident in recent publications such as Leavey (2020) and Kara (2020).

The author interviewed five participants twice, allowing time in-between for reflection and response art making. The Art Therapists were invited, if they wanted, to use response art to reflect on their chosen case study after the first interview. The author did the same. Both participant and researcher shared their images in the second interview which enabled them to explore together the deeper and more complex layers of change in their work. The act of the researcher sharing their own response art with the participants aimed to allow for collegial collaboration. The intention was to address some of the power dynamics that can occur in the relationship between researcher and participants.

### **3 Results**

For the purpose of this paper, and due to the doctoral thesis being written, only the researcher's images, alongside selected participants' quotes are shared here. The aim is to illustrate the process of how Art Therapists responded to the interviewing process and the sharing of response art by the researcher. All names have been changed to pseudonyms to protect the participants' identities.

#### **3.1 Process with participant A**

The process of interviewing the first participant, Amelia, was like diving in deep waters, having to *hold breath* and *swim in unknown waters*; as depicted in the two response art images created by the researcher after each interview (figures 1 and 2). The researcher had to learn how to embrace uncertainty, same as Amelia, who was talking about her struggle to engage a young person with complex life challenges in online Art Therapy.



Figure 1: Researcher's response art after Interview 1 with Participant A  
Title: 'Immersing and Emerging'.



Figure 2: Researcher's response art after Interview 2 with Participant A  
Title: 'Swimming deeper, looking

Researcher -sharing response art and reflections after Interview 1 with Amelia:

*'I start with dry inks, with structure because there's more control and then brush and water and just kind of playing with this structure and flow, structure and flow. There was something for me about how, you know, in principle it should be straightforward like 'Let's talk about a case study', but actually, when these bright colours kind of dived in here, which is the pool of the research, like a stone falling into water and it starts creating a bit muddiness... because once you start looking and move things around and all the need to have crystal clear answers and, how in reality when you start swimming... you deal with messy data.'*

Art Therapist Amelia- sharing reflection on the process in Interview 2:

*'Good, actually, it's been interesting to think around the case after some time I guess as well having some time to reflect on it. And then I was thinking about changes and if there was any. So I was questioning those things as well, which was interesting and so I've been thinking around it and I guess sometimes it's good to look at cases and take a step back and go back again. Because when you're doing the case, it's like you're in the bits of it so... It's been interesting to think and reflect back here.'*

In the excerpts above, the researcher shared how the use of water-soluble inks allowed for exploration of the relationship between structure and flow. This exploration led to muddy colours as a visual metaphor of the messiness of complex data. The participant reflected on how it is easier to reflect on change when taking time for the ink to dry; in other words looking back and thinking about the work from distance.

### 3.2 Process with participant B

Interviewing the second participant, Bethany, felt easier, more grounded. Water was replaced by earth/ground (researcher's response art; figure 3) and the reflection allowed deeper thinking. It was about *connecting the dots* of a child's journey which had lots of lost parts due to trauma needing connections; like the title of the response art created by the researcher (figure 4).



Figure 3: *Researcher's response art after Interview 1 with Participant B*  
Title: 'Nurture vs Nature'.



Figure 4: *Researcher's response art after Interview 2 with Participant B*  
Title: 'Connecting the dots'.

Researcher -sharing response art and reflections after Interview 1 with participant B:

*I asked you what is the first thing that comes to mind, when you're thinking about the case study and you said growth, thinking of this child growing bigger. Then, this tree came to mind but...It looks like that, but it's not a tree... something like a dna as well. It made me think about Nurture versus Nature. There's balance. Anything is possible... And something about how Art Therapy being in the middle, because we talked a lot about the process and the medicalised kind of therapy in the medicalised environments and then Art being the roots, and Art Therapy sitting in the middle so...Well, some things can change. Some things cannot change. Or can they? Client growth and evolution in DNA like shapes.'*

Art Therapist Bethany- sharing reflection on the process in Interview 2:

*It was really nice actually to spend a prolonged period of time thinking about the things that we thought about in the last one. And just to go deeper into things. What I found was that it really got me thinking about why I do, what I do and the sort of origins, the reason why I went into Art Therapy in the first place. And then kind of reconnected me with the kind of... I don't know, part of the beauty of the process with my clients, which was really nice, it felt really reconnecting, which I found really valuable and then just a regular sort of permeating sinking in the background about the client and the work that they did. So, it was an interesting outcome.'*

In the excerpts above the researcher shared reflections on growth in Art Therapy and the question around nurture versus nature conditions for change to occur. The participant reflected on the need for time to allow for deeper exploration of change and meaning making; for their case study as well as for themselves in their journey becoming Art Therapists.

### 3.3 Process with participant C

After the interviews with the first two participants, there was a long pause, and the researcher was waiting for more Art Therapists to come forward within the organisation. Things felt uncertain, but hope was maintained, and the time and space were used to continue with reflexivity. In supervision, the author reflected on how the practitioners were experiencing fatigue and overwhelm due to prolonged pandemic conditions; taking part in research was not a priority, understandably, due to lack of time and emotional space. Holding the hope was fruitful; a third participant came forward after few months. The aesthetic

changes in the two images (see figure 5 and 6) created after each interview with the third participant, Carmen, indicated a shift in the researcher's stance and ease within the process. Art Therapy with a young person in isolation and emotional shut-down, offered a process from gradual growth to full bloom. Hope had been reinstalled for the young person, their parents and the therapist.



Figure 5: *Researcher's response art after Interview 1 with Participant C*  
Title: 'Becoming oneself'.



Figure 6: *Researcher's response art after Interview 2 with Participant C,*  
Title: 'Seeds of energy'.

Researcher -sharing response art and reflections after Interview 1 with participant C:

*'The result was quite delicate, and then kind of sensitive. It has vulnerability and strength. I used ink blocks, they're like pastels but you can make the marks first with the ink blocks, they're water soluble, so then I used water with brushes and sort of filled in. then kind of adding some details, that you might not be able to see, with the pens. I don't know what they mean. But, I just I felt the need to put them there...And my thoughts were...I had this image of an onion-like-flower. And then I kept some key words like: 'Let the layers, the unfolding, the growth coming out, becoming oneself, let it happen. It will happen organically. Time and space lead to maturation. The last one was more about something common about my own processing within this project, because I'm seeing also the differences in my art making as I go along.'*

Art Therapist Carmen- sharing reflection on the process in Interview 2:

*'I've enjoyed it, like I said last week, reflecting on the reason why I started Art Therapy in the first place. And to kind of reminiscing on a case that it was very difficult at the beginning, and actually the profound effects that it had in the end. I'd be interested to read what you come up with at the end.'*

In the excerpts above the researcher shared reflections on the qualities of strength and vulnerability. These seemed to echo parallel dynamics in the case study exploration as well as the researcher's own process in conducting research. The participant appreciated the opportunity to reminisce their journey of becoming Art Therapist as well as seeing their work from a new perspective which was more hopeful than initially thought about.

### 3.4 Process with participant D

Soon after the third participant, the fourth Art Therapist, Dahlia, came forward. The joint reflection on

a complex grief case allowed for unexpected insights whilst navigating how loss and pain can become tangible through art making. The researcher aimed to capture this process of journey through their response art images (figure 7 and 8).



Figure 7: Researcher's response art after Interview 1 with Participant D  
Title: 'Getting there'.



Figure 8: Researcher's response art after Interview 2 with Participant D  
Title: 'It's a dialogue after all'.

Researcher -sharing response art and reflections after Interview 1 with participant D:

*'It wasn't a very conscious decision. I suppose I keep the colours the same, though, I keep the palette the same. So, first the squares, and I wrote down some words like building blocks, scaffolding and then grounding, because I did this, and then I felt like they were kind of in the air, so I drew these lines to ground them, but not heavily, almost like balloons...like grounding the research. So if this is the Art Therapy that is being researched, it's kind of sitting at the top, so it's kind of like they try to have a dialogue. But also, Art Therapy kind of escaping the square as well, using these kinds of stairs, those steps. So, my title in the end was 'Getting There', and I made a note that it is about me as a researcher, the art therapist getting there, and the client getting there.'*

Art Therapist Dahlia- sharing reflection on the process in Interview 2:

*'So you illustrate the research, what the research process feels like. And then you're analysing the art, I think that's amazing. I don't know what I expected. And it's exciting to think that something like this has been captured in an image that's going to contribute to research. Yeah, I didn't know about this. It looks like it could be something that could inspire other people as well and like what you were saying last time. And I think research is so often dismissive of those elements, or maybe people feel too worried to make themselves vulnerable in that way, in such a qualitative way.'*

In the excerpts above the researcher shared reflections on the process of breaking things down in smaller parts, creating scaffolding to ground the exploration for the different parts to have a dialogue. This dialogue was reflecting the case study exploration as well as the interaction between researcher and participant. The participant expressed interest in the process of visually conceptualising the research findings. There was an

appreciation of placing value in use of visual methods when there is a need for inspiration and vulnerability in qualitative inquires.

### 3.5 Process with participant E

The process of interviewing the fifth and last participant, Elaine, brought up the concept of safety and containment; how art making with an energetic child enables energy to be channelled positively in a creative and playful way. The researcher aimed to capture this process through their response art images (figure 9 and 10). Containment was also indicative of concluding the data generation, as this was the final interviewing, and continuing with data immersion and analysis.



Figure 9: *Researcher's response art after Interview 1 with Participant E*  
Title: 'Fireballs'.



Figure 10: *Researcher's response art after Interview 2 with Participant E*  
Title: 'Containment'.

Researcher -sharing response art and reflections after Interview 1 with participant E:

*'I did think about something around water. It was obviously inspired by what you were saying. But there's something about that theme of the research framework, softening up, being a little more fluid and allowing waves, allowing not to have straightforward answers, allowing the disturbance, the storm that you talked about. And the different spheres made me think about how the layers of you sharing lots of different things in the first interview, and allowing that almost like throwing balls in the air and see what happens, but also knowing what you talked about in the interview about the ball games that you played a lot, and that energy that this child had.'*

Art Therapist Elaine- sharing reflection on the process in Interview 2:

*'And it's interesting because that image you showed me is something that I've done in my supervision in the last year, I suppose, is that balls in the air thing. I think it was about the complexities of what we do, and the complexities of the cases, and trying to keep them all going at once and keeping in mind all the different areas. But that the image I made in supervision was more fluid, and it was actually more mixed, and my supervisor noticed it had more energy, and it was more alive, I was using chalk pastels, and I was kind of blending and the things were less separate and less compartmentalised. I suppose, it reminds me a bit of your first image, actually, how it had the potential to go off the page, you know, but it was bounded and structured. But there was that potential for the lines to go off the page and have more energy, I suppose.'*



In the excerpts above the researcher shared reflections on how the role of an Art Therapist may feel like throwing balls in the air. This was referring to elements of playfulness and energetic offering creative ways for children to express themselves and self-regulate. The participant expressed how containment was visually conceptualised; how Art Therapy can offer possibilities of freedom and exploration but within the safety of boundaries and structure.

#### **4 Discussion**

The findings presented in this paper aimed to highlight the value of using response art in a constructivist grounded theory research by presenting selected excerpts from the interviews with Art Therapists. The participants' responses indicated that this type of interviewing process offered time and space for joint reflections that were enjoyable and insightful. The author's own experience of engaging reflectively with their own response art confirms the potential of visual methods to stimulate research and education advancements in developing professional knowledge. The use of response art can function as a co-facilitator of deepening conversations and harnessing tacit knowledge. This can be helpful when clinical practitioners' professional knowledge needs to be accessed in a systematic and yet innovative, engaging and collegial way.

The research journey started with uncertainty and *diving into muddy waters* when interviewing the first participant. There was more grounding and meaning making in *connecting the dots* when interviewing the second participant. In the third participant interviewing there was some *blossoming* and *seeds of hope* which time and space had cultivated. These elements laid the *scaffolding* for bringing *deeper layers into a dialogue* of a painful case study with the fourth participant. The last participant interviewing brought forth visual elements of *energy and playfulness* within the *safety of containment*. The author had achieved a reassuring process of collaborative exploration into metaphor and meaning making of the research process.

One of the benefits of using this type of visual reflexivity method embedded in the overarching methodology was around enhancing researcher's reflexivity. This was through allowing for unconscious dynamics to be expressed, contained and visually recorded. Another benefit was around accessing a deeper level of the participants professional knowledge. This was through allowing for deeper reflection on Art Therapy case studies as well as the impact of the process of interviewing itself. A third benefit was around offering a more collegial and collaborative shared reflection between researcher and participants. This was through overcoming some of the power dynamics of conducting research within the organisation.

#### **5 Conclusion**

Based on the benefits summarised in the previous section, the inclusion of visual reflective processes, such as response art, in the methods can create conditions of time, space and hope. These conditions can enhance qualitative research enquiries by allowing a collegial researcher-participant exploration going beyond the surface and into deeper meaning making. Such exploration, through visual and symbolic avenues, can support navigation of complex research projects. These are projects which aim to advance knowledge and professional practice by asking the 'how' questions but there might not be enough pre-existing maps for researchers to use. Including visual methods in their design, researchers can find the tools to explore uncharted territories of knowledge. In this journey, they won't be one their own; they will have the research participants with them as co-navigators with a shared excitement for new discoveries. Using visual reflexivity methods, such as response art, researcher and participants can draw maps of evidence together, stimulating research and advancing professional knowledge.

## 6 Declarations

### 6.1 Acknowledgements

The researcher's supervisors at University of Essex UK are hereby acknowledged for their academic support and guidance: Dr Lindsey Nicholls, Dr Kalina Stamenova. The author also expresses deep collegial gratitude to the organisation for allowing the recruitment and to the Art Therapists who came forward to contribute with their case studies. All of which remain anonymous to ultimately protect the identity of the case studies, who are vulnerable children and young people.

### 6.2 Study Limitations

This paper is part of the author's professional doctorate research; as such, findings presented are partially, and not fully, indicative of the research project's final results which will be included in the author's doctoral thesis (submission May 2024).

### 6.3 Ethical Approval

The professional doctorate research, of which this paper is part of, has ethical approval by the School of Health and Social Care ethics committee at the University of Essex UK. ERAMS reference: ETH2021-1133 (June 2021).

### 6.4 Informed Consent

Consent form in writing was granted by all participants in this study; including use of anonymised data for publications and conferences. All identifying details have been anonymised to protect the identity for both participants (Art Therapists) and case studies (children and young people) discussed in the interviews and according to ethical guidelines of the British Psychological Society (researcher's membership) and the British Association of Art Therapists (participants' membership).

### 6.5 Publisher's Note

AIJR remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

## How to Cite

Dimitra Theodoropoulou (2024). Demystifying Art Therapy: Using Response Art to Enhance Reflexivity, Professional Knowledge, and Collegiality in a Grounded Theory Methodology Design. *AIJR Proceedings*, 18-28. <https://doi.org/10.21467/proceedings.168.3>

## References

- Bhaskar R. (2017) *The Order of Natural Necessity: A Kind of Introduction to Critical Realism*. UK: Gary Hawke.
- Bhaskar, R., Danermark, B. & Price, L. (2018) *Interdisciplinarity and Wellbeing: A Critical Realist General Theory of Interdisciplinarity* Oxon: Routledge.
- Birks, M. & Mills, J. (2015) *Grounded Theory: a practical guide* London: SAGE.
- British Art Therapist Association (2019) Code of Ethics and Principles of Professional Practice for Art Therapists. Online at: <https://www.baat.org/About-BAAT/BAAT-Council/Code-of-ethics> [Accessed on: 08.06.2019].
- Cara, H. (2020) *Creative Research Methods: a practical guide* Bristol: Bristol University Press. Charmaz, K. (2014) *Constructing Grounded Theory* (2nd edition) London: SAGE.
- Fish, B. (2017) *Art-Based Supervision* New York: Routledge.
- Hollway, W. & Jefferson, T. (2000) *Doing Qualitative Research Differently: free association, narrative and the interview method* London: SAGE.
- Huet, V., Springham, N., & Evans, C. (2014) 'The Art Therapy Practice Research Network: Hurdles, pitfalls and achievements' *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 2014 14 (3):174–180. Online at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14733145.2014.929416> [Accessed on: 08.12.2018].

Kelly, S., Davies, L., Harrop, D., McClimens, A., Peplow, D. & Pollard, N. (2015) *Reviewing Art Therapy Research: a constructive critique*. Online at: <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/11359/> [Accessed 18.11.2018].

Leavy, P. (2020) *Methods Meets Art: arts-based research practice* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition) New York: Guildford Press.

Polanyi, M. (1966) *The Tacit Dimension* (reprint 2009) Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Van Lith, T. (2016) 'Art Therapy in Mental Health: A systematic review of approaches and practices' *The Arts in Psychotherapy* 47: 9-22. Online at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2015.09.003> [Accessed on: 25/01/2019].

Waller, D. (1991) *Becoming a Profession: The history of art therapy in Britain 1940-82* London: Routledge.