

Lesley University

DigitalCommons@Lesley

Expressive Therapies Capstone Theses

Graduate School of Arts and Social Sciences
(GSASS)

Spring 5-22-2021

Engagement with The Non-Traditional: Exploring Unique Art Making Processes with Residents of an Assisted Living Community

Carina Fuller
cfuller3@lesley.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/expressive_theses



Part of the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Fuller, Carina, "Engagement with The Non-Traditional: Exploring Unique Art Making Processes with Residents of an Assisted Living Community" (2021). *Expressive Therapies Capstone Theses*. 423. https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/expressive_theses/423

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School of Arts and Social Sciences (GSASS) at DigitalCommons@Lesley. It has been accepted for inclusion in Expressive Therapies Capstone Theses by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Lesley. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@lesley.edu, cvrattos@lesley.edu.

Engagement with The Non-Traditional:

Exploring Unique Art Making Processes with Residents of an Assisted Living Community

Carina Fuller

Lesley University

GEXTH-7017-11

Professor Raquel Stephenson

May 5, 2021

Abstract

The older adult population is growing exponentially, however, supportive resources and trained geriatric professionals are not. As part of the aging process many older adults face physical, emotional, and social challenges, plus there is a significant rise in diagnoses of dementia. As a part of a larger care plan, engaging in the creative process of art making has the power to address some of these common challenges. Art making has been observed to engage the senses and stimulate the mind, promote life review and self-expression, help to identify strengths, be a channel to express emotions, and in group settings reduce feelings of isolation. For these many benefits, giving older adults' access to the creative arts could be a powerful tool to better their quality of life and overall well-being.

The next point of interest is how art materials are defined. A majority of art therapy literature references common materials that are often associated with fine art. These materials are not always accessible or may seem overwhelming. By introducing non-traditional – or materials that are not as commonly used – in different programs for older adults and adults with dementia, this exploration aims to question the definition of materials. This was done by observing the experiences of assisted living residents, to see if the same studied benefits of art making emerged. The resulting observations showed evidence that even with non-traditional materials, the participants seemed to positively engage with the creative process. This helps to expand the language of materials in art therapy and argues for the addition of the creative arts to the care plans for older adults.

Engagement with The Non-Traditional:

Exploring Unique Art Making Processes with Residents of an Assisted Living Community

In the field of art therapy there is an abundance of literature focusing on material choice. Additionally, more research and observations are being made about the benefits of art making for older adults. There is comparatively less available information combining these two topics, and even less that call into question the definition of materials. While research is available that looks at the physical and expressive properties of different art materials, they often look at what can be considered ‘fine art’ materials. The goal of this exploration is to question if similar engagement and benefits can occur with less common materials. Observations were made by engaging older adult assisted living residents in a variety of creative projects using materials and techniques that are novel to what they are familiar with. This exploration has two parts; the first being the choice of materials and how this impacts engagement, and the second being the experiences of the residents as they engaged in the creative process.

Current services, care facilities, community knowledge, and trained professionals cannot keep up with the high demand for geriatric care. According to the 2020 census, since 2010 the population of adults 65 and older has increased by more than 34.2%, and 3.2% from just 2018 to 2019 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Not only has the population of older adults been rapidly increasing, but for a myriad of reasons the number of older adults diagnosed with dementia has also been quickly increasing. As of a 2020 report made by the Alzheimer’s Association, there are approximately 5 million people in the U.S. diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease. Alzheimer’s and other forms of dementia are the sixth leading cause of death in the U.S. The same report puts out a shocking statistic that half of primary care physicians do not think the medical field is well-equipped for the current and continually growing number of people with dementia (Actionalz, 2020). There is a tremendous deficit in accessible and competent services for older adults. Therefore, the importance of developing effective and supportive interventions and care is increasingly important. These demands need to be met with a holistic approach that looks at the aging process from multiple angles. Engaging in the creative process, and art therapy, can be a powerful part of the puzzle.

As a part of a larger care plan, art making has been well established to promote physical, emotional, and social well-being.

This exploration is meaningful as a contribution to finding beneficial support services for older adults and can potentially add information to the literature about materials used in art therapy. A majority of the current literature focuses on fine art materials; however, this can be limiting as it excludes the vast potential of non-traditional materials (Moon, 2010). With the contemporary and modern art movement, countless materials and techniques are being introduced and more traditional practices are being pushed to their boundaries. Art therapy by its nature is influenced by societal and personal definitions of art (p. xvii). For this reason, the definition of materials used in art therapy should be expanded, much like they are in the professional arts. The contemporary art movement is beneficial to the field of art therapy because there is a focus on the process in combination with the final piece (p. xviii). Additionally, there is a focus on the work within the context of environment and other social factors (p. xix), and acknowledgement of the influence of gender, culture, and history on the creative process and choices of materials, techniques, and content (p. xxiii). These sentiments are often reflected in art therapy literature about material choice, so arguably the definition of materials included in these conversations should be expanded.

The projects and observations were facilitated by me, a graduate art therapy student intern, and influenced by art therapy literature. This exploration takes the stance that engaging in the creative process is restorative and has numerous potential benefits. Also, that support for an older adult's overall well-being does not have to be highly structured. Taking the time to listen, asking questions, and having conversations can have a tremendous benefit (Erickson, 2020). Another crucial clarification is how the word 'non-traditional' is used in the context of this exploration. What constitutes traditional compared to non-traditional, is subjective and can depend on several factors, including cultural norms, accessibility, and personal preference. Typically, the word 'traditional' refers to a practice that has a long-recognized use. Applying this idea to art, traditional materials can mean paint, pencils, markers, and pastels just to name a few. For the purposes of this exploration, the word 'non-traditional' is not meant to refer to

materials or techniques that are unheard of. In this exploration ‘traditional’ materials are considered to be those that residents of a specific assisted living community are more used to. While ‘non-traditional’ means materials or techniques that differ from what the residents use more often.

The anticipated outcome of exploring non-traditional materials is that a majority of residents will respond positively to the process. Before these materials and techniques were introduced, a relationship was developed with the residents and it was observed that most of them eagerly embraced the idea of trying something new. The hope is that the residents will experience a sense of pride in their creation, and maybe even be surprised by what they are able to create. There is also an anticipated positive social piece, as observations were made in group settings. However, this exploration is asking participants to veer away from the comfort of familiarity, which for some can be overwhelming. There is the expectation that some frustration and hesitancy might arise, while this is in no way intentional it is reasonable to expect that not every experience will be a positive one. If these more negative experiences arose, helping the resident process and arrive at a more balanced affect took priority.

Literature Review

Theoretical Outlooks

In order to understand the benefits of certain activities or the use of specific art materials for older adults, it is important to be aware of developmental theories of older adulthood. Human development is a continuous process, it is crucial not to ignore what older adults are experiencing in their current phase of life. One of the leading views is Erik Erikson’s stages of human development. His theory postulates that adults aged 40-65, are focused on the task of stagnation versus generativity. During this phase, adults are trying to develop a sense of purpose, often through passing on their care and knowledge to others. This phase is important for older adults as a building block. For individuals that are unsatisfied with this developmental task, they are often more vulnerable to dysregulated emotions or depression. Compounded with a perception of abandonment or loneliness, this dissatisfaction can have a major impact on Erikson’s proposed final task of psychosocial development (Johannsen, 2019). This final stage for adults 65 years or older, is despair versus integrity, where the major developmental task is life review. Individuals in this

stage will often start to reflect more on their relationships and choices they have made. When individuals can feel satisfied and fulfilled with their lives, this frequently leads to more positive coping strategies, allowing for most of these individuals to be in a better position to manage the many physical, cognitive, and social changes that occur in this later stage of life (Erickson, 2020).

Another theory published in 2011 by Lars Tornstam, a sociologist, is the idea of gerotranscendence. This postulated stage of life is centered around shifting from a logical and material perspective to a more spiritual and connected one. With age, individuals often begin to see themselves, time, and the world differently. Tornstam states that this shift in perspective is a natural part of the developmental process, bolstering the potential for creative expression, creative thinking, and continuous growth (Tornstam, 2011). Engaging in the creative process allows for individuals to make meaning, reflect on themselves and the world around them, and fosters interpersonal and community connections. For these reasons, the theory of gerotranscendence supports the use of the creative process for the well-being and increased quality of life of older adults (Rodrigues et al., 2019). Going a step further, using the creative process in a group setting has the power to help an older adult make meaningful connections. Gaining a better understanding of themselves in relation to the people and world around them is beneficial for achieving the goals of this developmental stage (MacLeod et al., 2016).

Challenges Facing Older Adults & Assisted Living Residents

Mind-body Connection

The following section will look at different challenges that many older adults face as part of the natural aging process, and the changes brought on by moving into a care facility. Before breaking down these different areas, it is important to recognize how interconnected the mind and body are and how much the environment can impact an individual. It is also noteworthy that every individual has their own needs and unique experiences that influences how they respond to challenges. Different individuals and cultures define ageing well in their own way. However, often part of this definition is the idea that aging is multidimensional. There has to be a balance of social, psychological, and physical supports (Liddle et al., 2013). For example, in cases when an older adult is diagnosed with depression, there are often

correlating impacts to the individual's physical and social well-being. They may experience headaches or gastrointestinal symptoms, additionally they may choose to stay home and not socialize (Johannsen, 2019). In order to promote overall well-being, all these areas have to be addressed. Care for older adults is often based on a medical model, focusing on the physical body more so than the mind, spirit, or interpersonal relationships. A more holistic view of older adults has to be used to advocate and give the individual the proper tools to increase their well-being (Erickson, 2020). Distress can manifest in many forms, if there is a goal to improve an individual's physical, mental, or spiritual health, the other domains cannot be ignored (p. 52-53).

Social

The way American society responds and speaks about older adults often excludes and isolates them. This language sometimes promotes the belief that they are able to cope without much assistance because they have years of 'experience'. Even the people that support and care for older adults might promote this idea of aging in isolation, as they focus on only one aspect of the whole person, or only provide a recommendation but not the tools to realize it (Erickson, 2020). Older adults are more susceptible to feelings of isolation and loneliness for many reasons. They may not be as mobile and able to leave their homes as often, or they might have a mental health or physical diagnosis impacting their energy. Older adults may experience their spouse and friends becoming sick or passing. If the individual has children, their family members may have careers or children of their own that would limit visits. An older adult may feel isolated and lonely for any number of reasons, but nonetheless it is important to recognize. If left unaddressed the lack of social interaction and subsequent intellectual stimulation may result in a decline of cognitive functioning (p. 59). When moving into a care facility like assisted living, older adults face another layer of social challenges. They may be even further removed from their family, friends, social activities, and community networks, plus they are in a new environment with staff and other residents they do not know. This can increase an older adult's feelings of isolation and might result in them feeling less like themselves (Rodrigues et al., 2019).

Emotional & Psychological

It is important to point out that every older adult has unique experiences and needs. Some have coping strategies in place that helps when distress arises. Coupled with a strong sense of self and meaning it often allows an older adult to better handle the ups and downs that come with aging (Rodrigues et al., 2019). However, this is not the reality for every older adult, and many are more vulnerable to emotional distress. As in any stage of life, there are a plethora of potential causes for emotional distress. Although it is not unusual for an older adult to have a diagnosis of depression or anxiety, it should not be considered a normal part of aging (Erickson, 2020). According to a 2015 report from the World Health Organization, the most common mental health diagnosis for older adults was depression (as cited in Johannsen, 2019). In the United States, the Center for Disease Control (2021) states that between 1% and 5% of adults who are 65 and older and live independently are diagnosed with depression. While 13.5% of older adults who require home healthcare, or other forms of daily assistance, are diagnosed with depression. There is an added layer when an individual moves into a care facility. A new resident has to adjust to a new routine and set of rules, and often have to depend on the staff to take care of some of their most basic needs. This can be a difficult transition, and can impact the individual's sense of self, meaning, purpose, and views of their own strengths and individuality (Rodrigues et al., 2019). Emotional distress can also come from frustration with declining abilities, whether it is physical or cognitive. An individual may become frustrated in not being able to do the same tasks or move the same way they once did. For older adults in the early stages of dementia there is often distress with the awareness of declining cognition (Erickson, 2020). Even with the prevalence of depression and anxiety among older adults, their need for support and purpose does not go away. As older adults move through the aging process their bodies might need more time to rest or move, however, their psychological self never stops needing stimulation and outlets to pause, process and reflect on their past, present and the future (p. 7).

Cognitive Decline & Dementia

Another challenge for many older adults, is cognitive decline. While moderate impacts to cognitive functioning are a normal part of the aging process, many older adults are diagnosed with a form of dementia, the most common being Alzheimer's disease. This is important to note, as many care

facilities will support residents in the early stages of the disease process or are specifically designed to care for older adults with dementia. Different forms of dementia affect certain parts of the brain and impact the individual's functioning and daily life. This does not necessarily present the same for every individual with the same diagnosis, as cognitive, verbal and motor skills may decline at varying speeds. It is important for care providers to operate under the assumption that the individual is still capable, rather than assume they have lost the ability to do certain tasks (Harlan, 1990). It is also harmful to assume that people diagnosed with dementia are unable to communicate for themselves. Some care providers assume that the individual is confused and might not take the time to try to understand what they are saying (Erickson, 2020). People diagnosed with dementia are still capable of communicating and in some cases, might not be aware of how to communicate as they once did. However, this does not mean they lack awareness that there is something they are trying to say, they just need someone to take the time to actively listen (p. 37).

Assuming a person with dementia is incapable, or unable to communicate, is detrimental to their well-being as it takes away their sense of self. In the beginning stages of the disease process, individuals are often aware of their declining abilities, which causes frustration. Being treated like they are incompetent causes an even greater sense of loss. For some individuals, they may not be able to verbalize these feelings, however, they may try to express them through their actions like avoidance, restlessness, or disorientation to name a few examples. It is important for people working with older adults diagnosed with dementia to try and preserve the individual's sense of self and ability to communicate. While this may become increasingly difficult as the disease progresses, it is important to always recognize that the person's identity is not their disease. When making their own decisions becomes more difficult it is important to honor the individual's preferences, by making sure that they are congruent with actions and decisions that the individual has made in the past (Harlan, 1990). This should be applied to any decisions, including what leisure activities to participate in. When an individual is able to partake in activities they enjoy, it supports their well-being and quality of life in ways that will be discussed more in the next section (Lokon et al., 2016).

Benefits of Engaging in the Creative Process

Pause & Relaxation

Older adults can benefit from art making in many ways, and their motivations to engage can be vastly different. For some, they benefit from creating art for the simple, yet powerful, reason that it gives them permission to pause and take a breath. The creative process can be seen as an activity that feeds the soul – an activity that allows for moments of reflection and has the power to make the individual feel at peace (Erickson, 2020). These restorative moments often occur in a state of being called ‘flow’. This is when an individual becomes engrossed in the process, often with the outside world melting away from conscious thought. States of flow typically occur when an individual is creatively challenged, but simultaneously feels as if they have the skills to realize their potential (Liddle et al., 2013). When an older adult has physical limitations, a disability, or a diagnosis of dementia – states of flow and peace are increasingly powerful. These moments allow the individual to not feel held back by their limitations, rather the creative process allows them to momentarily forget about their physical or cognitive conditions and be present in the moment (Rodrigues et al., 2019).

Sensory & Cognitive Stimulation

Another powerful aspect of art making is that it engages the senses which in turn stimulates the brain. Art materials inherently have sensory qualities to them, the most apparent is how they feel, but some materials have a scent, and some materials make a sound when they are being used. Moon (2010) likens these sensory qualities to vocabulary in verbal language, the sensory experience of art adds a richness and depth to the experience. This is beneficial for many older adults because it keeps their senses engaged and active, allowing them to focus on the abilities they still have rather than any decline they might be experiencing as part of the aging process (Johannsen, 2019). Of course, for some older adults, the opposite is true, engaging their senses highlights their changing abilities. This is why it is important to adapt art materials to meet the current abilities and needs of the individual (Stephenson, 2006).

Through the process of engaging the senses, certain personal and cultural memories may arise for older adults. The image, colors, texture, sound, or smell of art materials can be reminiscent of certain

memories, time, or places in an older adult's life (Moon, 2010). For example, textiles may remind the individual of learning to sew from their grandmother. The senses can evoke memories, and additionally the act of creating art engages the mind by calling on an older adult's creative thinking, planning, problem solving skills and concentration (Liddle et al., 2013). Older adults can engage in many activities that stimulate their intellectual thinking and problem solving, however art making engages creativity and empathy allowing the 'problem' to be manipulated and explored. This way of problem solving is often seen as having less tension compared to strictly intellectual problem solving (McNiff, 2015).

While the full scope of research into how art making impacts the brain cannot be fully discussed it is important to mention. Research into neurobiology has shown benefits of making art for older adults experiencing cognitive decline and dementia. Belkofer & Konopka (2008), observed that even the simple act of observing art can activate neural pathways correlating to different emotional reactions. While this study only looked at the brain imaging of one participant, there was evidence that art making activated the occipital, parietal, and temporal lobe of the brain. The occipital and parietal lobe activity has to do with the visual processing associated with making art. There were significant increases of activity in the temporal lobe, which is the part of the brain that associates and assigns meaning to sensory information and processing memories. Part of the temporal lobe is the limbic system which helps control emotions and memories. The activation of these regions of the brain supports the benefit of art making in bringing forward memories and emotions through a sensory experience (Belkofer & Konopka, 2008).

Psychological & Quality of Life

Regardless of the motivation or use of the creative process, it has been observed that participating in arts activities is beneficial for the psychological well-being of older adults. Engaging in the creative process tends to focus on the present moment, while also allowing time to reflect on the past and future, making it a beneficial tool to support and improve an older adult's well-being. The arts can also take on many forms allowing it to be used as a cathartic experience, as a tool to maintain or regain motor function, or as a coping strategy for loss (Stephenson, 2006).

The number of older adults diagnosed with depression is rapidly increasing, intensifying the need to find effective interventions. One study conducted by Johannsen (2019) set out to explore this need, examining the effectiveness of older adults participating in art activities. The study found that the longer a participant was involved in art activities the less symptoms of depression they reported (p. 48). One reason engaging in the creative process is beneficial for older adults, is that it generally allows them to constructively experience and process a broad range of emotions. While art making can bring forward emotions such as peace, satisfaction, a sense of accomplishment, excitement, and pleasure, it can also bring about feelings of impatience or frustration (Liddle et al., 2013). The art making process allows for participants to make mistakes, and handle challenges and frustrations in a safe environment where there are no consequences of these emotions. Having the experience of handling these negative emotions has the power to be translated into everyday life and transformed into a coping skill, which could ultimately improve an older adult's well-being (p. 336). The potential positive outcome of creating art has the power to increase an older adult's self-esteem and be a source of empowerment, as they may discover new strengths, they did not know they had, or have not utilized in a long time (Rodrigues et al., 2019). While the positive experiences are beneficial for an older adult's psychological well-being, there is also significance in the negative experiences.

Self Expression

Another aspect of engaging in the creative process that improves the psychological well-being of older adults, is that art can give them the opportunity to express themselves. Art often gives the space for an older adult to express who they are in the moment, all their life experiences that have gotten them to this stage of life, and also allows them to explore the future. This can help strengthen an older adult's sense of individuality, empowers them to be active, and gives a constructive outlet for them to express their unique identity and their unique needs (Rodrigues et al., 2019). For some older adults creating art not only allows them to express who they are, but it can also show them their own potential, something a lot of older adults feel disconnected to (MacLeod et al., 2016). For some older adults learning new art techniques can help them find a way to express themselves in a way that fits their needs (Rodrigues et al.,

2019). Once an older adult finds a channel of self-expression that feels right for them, many are willing to share their unique experiences and perspectives (Erickson, 2020). This idea plays into the importance of material choice, as some participants will respond differently using a variety of mediums. While art can be a tool to express an older adult's strengths, it can also create a safe space to express challenges and vulnerabilities. Art is often viewed as a less intimidating form of expression because the material exists in a symbolic state and space. This allows an older adult to temporarily remove themselves from a potentially difficult topic, often letting them feel more comfortable sharing it with others as it is processed and integrated into their understanding of themselves and their experiences (Stephenson, 2006).

While the above discussed benefits of art making apply to all older adults, some researchers have found that art as a tool of self-expression is especially beneficial to people with dementia. Humans are social creatures, who desire to communicate, and have the capacity to be creative. This capacity does not change, and this desire does not go away when someone is diagnosed with dementia (Lokon et al., 2016). Engaging in art activities gives people with dementia the opportunity to express themselves through their creative choices. Whether the choice is how they orient their paper, the colors they choose, how they use the materials, or what they create – all of these are choices that give a person with dementia a chance to express their preferences and themselves. These choices become increasingly important when verbal language abilities begin to decline. Art has the ability to act as a nonverbal form of communication, allowing the individual to express things they might not be able to use just verbal language for (Harlan, 1990).

Life Review & Reflection on Strengths

Connecting back to the developmental milestones of older adulthood, a majority of older adults begin to reflect more on their lives. There is sometimes an inherent desire to pass on their knowledge and experiences to others. Art making can be one avenue of doing so. Engaging in the creative process can give older adults the means to reflect on their accomplishments in the presence of others. In many cases, art activities are facilitated by someone belonging to a different generation, which can be seen as an asset in accomplishing the theorized developmental tasks of older adulthood (Johannsen, 2019). It is often

through these positive connections with the facilitator and with peers, that allow for many older adults to feel empowered to share their stories, which can make them more meaningful as they feel seen and heard (MacLeod et al., 2016). Art making can be used as a tool to connect the past and the present and gives older adults a way to reflect on their life experiences that is constructive and encourages emotional connections and self-expression (Stephenson, 2006).

Creating art and engaging with others frequently allows for an older adult to feel acknowledged for their strengths and experiences. Many older adults share a similar perspective that they would rather focus on the present moment, rather than only focusing on long term goals, and identifying strengths they possess can be an important part of this process. The strengths an older adult has, and others they can develop, or redevelop, can help them cope with changes brought on by the aging process, and life itself (Stephenson, 2006). The act of making art can be viewed as a skill, and many older adults are highly motivated to develop and learn new skills and techniques. This allows them to feel accomplished and recognized for their artistic abilities (Rodrigues et al., 2019). McNiff (2015) shares the perspective that art making can help uncover or develop internal strengths and resources. In any given situation, the only strengths that can be activated are ones that are already present in the individual. Art making can be used as a tool to rediscover these strengths and expand an individual's potential (p. 94).

Reduce Isolation & Create a Community Connection

A major concern for many older adults, especially those living in care facilities, is social isolation. As discussed previously these feelings can emerge for a myriad of reasons but can be detrimental to an older adult's physical and mental health. Often an older adult can feel cut off from their friends, family, and community after moving to a care facility – a feeling that has only heightened during the time this exploration was conducted. During the Covid-19 pandemic, many care facilities had to make the tough decision to not allow any outside visitors into their buildings for the safety of the residents. This has only made feelings of isolation and loneliness increase. However, art programming offers these older adults a space to connect with others, express themselves and connect over common interests (Rodrigues et al., 2019). Being a participant in art groups can allow older adults to interact in a meaningful and

engaged way and has the potential for them to forge new connections with peers and staff (MacLeod et al., 2016). Referring back to the theoretical views of the developmental tasks of aging, one of Erikson's proposed tasks involves an older adult reflecting and passing on their experiences and knowledge. The connections that art programs create, helps in this process especially when there are generational differences among participants or staff (Johannsen, 2019). By putting care and parts of themselves into creative endeavors, older adults can feel empowered and a sense of belonging (Liddle et al., 2013). In one study, the older adult participants in an art program valued the social connection of the group as much, if not more, than the art making. The researchers were able to connect these sentiments with feelings of purpose, self-worth, growth, and self-esteem, all reasonably influenced by the combination of social connection and creative expression (Rodrigues et al., 2019).

Engaging in the creative process has many advantages, however, these programs held in a group format add another layer of benefits for older adults. Positive social interactions and relationships help reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation, potentially in turn influencing better physical and mental health (MacLeod et al., 2016). Positive social interactions impact the brain, as does learning new skills, meaning they have an impact on the person's emotions. Creating and reinforcing these neural pathways can strengthen and maintain the part of the brain that processes emotions and memories (Belkofer & Konopka, 2008). Aside from the cognitive benefits, creating art in a group format can also benefit the perceived quality and meaningfulness of an individual's artwork. McNiff (2015) speaks to the simple observation that being in the presence of creativity often sparks more creativity, it is like a wave of energy that has the power to motivate a group. He continues by explaining his observations that creating art in the presence of others often helps soften an individual's judgement of their own work. An individual may receive support or positive feedback from a peer, and in return the individual may become kinder to themselves (McNiff, 2015).

Art making often encourages an individual to express themselves and celebrate what makes them unique. Older adults often benefit from this preservation of identity, while at the same time art making in a group setting creates a sense of community (MacLeod et al., 2016). When older adults feel accepted by

the other participants for who they are and for their art making, this has the power to increase their own self-confidence, sense of worth, and the meaningfulness of their participation (Liddle et al., 2013). Similar observations were made in studies that focused on older adults diagnosed with dementia, finding that some individuals would engage more when the art making involved positive social interactions (Harlan, 1990). This was solidified in the exploration and formulation of Opening Minds Through Art (OMA), a program used in this exploration. Part of what made this program beneficial for people with dementia is the focus on social connection. Participants work one-on-one with a volunteer or staff person, while also participating and showing their art to the other participants, and in a gallery show. These positive interactions improved the observed well-being of the participants (Lokon et al., 2016).

Barriers to Engagement

Considering the challenges many older adults face, and the benefits they may get from engaging in the creative process, why is it not widely taken advantage of? There are many barriers that prevent older adults from engaging with the arts, and they range from financial, biological, psychological, to social. One study set out to explore these barriers that prevent some older adults from engaging in art making. The researchers stress that the visual arts are not always accessible to everyone, it requires materials, space, and time – things that not every older adult has access to. While a lot of care facilities offer some form of art in their programs, not all of them are well funded. Some older adults do not utilize these groups, because their previous access or education did not introduce them to art making, therefore the process is unfamiliar to them (Francourt & Mak, 2020).

Biological

Health and physical limitations were found to impact an older adult's capability to engage in art making (Francourt & Mak, 2020). The same study found that an older adult's physical health had the strongest impact on their perceived and actual ability to create art, but simultaneously a low impact on the participants motivation to participate (p. 6). This stresses the importance of adapting art to fit the physical needs of the older adult. For example, putting a tennis ball around a paint brush to make it easier to hold, or using a dark marker to circle where white paint is on the palette for those with visual impairments. For

many individuals, the motivation to create is there, but barriers put in place by their physical health and ability have to be taken into consideration. This is true for people diagnosed with dementia as well, the decline in their cognitive abilities creates a barrier to art making. Some individuals might need more hand-under-hand assistance or prompting on how to use materials, however, the motivation to create often still exists (Lokon et al., 2016).

Psychological

Francourt & Mak (2020) found that older adults with a diagnosis of a mental illness, or undiagnosed emotional distress, showed less motivation to engage in art making, but benefited from the opportunity to regulate their emotions that art engagement provided. Being creative is often seen as a basic human drive, however, an older adult's mental health can impact their motivation to engage in art making. What also may impact the engagement of older adults is their perception of how meaningful the activity is, and how much they feel connected to it (p. 4). For some older adults, including those diagnosed with dementia, they may rely on caregivers or care staff to help them with daily tasks, this can sometimes take away their sense of individuality, decreasing their self-esteem, confidence, and motivation to creatively express themselves (Lokon et al., 2016).

Social

Isolation and feelings of loneliness can be large barriers for older adults, effecting their opportunity and motivation to create art. Francourt & Mak (2020) found that older adults are more likely to participate in art activities when someone they are close to also participates. If an older adult feels isolated, they may not seek out, or have access to, spaces where art activities are being offered. When an older adult experiences loneliness, this is sometimes associated with feeling less in control, which can impact their motivation to engage in art groups (p. 3). This study found that when an older adult is socially active, they are more willing to join different activities (p. 9). Being socially active generally increases an older adult's motivation to engage in art activities because often they are held in groups and provide opportunities to connect with peers (Liddle et al., 2013).

Importance of Materials

There are two parts of this exploration; looking at the benefits an older adult might get out of participating in an art program and questioning if these same benefits can be seen with the use of non-traditional art materials. When developing any art program or project, material choice is an important aspect of planning. Different materials have practical benefits and individuals have personal preferences, but they also allow for different forms and quality of expression. Most art spaces are equipped with more common art supplies like paint or traditional drawing materials. In some cases, this is because these materials are easily accessible, familiar to most people, and easy to store. While the use of these materials is not universal, the breadth of potential materials and techniques is far greater. Any materials used in the creative process, can potentially change the quality of the individual's creative expression, making it beneficial to consider a variety of diverse materials and techniques. With this being said, it is important to carefully consider the use of certain materials and to not just use them for the simple reason that they are unique or different. Choices have to be made based on what best suits the individual and their abilities, needs and goals (Moon, 2010).

Practical Considerations

Mentioned briefly as a barrier to engagement, art making requires access to materials. This involves space to use and store materials, time, and financial resources, but not every older adult or care facility has all of these resources. Materials should be chosen to match the individual and setting, this may include considerations about safety, sensory quality, and the individual's abilities (Moon, 2010). When working with older adults it is crucial to select materials to fit their needs and abilities but also materials that are appropriate for their age. This means that the materials or projects should not be child-like, as this makes the task seem insignificant and might make an older adult question their own abilities (Harlan, 1990). Materials should not be a source of frustration for an older adult, they should help make the process more meaningful and provide a creative challenge (Moon, 2010). Another source of frustration could be an older adult's ability to use certain materials. For example, someone with arthritis gripping a paint brush can be painful and limit the person's control over their movement. This is why it is important that materials can be adapted to fit the specific needs of the individual (p. 7), while not forgetting to

incorporate the individual's preferences (p. 10). Adaptability is frequently regarded as a strength of not only visual art but other creative forms of expression (Stephenson, 2006).

Expressive Qualities

Not only do different materials have varying physical qualities, but some also lend themselves better to different forms of expression. The expressive qualities of a material or tool can be prompted by several factors. One of which being how an individual feels using a material, or how congruent a material is with the intended expression (McNiff, 2015). An individual's familiarity with a material can also influence their emotional response. Sometimes the unfamiliarity of a material or process is overwhelming because an individual may fear to show any imperfections (p. 143) and sometimes it is freeing to not have an expectation to compare their process to. An individual's emotional reaction is subjective and can vary greatly from person to person. Every individual will carry with them certain associations with different materials based on social, cultural, and historical influences, and this impacts their emotional experience using that material. There can also be several realities that coexist about a certain material, for example paint can be associated with craft projects from early childhood, but also with the paintings hanging in museums (Moon, 2010). Yet another influence on an individual's emotional reaction is the number of choices they have available to them. For some this variety is energizing and sparks creativity, however, for others it might be overwhelming to have too many options (p. 24). It is crucial to honor and hold these emotional reactions and to explore them further when working with different materials.

Non-Traditional Materials

This exploration's use of the term 'non-traditional' does not mean that there was no familiar tools or techniques used. Rather that the goal was to push these materials in new ways or introduce different ways of using a certain material. What can be seen as traditional drawing requires visual, motor, and other executive function skills – some of which begin to decline naturally in the aging process or rapidly for people with dementia. When these skills decline it can sometimes be easily spotted when the drawing is not technically 'correct' or representational. This can be intimidating to a lot of people, especially older adults, and prevent them from wanting to draw, because their perception is that they are unable to. (Moon,

2010). Sculpture, found objects, and collage can be less intimidating because the elements already exist. The creative process is then altering them, creating a composition, or combining the materials to create new meanings or relationships between the elements (McNiff, 2015). These techniques are also accessible to the older adults that do not view themselves as an artist, because there is no expectation to create a representational image from scratch, and no engrained expectations of what the final image should look like (Moon, 2010). Found objects for collage or sculptures can also be a source of reflection as they each have their own intended purpose and meaning, but through the creative process they can take on a new identity. Older adults may reminisce about a specific found object or about any memories they may elicit but be able to strengthen their decision-making skills and self-expression through altering these objects to create art (p. 23).

Method

This exploration of engagement with non-traditional art materials is based on observations from the residents at Goddard House Assisted Living in Brookline, Massachusetts. There are many reasons why an older adult might move into an assisted living community. These individuals are mostly independent but may need some daily assistance or support. Goddard House is divided into two communities, traditional assisted living which has 70 apartments, and Olmsted memory care which has 40 apartments. Rather than following a medical model, Goddard House uses a habilitation and social model. Their focus is on supporting the current needs, abilities, independence, and social well-being of the residents, rather than trying to gain back an ability or treat a vulnerability.

Before developing a program to observe the residents' experience with non-traditional materials, I spent time getting to know the site as well as the residents. This time included observing existing programs and building relationships with the residents. In both the traditional and the Olmsted neighborhoods there is a diverse offering of art programs and occasionally the residents engaged with non-traditional materials in these existing groups. One of these programs includes the open studio in the traditional assisted living community, which is an open group with room for 6 residents each week. The other is Opening Minds Through Art (OMA) in the Olmsted neighborhood. I brainstormed ideas starting

with the kind of activities I thought they might enjoy, their abilities and limitations, and what materials they were most familiar with. I personally identify as a mixed media artist and enjoy the process of pushing the boundaries of materials. Inspired by the residents' willingness to experiment and try new things, I decided to create a Mixed Media group. The intended goal of this group was to encourage exploration and for the residents to challenge themselves with unconventional materials or techniques. Subsequent goals included increasing self-confidence, positive social interactions, exercise creative thinking and problem-solving skills and gaining a sense of pride.

This group was held for one hour in the afternoon on Tuesdays in the traditional assisted living community. I created a list of potential materials to use; however, the weekly plan was intentionally kept open. This was done on purpose to remain flexible with how long the residents might need to complete a piece, and also to tailor the program to fit their needs and interests. Participation in the group was open and voluntary. Following the Covid-19 guidelines, the group was held in an open common space with three tables, each having a plexiglass divider down the center. This allowed for 6 residents to participate each week. The program was promoted by word of mouth to residents interested in visual art. However, it also was listed in the weekly program schedule that is handed out to each resident. Under the time, title, and location was the following description: "Explore new and repurposed art materials and get creative with layers and different techniques".

While the initial intent of this exploration was to focus primarily on the Mixed Media group, there were unforeseen circumstances that prevented this group from meeting every week. This exploration took place during the Covid-19 pandemic, and a few weeks after the Mixed Media group began, there was an outbreak at the site. To help prevent the further spread of the virus, staff and interns were asked to stay in either the traditional or the Olmsted neighborhoods. With greater need for support in the Olmsted neighborhood, the Mixed Media group was temporarily canceled as I supported the programming on Olmsted. The Mixed Media group eventually resumed as the Covid cases decreased in the building. However, this caused a shift in this exploration to also focus on already existing programs, to supplement and add to the breadth of observations.

Opening Minds Through Art (OMA) was held weekly in the Olmsted neighborhood. OMA is a program developed by Dr. Elizabeth Lokon (2016) and was brought into Goddard House. The program is meant to be an intergenerational program for people with dementia to engage in art making. This means that each participant is partnered directly with a volunteer, intern, or staff person, during the time of the pandemic this group would consist of 2 or 3 residents paired with myself, another graduate art therapy intern, and Goddard House's community art therapist. Lokon and her colleagues (2016) developed OMA to create a meaningful activity that promoted the well-being of people with dementia. This is done through a structured routine, with activities that are failure-free and have as many opportunities as possible for the resident to make their own choices. Most of the structure occurs behind the scenes, art is kept abstract so there is no pressure of creating a representational image, color palette options are grouped to prevent the colors from becoming muddy, and tools are chosen with the residents' abilities in mind. All of which attribute to this idea of failure-free activities, where all the residents have to do is express themselves.

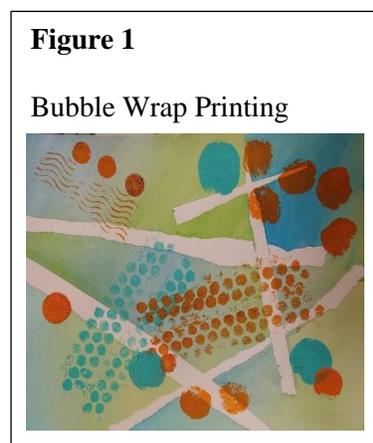
Before each group, a piece of sample art was created to show the residents the potential uses of the materials presented. Then they were encouraged to create their own variation. Images of these samples I created were collected into one digital folder on my personal computer. It is important to note that consulting an internal review board was not accessible, therefore the images included in this paper were created by me, and all observations are made from my own perspective.

After each group, observations were recorded in a personal notebook. These observation notes included a summary of how the group went, how the residents engaged with the materials and process, and their experiences with the project. For the OMA group some of these observations were collected as a collaborative effort with the other graduate intern as part of writing a process note. Otherwise, all the observations were made by me. At the end of the week, these handwritten notes were transcribed onto a Google document, to make the eventual analysis easier by having them all in one place. To organize and analyze the observations the Google document was organized by which group the observations were made in, Mixed Media, OMA, or Open Studio. Afterwards, the observations were read over, and any

recurring words or themes were highlighted and categorized to create a general sense of the types of experiences the residents had working with non-traditional materials.

Results

The following breakdown of projects begins with the Opening Minds Through Art (OMA) program, in the Olmsted memory support neighborhood. Figure 1 shows my sample image for one of the



first projects facilitated for OMA. This project used painter's tape, watercolor, and acrylic paint, with the non-traditional material being textured cardboard and bubble wrap. To begin the piece, the residents placed painters' tape on the paper, then used watercolor to fill the background. Next, they used acrylic paint on bubble wrap and textured cardboard as printing tools. The use of these materials was intended for the residents to explore the different textures they could create with the

printing tools. Bubble wrap is light, and the plastic is soft, making it easier for the residents to manipulate. This material was also chosen because it is often overlooked. When receiving a package, the bubble wrap is the first thing to come out of the box to be thrown away - but using them as a printing tool gives it a new purpose. While the residents did not verbally express this idea in this manner, they seemed to be intrigued and surprised by this repurposing. The Bubble Wrap Printing project was done in two separate sessions, with a total of four residents. In the first session it was observed that the two residents were willing to engage in the process, with some prompting and support from myself and the other intern. The residents were quiet while they created, and each became fixated on applying paint to one part of the page. There was a moment of frustration in trying to apply the paint to the printing tools, so we helped the residents hold down the bubble wrap while they added the paint which seemed to alleviate some of this frustration. In the end, both residents verbalized liking their pieces. In the second session, it was observed that the residents enjoyed both the process and the group setting. The two residents chatted with each other and shared compliments and words of encouragement to each other. They also shared sentiments about enjoying having an art assistant to help them through the process – referring to myself and the other

intern. Before beginning, both residents shared doubts in their artistic abilities, but that they were willing to try something new. Both of the residents expressed their deliberate choices in their colors and how they used the printing tools, with both seeming to be happy with their final pieces.

The next project for the OMA program was called Dream Catcher, shown in Figure 2. This project used acrylic paint and sea sponges, with the non-traditional material being yarn. The first step was taping the yarn across the page, then using a brayer to apply the acrylic paint to the page. After removing the yarn, the sea sponge was used to dab a different color paint as an accent. The use of the yarn was intentional. Practically, it created a hazy line unlike a strip of tape would have, giving the pieces a softer look. The yarn was also used to evoke potential memories of knitting and sewing, while the goal of the whole piece was to create a dream catcher-like image. The intention for the discussion of the art was to weave in life review questions, identify their strengths, and potentially identify a dream or goal they have. This project was done in one session with two residents. It was observed that both residents needed some prompting to get started, however, both showed sustained engagement. The two residents that participated in this group did not process their pieces verbally, however, it appeared like they both surprised themselves with what they were able to create. Both residents made small statements of pleasure in their own work and seemed to enjoy sharing their work with each other. While the conversations around life review or dreams of theirs was not had, their engagement, pride in their work, and connection with each other in sharing their pieces are striking examples of strengths communicated nonverbally.

Figure 2

Dream Catcher



As a third project, Figure 3 shows examples of Shaving Cream Marbling. This project utilized two non-traditional materials: shaving cream, and food coloring. To create this effect the residents sprayed shaving cream into a tin and lightly stirred in drops of food coloring. The other facilitator and I then helped the residents put their paper into the shaving cream and then to scrape away the cream with a ruler. The residents then used a sea sponge to dab on glitter paint. The intended benefit of this specific

Figure 3

Shaving Cream Marbling



project was to engage the residents' senses, through feeling and smelling the shaving cream. By engaging the senses, the hope was to create a unique experience for the residents. The one session using this project was structured a little differently than the traditional OMA format, there were two facilitators and four residents participating. This created an interesting group dynamic as the 2 residents sitting at each table seemed to feed off of each other's energy. One table was observed as being more engaged, while the table I was directly supporting was intermittently engaged. Despite this observation, all of the residents verbalized some

degree of enjoyment and expressed gratitude for being included in the group. The nature of the shaving cream more outwardly evoked the senses – both touch and smell. Three of the residents seemed to enjoy stirring the food coloring into the shaving cream. They expressed surprise seeing how the paper looked after scraping away the shaving cream. The other resident was not as interested and seemed hesitant to put the paper over the shaving cream for fear that it would make a mess. This resident did not seem as satisfied with their final piece.

For a fourth OMA Project, Figure 4 shows the Tin Foil Stamping project that was used in two sessions with six different residents. The non-traditional material for this project was the tin foil, in combination with traditional acrylic paint. The residents first painted the background with watercolor, then balled up some tin foil to use as a stamping tool in acrylic paint. The intention behind this project was for the residents to again experiment with the transformation of an everyday object. Tin foil is often linked to cooking and baking, an enjoyable

Figure 4

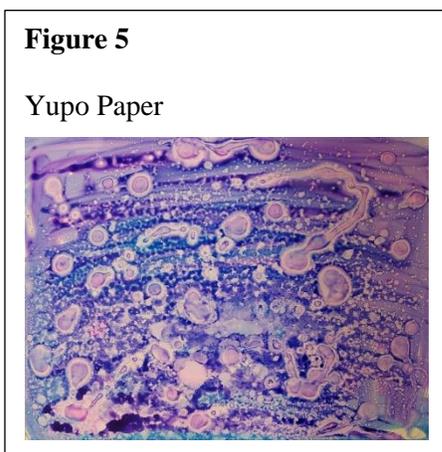
Tin Foil Stamping



experience for most. By using this familiar material in the context of art making, the hope was for the project to feel more approachable to the residents that do not consider themselves an artist. For this project it was observed that the three participants in the first session were more eager to participate and to

get the opportunity to try something different. This group also seemed to really enjoy chatting and showing their pieces to each other. One participant expressed enjoyment in the methodical process of creating the image with repeated marks and patterns. The resident I was working one-on-one with enjoyed finding images in the abstract shapes and lines – seeing different animals and a map. We wondered aloud what the map might be showing and what animals were emerging from the shapes and lines. In the second group a little more resistance was observed, with two residents ultimately engaging in the process, and one who did not. The resident that chose not to engage, decided to still sit with the group and seemed to like watching the other resident’s work, even giving them the occasional compliment. The other two residents seemed to be invested in their pieces, clearly expressing their decisions, and working until they felt the step and their piece was complete.

One directive that was used as both an OMA project and in the traditional assisted living’s open studio was with Yupo paper. Yupo paper is synthetic and non-absorbent paper, meaning that paint or ink does not soak into the page and can be manipulated and mixed until the air dries it. Along with experimenting with this non-traditional paper, participants experimented with adding soap, spraying alcohol, and letting the paint dry under plastic wrap. Figure 5 shows watercolor on Yupo paper, with soap and alcohol. The uniqueness of this paper was intended to encourage experimentation, and color play. The



liquid watercolor remained vibrant on the page, while the different materials like soap and alcohol repelled the paint in interesting ways. The ability to still manipulate the paint on the paper seemed to invite a more emotive expression, as every mark did not have to be final, and the material remained fluid. This project was used over four sessions and for one session as an OMA project. In the one OMA session it was observed that the three residents enjoyed the experience of

working in a group together. They also expressed joy in watching the bright colors of the paint spread across the page, how the colors interacted, and how the soap changed the image. The resident I was

directly working with needed more hand under hand assistance to work on the project but was smiling and expressed enjoying the process.

For the open studio groups, the same three residents worked on individual pieces for the first two sessions, and then created two separate large collaborative pieces for the next two sessions. For the individual sessions, each resident seemed interested and eager to try something new. One of the residents was not planning to stay for the group but was persuaded to by the other two residents. It was observed that each resident was engaged in the process during both sessions. However, during the first session, the residents stated that they did not like how their pieces came out, one sighting the lack of control over the material as the reason. During the second session the residents used plastic wrap over their paintings, and each expressed interest in how this changed the look of their piece. The residents seemed more visibly excited by this process and stated how eager they were to see the pieces when they dried. They made plans to come back the next day when there were no groups going on in the space, just to see how their pieces came out. During the next open studio group, they eagerly showed me their pieces, and shortly after began working on their first collaborative piece.

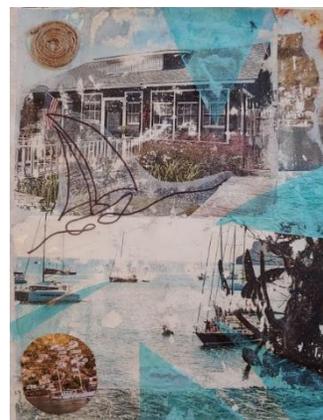
Wanting to continue experimenting with this process, the residents wondered aloud what the process would be like on a larger piece of paper. The next two sessions were spent creating two large group pieces on Mylar paper, which has a similar quality as Yupo paper. In the first session one resident was convinced to stay by the other two residents, and by the end vocalized having a really great time. The observed highlight of this process was the positive social interactions and collaboration of the three residents. Also, during this session, a fourth resident walked by and stopped to talk and became engaged in helping them turn the large piece of paper and suggesting other ways to play with the paint. The residents enjoyed the process of this first collaboration, but they did not like the final product mostly because some of the colors blended together leaving a muddy look in some places. In the second session the three residents sat together and discussed their first piece and talked about what they could do differently, concluding that they wanted to try the process again. By the end of this second group session the residents were vocal about their surprise and satisfaction with the process and final piece. Throughout

both sessions the residents were smiling, laughing, and talking with one another. One resident was visibly frustrated in the beginning of the group, however, working and chatting with the other residents appeared to regulate their mood to a point where they left smiling.

Now moving into the observations in the Mixed Media group, Figure 6 shows the first project. The first two sessions of the Mixed Media group were dedicated to making photo transfer collages. Over the two sessions there were four residents that participated in the project. For this project, the materials were ones that the residents were familiar with, magazines, tissue paper, twine, and tracing paper. However, what can be considered non-traditional was the process of the photo transfer. This included gluing down a magazine image with gel medium face down on the paper, and then using a damp cloth to wipe away the back

Figure 6

Photo Transfer



layer of paper pulp to reveal the image. My intention for this project was to recreate the effect of older distressed photographs. I encouraged the residents to find images they felt connected to, or that stood out to them. My goal was for this technique to create a nostalgic feeling, to encourage the residents to share something about themselves. While the participants engaged in this process it was observed that they were eager to try this new technique and interested in the layers used in my sample. Through the process of selecting magazine images, all four residents at some point reminisced or made connections with the images they were seeing and using. Additionally, for one resident the process of wiping away the back layer of pulp was reminiscent of volunteering to restore water damaged books. It appeared however, that there were moments of frustration in the process. The rubbing part of the photo transfer requires a certain pressure to be applied, too hard and the image rips, too soft and the underlying image does not come through. At one point in the process each of the 4 residents expressed some frustration in this step. However, at the end of both groups the residents expressed enjoying trying something new, even if they did not like how it came out.

On the third week of the Mixed Media group only one participant attended. The resident entered

Figure 7

Sea Glass Pendants



the group expressing the desire to try something totally new. The project introduced was wrapping sea glass in wire, which can be seen in Figure 7. Sea glass was chosen because I use this material in my personal jewelry making. I wore one of my necklaces one day, and a few residents expressed interest in learning how to create them. My goal for the group was to challenge the residents to work on a three-dimensional

project, but also for the materials to encourage reminiscing. My thought was that the sea glass could bring up memories of going to the beach or on vacations. After the resident looked at the pictured examples, they seemed to be eager to try and make their own. It was observed that the resident was clearly able to articulate how they wanted their piece to look. The resident decided to push their own abilities and instead of starting with one piece of sea glass, decided to wrap three together. After getting set up, the resident was remarkably engaged and manipulated the wire until arriving at the desired look. I assisted the resident only to tighten the wire around the sea glass to ensure that it was secure, when receiving it back the resident expressed shock that they were able to create the piece. Even with a mask on, it was observed that the resident was grinning, and visibly excited with the final product. After this process, the resident opened up about their son being diagnosed with Covid-19. While of course the resident was still concerned, they seemed almost relieved to have shared the news with someone else.

The following week, three residents attended the Mixed Media group, one of which had a strong desire to try and make greeting cards. After hearing the idea, the other two residents seemed really interested in the idea. The original project prepped for that week was set aside and this process was facilitated over two sessions. Figure 8 shows a sample created to test out the process. This is another project where the

materials were familiar to the residents – acrylic paint on 4 x 7-inch canvas boards. However, what was unique was the process of turning these paintings into greeting cards using the office printer to print on

Figure 8

Greeting Cards



coated paper. While this project was not originally planned, I encouraged their interest in trying out the idea. Knowing that the three residents got along really well, I knew that working on the same project could be an enjoyable experience for them. Additionally, the final product would be a unique way to communicate and connect with their loved ones, who at the time could not visit because of the Covid-19 pandemic. It was observed that one resident was very engaged in the process, creating one detailed painting and then two quick ones right after. Another resident decided to experiment with a rubber comb and adding glitter to increase the texture and contrast to make the final image easier to see. It was observed that the third resident was frustrated when attempting to paint words did not go as intended. Rather than give up, the resident began a second piece and expressed satisfaction with this second attempt. After the pieces were dry, I used the office printer to create greeting cards, even a set that was sized specifically to fit envelopes one resident already had. When the cards were printed, the three residents expressed excitement in how well they came out. One resident stated that they were eager to write a note to a family member that same day. Before the end of the group, the three residents were showing each other their cards. Together they decided to each sign the front of two of their cards and exchanged them with each other.

Figure 9

Clay Stamping



The next project introduced in the Mixed Media group was using office supplies to stamp and mold clay, as shown in Figure 9. This project was completed in one session, with five residents attending – and for two of them this was their first time joining an art group at least since the beginning of the pandemic. While clay is often considered a traditional material, several of the participants expressed that it had been a significantly long time since they had used clay. Plus, the addition of the office supplies made the process more unique to the residents. My goal for using clay was to engage the residents in a more sensory form of art making. Clay has a distinct feeling and smell and using the office supplies created unique textures and levels of resistance when used as carving tools. It was observed that three of the five residents seemed to enjoy the sensory experience of manipulating the clay and exploring the

different textures the office supplies made. The other two residents appeared a little more hesitant to work with the clay, but nevertheless engaged in the process. Clay can be manipulated in a variety of different ways. This project was left more open ended to encourage the residents to express themselves in however they saw fit, and as a result there was a wide variety of pieces. One resident did a slab of textures similar to the sample but expressed that they did not like it very much. However, when another resident complimented their work, it seemed to change their perspective on what they were able to create. The other residents took a slightly different approach using the office supplies to mold the clay in addition to using them to make textures. One resident manipulated the clay with the tools until a face began to emerge, they seemed surprised yet pleased by this and continued to render and bring out the face. After the session ended, this resident returned to the space with a friend to proudly show them what they created.

The final project included in this set of observations was collaging with buttons and string, as seen in Figure 10. This one session was attended by three residents. While the residents were familiar with buttons and string, it was a unique experience for them to use them as part of a collage. My goal for using this material was to encourage reminiscing, and to explore the transformation of buttons as an everyday object into an art material. I knew going into this project that a lot of the residents know how to sew, and I was hoping this project would evoke some of these positive memories. One of the residents that attended had just moved into the building the week prior. While they did not seem to be engaged by the particular project it was observed that they spent time with another resident looking at an art history book. This gave the resident an opportunity to make a connection with another resident and reminisce on a long career as an art history professor. The other resident that was looking at the book was not intending on staying but was intrigued and seemed to be excited by the buttons. There seemed to be some discomfort as the resident appeared bothered by getting glue on their hands. However, after the process they were fondly reminiscing on the

Figure 10

Button Collage



ornate button collection their mother used to have. This resident was sitting at the same table as the third resident that attended the session, and through talking with each other it seemed both were reminded of memories of their mothers. The third resident in the session shared memories of their mother changing out the buttons on any new clothes. This resident expressed a lot of interest in the process and carefully selected buttons to use and where to place them on the paper. After the piece was completed, they commented on enjoying the projects in the Mixed Media group as they prompted them to think and kept their mind active.

Discussion

Many older adults face obstacles as part of the aging process and can be impacted in many different ways. With the older adult population growing exponentially, it is becoming more evident that there is a severe lack of community knowledge, supportive resources, and trained professionals. While this deficit needs to be addressed holistically from several different angles, art can be a powerful part of a care plan. Art therapy, and groups that lean on the healing power of the creative process have been studied to be beneficial for older adults, as it is a relaxing activity that can engage the mind and senses, promote self-expression and quality of life, bring forward strengths, evoke memories, and create positive social interactions. These benefits have the power to address the common challenges that older adults face through the aging process. This exploration took place in a specific assisted living community that follows a social and habilitation model. What this means is that the primary focus is to support the residents in the current moment, rather than trying to regain a lost ability. Through engaging with the creative process, the residents were allowed to access the observed advantages of art. In fact, one of the leading theorists and voices of art therapy, Edith Kramer, promotes that the process of art making is what carries the transformative nature of art (as cited in Moon, 2010).

Another important aspect of the art making process is the materials used. A majority of literature and other studies focus on the use of common fine art materials. However, art does not have to be limited by this definition, as the modern art movement has shown. For some what might be considered traditional fine art materials are not accessible or may seem intimidating to those that have not had exposure to them.

By introducing more non-traditional materials – by experimenting with other ways to make art – the process might become more available to older adults. Using unique materials and found objects can also stimulate creative thinking and problem solving and promote creative expression as there is no predetermined belief on what the final product ‘should’ look like. By expanding the definition of art materials, individuals have access to a wider variety of expressive tools. For example, the Yupo paper and clay encourage a fluid and affective art making process, whereas the photo transfer and button collage are more cognitive. Think of art materials as a language, a broader definition of what can be an art material can be equated to vocabulary words (Moon, 2010). While a sentiment can be achieved with simple words, an increase in vocabulary can be more effective in conveying exactly what the individual wants to say. In many cases these non-traditional materials, have other purposes and functions, which brings in another layer to the creative process. The buttons used to collage for example, are intended to fasten pieces of fabric, and they still carry this meaning even in a different context. These additional meanings can also be culturally significant to some individuals, which is important to identify, consider and process.

When developing the Mixed Media group for this exploration, the ultimate goal was to address the commonly seen challenges for older adults and harness the benefits of engaging in the creative process for the residents of Goddard House Assisted Living. With this in mind, the goal of the group was outlined to encourage the residents to explore and challenge themselves with unfamiliar materials. As a product of this engagement with the unfamiliar, the subsequent goal was to increase the residents’ self-confidence, foster positive social interactions, to exercise creative thinking and problem-solving skills and for the residents to recognize their own strengths and feel proud of what they are able to create. All of these goals of the Mixed Media group are intended to create a sense of meaning for the participants, which ultimately attributes to their overall well-being.

Similarly, the main goal of the Opening Minds Through Art (OMA) program was to adapt art making, so that people with dementia can gain the benefits of engagement in the creative process. OMA was designed specifically for people with dementia, with the intention of giving them an outlet to express themselves, individualized support and for them to feel empowered. The structured backbone of OMA is

meant to alleviate some points of stress that stand as barriers to art making for some people diagnosed with dementia. Like the Mixed Media group, there are resulting benefits like; positive social interactions, empowerment through making choices, and a sense of pride in their abilities to create art.

Overall, the residents engaged favorably with unconventional materials. There was some hesitation in some instances, however, the majority of the residents were eager to try something new. While the goals and expectations for this group were largely positive, it was expected that there would be some frustrations and resistance. These moments were observed, however there was a remarkable level of determination from the residents to continue with the process and find the good that still existed in the experience. For example, only one resident during the Tin Foil Printing OMA group stopped and did not finish the piece they were working on. Even in this moment, the resident still sat with the group and seemed to enjoy watching the other participants – so they still participated in a positive social interaction, and still engaged similar regions of the brain as an observer (Belkofer & Konopka, 2008). Regarding the other goals of the group, the observations for this exploration has shown that they are being addressed. Several residents expressed satisfaction and surprise in their own abilities and in their final pieces. Residents also expressed enjoying the process of trying new and different projects because it kept them thinking and was a fun challenge.

Pause & Relaxation

Breaking down the observations to the studied benefits of art making, there is evidence to support that using non-traditional art materials can promote the same benefits as the well-established fine art materials. First looking at art making as an opportunity to pause and relax; this could be seen in several observations about the residents' engagement with the different projects. When an observation of engagement was noted, it typically meant that the resident was focused on the task, engaged their creativity, and consistently continued with their process until the piece felt finished to them. This is also sometimes called being in a state of 'flow'. In every project presented in this exploration there was at least one resident that was fully engaged in this way, where it seemed like the rest of the world was hushed as the art in front of them took focus. This sense of relaxation could also be seen in the

observations of the resident's eagerness to try something new. Engaging with different and unfamiliar materials gave the residents permission to just play. To experiment without the pressure of right or wrong, and with the freedom to create whatever they were moved to create.

Sensory & Cognitive Stimulation

While the residents' engagement can be viewed as a moment to pause, it also represents cognitive stimulation. As the residents engaged in the process, they were able to think creatively and critically even in the face of frustration. Residents were also able to utilize sustained focus to create their final pieces. This was especially observed in the OMA groups with the residents with dementia. Through the creative process, the residents that are not as verbal were able to clearly dictate their own choices. The residents with more limited mobility were able to fill their page with a range of small and large movements. Cognition was also stimulated through the senses. Art by its very nature is tactile, however, some of the materials like the shaving cream and the clay were even more so as they also engaged the sense of smell. Certain materials also evoked memories, for example some of the residents participating in OMA would title their pieces based on a memory or song it reminded them of. Also, the materials like the buttons elicited positive memories. This engagement and stimulation of the senses and the brain are important for older adults, especially those diagnosed with dementia.

Psychological & Quality of Life

The next studied benefit of art is its psychological benefits and ability to promote overall well-being and quality of life. In the observations there were small moments that suggested the existence of this benefit. For example, in one of the Yupo paper projects one resident began the group in a frustrated mood but left with a smile. In the Sea Glass Pendant project, the resident disclosed their worry for their son being sick. The experience of engaging in the creative process and in a positive social situation could have potentially allowed them to regulate and process these emotions. Another benefit of these art groups was that they provided a space to safely process feelings of frustration. This could potentially be even more powerful in the current times of the Covid-19 pandemic when there is so much added stress. Processing the non-threatening frustration of the art making process, can be a channel to develop coping

strategies to help process larger frustrations. Engaging in art making could have also given the residents a break from thinking about this stress. The hope is that these moments build to eventually add to the residents' quality of life.

Self Expression

Art making is a unique channel for self-expression, especially for those that might not be able to verbally express themselves. Throughout the experience of engaging with non-traditional materials, it was observed numerous times that the residents were able to clearly articulate their own choices and preferences, and to develop their own unique styles of art making. For the residents diagnosed with dementia, the art making process in some cases gave them a voice and a sense of individuality that they might not have had access to verbally.

Life Review & Reflection on Strengths

Yet another benefit of art making outlined in the literature, directly connects to Erik Erikson's developmental task of Integrity. This benefit is that art gives individuals a chance to identify their strengths and share aspects of themselves and their lives. Erikson's final developmental goal of Integrity is accomplished through the process of an older adult reflecting back on their lives and finding meaning. In some of the projects like the Button Collage, and the Photo Transfer, specific memories were evoked by the materials. In other projects the residents were able to reflect and make connections with each other through their conversations. Having a majority of the residents feel proud about what they created, or proud that they tried something new, helps build this sense of meaning. This can also potentially help increase their self-confidence and strengthen the way they see themselves, which attributes to the theory of gerotranscendence. Through the challenge of using non-traditional materials many residents had to think creatively since there was no right or wrong way to use them. The hope is that it showed the residents the abundance of strengths each of them possesses.

Reduce Isolation & Create a Community Connection

The observations were all made in group art making settings, which also allowed for observations about another subsequent benefit of art, which is formulating a sense of community. Even in the Sea

Glass Pendant project, when there was only one resident, there was still the interaction between the resident and me. The connection and relationships that I developed, allowed for the groups to be more flexible and address the specific needs and desires of the residents. This also has the potential to address another stage of Erikson's developmental task, which is generativity. According to this theory it is natural for older adults to want to pass on their knowledge to other generations. On multiple occasions it was observed that the residents enjoyed showing me how they approach certain situations and sharing their life experiences. Not only were there positive social interactions between the participants and I, in every session there were observations of peer connections. This was through compliments and words of encouragement to each other, or through conversations and sharing memories, and also bonding through the shared experience of utilizing the presented non-traditional materials. These social interactions really shaped the groups, for example during the individual and group Yupo paper, the Greeting cards, and Button Collage, it was the residents that encouraged another resident to join the group. Then there was also the collaboration in the group Yupo paper projects, which created a group dynamic resulting in one larger piece, that had elements of each participant's style but came together as a cohesive whole. Of the many positives observed in this process, it was probably these social interactions that stuck out the most. Even before developing the Mixed Media group, there was a strong feeling of connection and also a longing for it. The Covid-19 pandemic has left many older adults, feeling even more isolated and lonely. For the residents of Goddard House there were many expressions of appreciation for group programs, like the ones in this exploration as they created a space to enjoy an activity with others.

Limitations

While some limitations have been mentioned previously, they are important to be aware of when considering the results of this exploration. The largest limiting source was the Covid-19 pandemic, which impacted this exploration and the residents' experiences in numerous ways. The pandemic impacted group size, making the groups smaller than they might have been otherwise, it also dictated how the tables had to be set up and where participants could be in the space. This might have impacted the quality of the social interaction, as the residents potentially could have felt blocked off from interacting with their

peers. Conversely, the pandemic could arguably have increased the quality of social interaction, as many residents expressed feelings of loneliness and isolation having to quarantine in their apartments for periods of time. The building had to stop non-emergency visitors, meaning the residents were further isolated from friends and family. This meant that these programs could have been a point of connection for the residents. The Covid-19 pandemic also impacted the consistency of the Mixed Media group, with it having to be cancelled for 6 weeks. These are just a few examples of limitations brought on by the pandemic, where the full scope could be a whole other exploration. Another limitation is that the results are all based on my observations. While the intent was to be as objective as possible when discussing observations about the residents' experiences, it is conceivable that my own subjectivity crept into the observations as my hope for the groups was for the residents to have a positive experience.

Conclusion

This exploration can be viewed as a starting point to challenging the definition of art materials and utilizing the benefits of the creative process for older adults, however, there still is a great need for further research. Benefits of this process were observed for the specific residents of Goddard House Assisted Living. To further examine if non-traditional art materials can evoke the same or similar studied benefits of art making, this practice should be applied in more settings with the inclusion of the older adult participant's first-hand experiences. The need for beneficial services for older adults is drastically increasing, so expanding the definition of art materials to include not simply fine art materials can broaden the scope of art therapy - and add a strong piece to the whole puzzle of geriatric care.

References

- Actionalz. (2020, March 11). *Alzheimer's association 2020 alzheimer's disease facts and figures* [Video]. Alzheimer's Association. <https://www.alz.org/alzheimers-dementia/facts-figures>
- Belkofer, C. M., & Konopka, L. M. (2008). Conducting art therapy research using quantitative EEG measures. *Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association*, 25(2), 56-63. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ797299.pdf>
- CDC. (2021, January 6). Depression is not a normal part of growing older. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved April 5, 2021, from <https://www.cdc.gov/aging/depression/>
- Erickson, S. (2020). *Plan for aging well*. Platform Publishing.
- Francourt, D., & Mak, H. W. (2020, March 25). What barriers do people experience to engaging in the arts? Structural equation modelling of the relationship between individual characteristics and capabilities, opportunities, and motivations to engage. *PLoS ONE*, 15(3), 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0230487>
- Harlan, J. (1990). Beyond the patient to the person: Promoting aspects of autonomous functioning in individuals with mild to moderate dementia. *American Journal of Art Therapy*, 28, 99-105.
- Johannsen, S. S. (2019). Relationship between art activities and older adult depression. *Psi Chi Journal of Psychological Research*, 24(1), 43-51. <https://doi.org/10.24839/2325-7342.JN24.1.43>
- Liddle, J. L. M., Parkinson, L., & Sibbritt, D. W. (2013). Purpose and pleasure in late life: Conceptualizing older women's participation in art and craft activities. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 27(4), 330-338. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2013.08.002>
- Lokon, E., Sauer, P. E., & Li, Y. (2016). Activities in dementia care: A comparative assessment of activity types. *Dementia*, 18(2), 1-19. https://www.scrippsoma.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Activities_In_Dementia_Care_Dementia-2016-Lokon-1471301216680890.pdf
- MacLeod, A., Skinner, M. W., Wilkinson, F., & Reid, H. (2016). Connecting socially isolated older rural

- adults with older volunteers through expressive arts. *Canadian Journal on Aging*, 35(1), 14-27.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S071498081500063X>
- McNiff, S. (2015). *Imagination in action*. Shambhala Publications.
- Moon, C. H. (Ed.). (2010). *Materials & media in art therapy: Critical understandings of diverse artistic vocabularies*. Routledge.
- Rodrigues, L. M., Smith, A. P., Sheets, D. J., & Hémond, J. (2019). The meaning of a visual arts program for older adults in complex residential care. *Canadian Journal on Aging*, 38(2), 143-154.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0714980818000508>
- Stephenson, R. C. (2006). Promoting self-expression through art therapy. *Generations: Journal of the American Society on Aging*, 30(1), 24-26. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26555437>
- Tornstam, L. (2011). Maturing into gerotranscendence. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 43(2), 166-180. <https://ezproxyles.flo.org/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.ezproxyles.flo.org/scholarly-journals/maturing-into-gerotranscendence/docview/1010377448/se-2?accountid=12060>
- United States Census Bureau. (2020, June 25). *65 and older population grows rapidly as baby boomers age*. U.S. Department of Commerce. Retrieved February 21, 2020, from <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2020/65-older-population-grows.html>

THESIS APPROVAL FORM

Lesley University
Graduate School of Arts & Social Sciences
Expressive Therapies Division
Master of Arts In Clinical Mental Health Counseling: Art Therapy, MA

Student's Name: Carina Fuller

Type of Project: Thesis

Title: Engagement w/ the mental health: Exploring unique AA models,
processes w/ residents on an Assisted Living Community

Date of Graduation: May 27, 2021

In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

Thesis Advisor: Raquel Staples