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The Effectiveness of Art Therapy as a Treatment Modality in Improving Quality of Life for

Adults with Chronic Pain

Capstone Thesis

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Abstract

The efficacy of art therapy is explored in the context of improving the quality of life and mental health of individuals experiencing chronic pain. The exploration and examination of previous research on chronic pain and art therapy have led to various interconnected themes that tie together the needs of this population with the healing aspects of this treatment method. Through gathering data on both the negative impact of chronic pain and the healing aspects of art therapy and exploring research on chronic pain art therapy groups already in action, it can be deduced that future research may further illuminate the effectiveness of art therapy in improving overall quality of life and mental health. The use of art therapy in the context of treatment for adults with chronic pain should be viewed holistically, as part of a multidisciplinary approach that functions in a complementary way to individuals' medical treatment and medications. The main goal of this treatment modality is to improve overall life functioning and mental health, with the potential of reducing physical pain sensations as mental health symptoms decrease.

Keywords: art therapy, chronic pain, quality of life, mental health, self-esteem, hope, coping with chronic pain

The Effectiveness of Art Therapy as a Treatment Modality in Improving Quality of Life for
Adults with Chronic Pain

Introduction

Art therapy is a therapeutic modality that offers the unique feature of helping individuals visually express and therapeutically process life experiences, thoughts, and feelings. Based on the visually expressive features of this modality and the support that can be provided through a therapeutic group setting, the use of art therapy should be explored in the context of improving quality of life for adults experiencing chronic pain. Living with chronic pain can inhibit one's ability to connect with others, feel a sense of hope, and experience positive self-esteem (Lynch et al., 2013). Through the use of visual art and expression, the process of artmaking and sharing in a therapeutic group has the potential to instill hope, self-worth, and connection with others. Art therapy also has the potential to build resiliency in this population (Lynch et al., 2013). Additionally, art can be used to visually express a desired way of living for an individual with chronic pain, which could be explored further in a therapeutic setting to examine and process what those images mean for an individual (Kirkham et al., 2015).

In the context of this research, chronic pain can be defined as physical pain occurring more days than not, for the duration of at least 3 months. The experience of chronic pain is unique to the individual and based on their own perception, which may be impacted by cultural ideas of pain in general, how to manage pain, gender roles, ability to cope, an individual's relationships and relationship to society, as well as additional stressors impacting that individual (Angheluta & Lee, 2011). Around 50 million people in the United States alone experience chronic pain (Hass-Cohen et al., 2021). One in five people in industrialized countries experience and report chronic pain, with an increase seen in developing countries to two in five people

(O'Neill & Moss, 2015). The research being explored includes various diagnoses and health problems that are associated with chronic pain such as spinal cord injuries, multiple sclerosis, and musculoskeletal pain. The age of the population in the discussion and context of this research is 18 years and older, with a focus mainly on individuals under the age of 65.

Adults with chronic pain are often faced with challenges of loss. This can include loss of identity, functionality, and quality of life (Hass-Cohen et al., 2021). Additionally, loss can be experienced as loss of a job, concentration, sleep, or even joy and hope (Lynch et al., 2013). Chronic pain can impact social functioning, mood, (Ataoğlu et al., 2013), employment, and engagement in hobbies (Larson et al., 2018). Additionally, chronic pain in adults is tied to increased rates of depressive symptoms (Ataoğlu et al., 2013) and double the rate of suicide for those suffering from chronic pain (Larson et al., 2018). Adults with chronic pain experience “worse health-related quality of life as compared with other chronic diseases such as heart disease, chronic obstructive lung disease or kidney failure” (Lynch et al., 2013, p. 51-52). A common thread between research was the idea of a multidisciplinary approach, where the psychological impact was explored, as well as the impact on various domains of life in addition to a medical framework.

The purpose of art therapy in the context of supporting adults experiencing chronic pain can be used for both “self-expression and self-exploration” (Wadeson & Wadeson, 2010, pp.2). Art therapy does not require artistic skill and ability, but rather, it is focused on the process of creation and what emerges through the artwork for the individual or group. A large part of the process is reflecting and sharing after creating art with various materials such as paint, fabric, graphite, magazines, clay, etc. Art therapy can be utilized to “promote insight”, and it may also be used to build social connection and self-esteem (Wadeson & Wadeson, 2010, pp. 4). When

exploring the use of art therapy with this population, common themes of interventions and topics in various art therapy groups will be highlighted, to delve further into the key elements in sessions that can improve quality of life in individuals experiencing chronic pain.

Art therapy is not a replacement for an individual's medicine or medical care, but rather, it supports an individual with the emotional, mental, and psychological impact of chronic pain. There is a need to further explore the importance of mental health services for this specific population, in addition to the medical care individuals may receive for physical symptoms. Chronic pain in adults often lowers self-worth and self-esteem, can cause social isolation and loneliness, feelings of loss, and a diminished sense of hope and motivation (Lynch et al., 2013). With the unique healing aspects of art therapy, exploring the use of this therapeutic modality with adults experiencing chronic pain could potentially counteract the negative qualities caused by chronic pain by instilling hope, forming a sense of community with others, and building confidence and creativity (Kirkham et al., 2015). In research that has emerged on this topic, these appear to be the most common themes of the impact of chronic pain, and themes of how art therapy in a group setting has positively impacted those qualities of life.

While the main focus of this research aims to discuss the effectiveness of art therapy as a treatment modality to improve mental, emotional, and psychological health, it has been recognized that chronic pain and associated comorbidities or life experiences can function bi-directionally, to some degree (Hass-Cohen et al., 2021). This could indicate that the improvement of an adult's mental health could potentially decrease physical pain sensations. This calls to question the impact art therapy can have not only on one's mental, emotional, and psychological well-being, but also on one's experiences of physical pain. Pain severity can be impacted by "negative affect, childhood trauma, social isolation, and catastrophizing" which can

also be “exacerbated by hyperarousal, vigilance, and muscle tension” (Hass-Cohen et al., 2021, p. 1). With considering the impact the mind can have on the body’s experience of pain, it would be worthwhile to explore the impact art therapy may have on an individual’s experience of physical pain as well.

Multiple studies illuminated a common theme of hope, which emerged as a topic that helped individuals cope with chronic pain and increase their quality of life. For example, a hope collage art therapy intervention led participants to feel more connected to group members through shared experiences and instilled hope through other members’ contributions and the individual’s own ability to share their story and receive validation (Larsen, 2018). Additionally, a theme of atmosphere emerged as members were able to feel comfortable, safe, positive, and hopeful in the group environment with the support of the facilitator and group members (Larsen, 2018). In another study, the use of art therapy allowed participants to feel less isolated. It enhanced their ability to connect with others, recognize their own self-worth, and it provided a sense of fulfillment and distraction from their physical pain (Lynch et al., 2013). Another study indicated the usefulness of art therapy in the context of visually representing internal pain which can act as a pathway of communication with others and, therefore, lead to a deeper understanding of their suffering (Kirkham et al., 2015).

Through exploring the interconnected nature of chronic pain and quality of life and assessing the elements of life impacted by chronic pain, it becomes notable and significant that art therapy’s benefits align with the needs of this population. With a lack of extensive research on this topic, the purpose of highlighting and exploring these avenues is to further direct and emphasize the importance of conducting more research on the use of art therapy with adults experiencing chronic pain. While physical symptoms are typically managed in a medical setting

and researched more thoroughly, the mental health and quality of life of adults experiencing chronic pain can be overlooked. The intention of this research is to reinvigorate and inspire others to explore the connection between the use of art therapy and the management and treatment of chronic pain.

Methods

In the process of gathering research, key search terms were used within databases to find relevant content connected to both chronic pain and art therapy. Articles were only utilized if the population examined individuals over the age of 18, excluding one article that discussed adolescents, which was defined with specification and purpose in the literature review. Research that involved arts-based groups, arts-based interventions, and therapeutic artmaking were still utilized, and it is consistently specified throughout the literature review if the group was not identified as an art therapy group. Common themes throughout the articles were analyzed in depth to highlight patterns emerging in the existing literature. The most prominent themes to emerge are categorized in the literature review to create a structure that identifies the needs of the population in conjunction with the impact of art therapy.

Literature Review

The use of art therapy and therapeutic artmaking with adults experiencing chronic pain is a relatively new concept with a limited and growing body of research. There is often a failure to notice the impact chronic pain can have on an adult's mental health and wellbeing. Exploring the use of this treatment modality aims to expand the perception of what may be helpful for adults experiencing chronic pain as they navigate both physical and mental health challenges. Through the studies highlighted in this literature review, themes, benefits, and limitations will be discussed at length in an effort to direct future research on this topic.

Emerging Themes

Hope and Resilience

Themes of hope and resilience are salient across many studies on the use of art therapy with adults experiencing chronic pain. Hope, resiliency, and optimism can be utilized as protective factors, which result in healthy coping. Hope is seen in the research as both a common intervention theme as well as a factor of positive change for individuals. It is recognized as an important element in allowing individuals to “remain oriented towards the positive, even during times of sustained difficulty” (Larsen et al., 2018, p. 724). Taking a positive psychological approach to supporting individuals with chronic pain can lead to positive adaptation (Lynch et al., 2013). Monitoring and utilizing hope and resilience in art therapy with adults experiencing chronic pain can aid in the process of improving life satisfaction (Lynch et al., 2013) and increase motivation for individuals to pursue qualities and experiences that lead to a “positive possible future” (Larsen et al., 2018, p. 724).

In a hope collage arts-based group intervention, participants explored the theme of hope through collage materials such as magazines, construction paper, scissors, and glue (Larsen, 2018). Participants created their art piece in one session and shared their work with the group in the following session. Through the creation and sharing of artwork around the theme of hope, participants identified a felt sense of connection to group members through shared experiences and challenges, a positive and hopeful environment, vicarious hope for one another, as well as the internalization of hope which impacted how they were able to move forward and remain hopeful beyond the time spent as a group (Larsen et al., 2018).

Resiliency is challenging to quantify, measure, or objectively discuss and the measurement and conceptualization of it must be further developed by researchers (Alschuler et

al., 2016). Nonetheless, resiliency has been recognized as an indicator of coping and it positively impacts psychosocial variables and pain outcomes (Hass-Cohen et al., 2021). Therefore, utilizing art therapy interventions that support the process of building resiliency and hope could potentially benefit individuals with chronic pain by reducing the experiences of physical pain sensations and increasing quality of life by improving psychosocial factors. Additionally, it has been noted that creativity and imagination can both aid in the “development and maintenance of resiliency” (Hass-Cohen et al., 2021, p. 2) which ties into art therapy’s expressive factors.

Self-Esteem, Identity, and Body Image

A common theme found in multiple studies is the negative impact chronic pain can have on both self-esteem and body image for many individuals. In a study conducted to determine if body distortion was associated with cerebral palsy or the experience of low back pain, researchers discovered that participants experiencing chronic low back pain had a disrupted self-perception of their body image (Yamishita et al., 2019). Participants with low back pain (LBP) and no diagnosis of cerebral palsy and participants with cerebral palsy that experienced LBP had higher rates of body image distortion than individuals with cerebral palsy that did not experience LBP (Yamishita et al., 2019). In addition to significant body image distortion, adults with chronic pain may also face real changes to their body shape due to not being able to move around or exercise as much (O’Neill & Moss, 2015).

In a community art therapy group, participants were able to address their perception of their body image, which had been unresolved for various participants prior to the group. Participants processed and reflected on this through an art therapy intervention that involved creating a life-sized body representation of themselves (O’Neill & Moss, 2015). During this intervention, individuals in the group reflected upon the physical changes to their body shape and

related to one another about hiding their body with protective clothing styles. Another individual in the group that was in a wheelchair wanted his body to be traced while he was standing, as he wanted to view himself through his art as a standing figure. Through this intervention, participants processed their body image and self-perception, and reported that the large-scale nature of the intervention “was a powerful and moving exploration” (O’Neill & Moss, 2015, p. 164).

Following that note, chronic pain can lower an individual’s self-worth and self-esteem and create a sense of lost identity. Past research has shown that individuals have expressed feeling useless or devalued, feeling like a burden to others, and having a lack of purpose (Lynch et al., 2013). Some participants in an art therapy group setting felt shame and guilt around not being employed or unable to work and felt socially undesirable (Lynch et al., 2013). With a lost sense of purpose, came a lost sense of self-concept and self-worth. In a study conducted on an art therapy group with adults experiencing chronic pain, individuals experienced positive changes in self-perception and body image when they were willing to make progress in the group and “assume responsibility for their personal well-being” (Angheluta & Lee, 2011, p. 119).

The Use of Metaphors: Internal Experience to External Expression

The use of metaphors in an art therapy setting can be a powerful means of connecting an individual’s internal experience to an external expression through visual art. Symbolic themes and metaphors emerged for participants in various studies, which highlighted the connection created between participants and their ability to relate to one another. In one study, themes of barriers, fences, and cages emerged in participant artwork. These metaphors explored the concepts of individuals “feeling caged in by their pain” and feeling as though there was a barrier between themselves and others as a result of their pain (O’Neill & Moss, 2015, p. 163).

Color choices were also indicative of individuals' related experiences, as color themes began to emerge in paintings created in an art therapy group setting. Participants in this specific group created paintings that represented their pain. Common color themes of red and black were seen across participant art, with red as the most prominent color used by individuals to convey pain. Individuals reflected on their color choice and associated it with "pain, inflammation, [and] burning" as well as "anger and heat from the pain" (Kirkham et al., 2015, p. 402). Other participants reported that black was "bad", and it expressed the negative emotions that stemmed from their chronic pain (Kirkham et al., 2015).

The act of expressing an internal physical experience allows individuals to process, contain, and share the impact chronic pain has had on them personally. Individuals participating in an art therapy group had been given the opportunity to confront their pain "by seeing it concretely in an image reflected back in symbolic form"; one individual reported that this allowed him to leave the art therapy group energized each week (O'Neill & Moss, 2015, p. 163). The use of metaphors in art therapy for adults experiencing chronic pain can be "used as a mechanism to bridge meaning arising from art-making to the lived reality of the patient" (Angheluta & Lee, 2011, p. 121). It has been recommended by art therapists to use pictorial representations of pain to support individuals in giving form to experiences and feelings that would otherwise remain overwhelming, unnamable, or vague (Kirkham et al., 2015).

Not only does pain imagery and metaphor help individuals process their own experiences and emotions, but it also gives insight to others on the impact of chronic pain. The expression of pain imagery creates an "intersection between *what is seen* and *what is felt*" (Kirkham et al., 2015, p. 399) which expands an individual's ability to communicate with others about their lived experiences. The movement from internal to external connects adults with chronic pain to the

outside world such as their family, friends, and anyone who views their visual art. In society, despite a growing body of research sharing the depth of suffering individuals with chronic pain experience, the impact is commonly denied or minimized (Lynch et al., 2013) which leads individuals to feeling misunderstood, rejected, and isolated.

Participants in an art therapy group shared a common frustration with the need to justify their pain experience to others, including health care professionals. The idea of an invisible illness can leave adults with chronic pain feeling disconnected from others, as their experiences are not taken seriously or understood (O'Neill & Moss, 2015). The pressures and expectations created by society can cause some individuals to perceive themselves as lazy because they are unemployed. This happens despite their real-life struggle to manage physical pain due to a significant physical limitation that can impact one's ability to contribute to society in this capacity. This exacerbates the negative impact on an individual's self-worth and sense of purpose in life (Lynch et al., 2013). Adults with chronic pain that are given the opportunity to represent their internal experience in a visual, tangible way exposes others to the discomfort, desperation, and suffering caused by chronic pain. Through a specific study done with participants living with chronic pain, the expressive externalization through painting their internal experience led to the creation of "a deeply personal account...of the sensory, psychological, and social impact of chronic pain" (Kirkham et al., 2015, p. 404).

Building and Rebuilding Relationships

The quality of life for adults experiencing chronic pain is negatively affected in the realm of their social life and relationships. Studies have shown that chronic pain has a substantial impact on social functioning, and frequently interferes with one's ability to carry out normal social activities (Ataoglu et al., 2013). Pain in general is an "inherently lonely" experience and it

can “cause us to disengage from others and even from ourselves” (Stahl, 2016, p.2). Chronic pain can inhibit one’s ability to connect with others and individuals in various studies have reported feeling isolated and lonely as a result of their physical pain. Visual art is a way to connect with oneself, and work through the experience of pain (Stahl, 2016). In one study conducted on creating art in the face of pain, individuals shared that they struggled to find value in themselves in terms of what they could contribute to a relationship (Lynch et al., 2013). This is tied to the concept of self-worth and being able to identify value outside of the experience of pain or one’s diagnosis or condition. Not only were individuals’ relationships impacted by their perception of their own self-worth, but also by their physical limitations related to “movement and energy” which lessened their social contact and connection (Lynch et al., 2013, p. 57).

The impact on relationships does not only affect the individual with chronic pain, but also, individuals in that person’s social sphere such as a significant other or partner, caregiver, or family member. Adults with chronic pain and their partner in a relationship can experience “higher than average levels of conflict and lower levels of perceived support” (Tankha et al., 2020, p. 51). Pain is a factor in negatively impacting couples’ satisfaction in relationships and even leads to a negative effect on the level of anxiety, mood, and overall wellbeing of the partner that is not experiencing chronic pain (Tankha et al., 2020).

In terms of family and caregiver relationships, members that help care for the individual with chronic pain often feel “sadness, burden, frustration, and helplessness” (Ojeda et al., 2014, p. 400). Family members and caregivers are often faced with taking on a role that is new and unexpected. They may need to help the individual by carrying out tasks they are unfamiliar with, which can lead to uncertainty regarding their own ability and performance. Such tasks can include giving medications and monitoring both the individual’s level of pain and the side effects

of medications (Ojeda et al., 2014). It has also been reported that adolescents experiencing chronic pain often cause an increased level of anxiety and depression in parents (Coren, 2016). This leads to question how familial relationships are impacted over time, as an adolescent with chronic pain develops into adulthood.

Adults with chronic pain are also faced with social stigma, which varies across cultures. For some individuals, social stigma is experienced in a way that leads to a disconnection to society and community. Following the study on creating art in the face of chronic pain, outcomes led participants to have a changed outlook and heightened sense of creativity. One participant shared, “It’s hard not to lose hope and courage, but creative endeavors...can change your outlook and make you feel less isolated” (Lynch et al., 2013, p. 58). In an art therapy drawing protocol study, the results indicated an overall improvement in ratings of participants’ relationship quality and demonstrated that the art therapy drawing protocol had the potential to spark and maintain social interpersonal changes as well as behavioral intrapersonal changes (Hass-Cohen et al., 2021) which can both play a role in an individuals’ relationships to others and society at large.

Across multiple studies, it has been recognized that positive outcomes of art therapy with adults experiencing chronic pain often included “improved relational coping”, better communication with family, increased socialization, and “building and maintaining new relationships” (Angheluta & Lee, 2011, p. 119). Multiple studies also highlighted the significance of community and feeling understood within a group art therapy setting. Individuals were able to relate to one another through shared challenges, hopes, and strengths and were able to build a sense of community and social connection through vulnerability and sharing within the group (Larsen et al., 2018). Additionally, having a safe, supportive, authentic, and non-

judgmental space to express and share their own experiences of chronic pain allowed participants to feel a sense of hope and connection to others (Larsen et al., 2018).

Physical Pain Management

Art therapy in terms of managing physical pain is an area of research with a weaker body of knowledge. Nonetheless, it should be noted that the mind-body connection has been highly researched and could bridge a gap in understanding the potential benefit of utilizing art therapy as a form of physical pain management. In a Harvard Medical School special health report, it was noted that pain is a subjective event that is emotional “as much as it is an objective medical symptom” and using mind-body techniques can alter one’s perception of pain (*Pain Relief*, 2019, p. 10). Additionally, it is recognized that depression and anxiety decrease one’s pain tolerance and increase the risk of developing chronic pain. On the flip side, chronic pain increases the risk of developing psychiatric symptoms related to depression and anxiety (*Pain Relief*, 2019, p. 12).

Expanding upon the idea that pain is tied to emotional states and the mind is connected to the body’s sensations, individuals can be “so fearful of pain” that it causes an increase in tension in anticipation of it. Individuals can become “hypervigilant for signs of pain” which could result in creating a physical imbalance such as tensing one’s shoulders in anticipation of back pain occurring (*Pain Relief*, 2019, p. 11). Additionally, when an individual has been in pain for an extended period of time, their “brain may actually rewire itself to perceive pain signals even after an injury has healed and the signals aren’t being sent anymore” (*Pain Relief*, 2019, p. 11). When chronic pain is experienced, the brain becomes programmed to elicit pain signals at a high volume. Due to the brain’s neuroplasticity, mind-body interventions can help to rewire those pain signals occurring and adjust “how the nervous system responds to painful stimuli” (*Pain Relief*, 2019, p. 11).

While art therapy is not a replacement for medical care or pain medication, it can be used as a complementary approach to help reduce an individual's "perception of pain experiences" (*The art of pain therapy*, 2018, p. 5). Art therapy can be utilized as a treatment modality to support individuals with chronic pain in learning how to shift one's mental focus and reach a more relaxed state to minimize the pain's control over one's emotional and mental wellbeing (*The art of pain therapy*, 2018). In addition to the benefits of art therapy itself and processing experiences through artmaking, it has also been found that repetitive or rhythmic crafting activities such as sewing, knitting, or crocheting can help to reduce physical pain sensations. The repetitive movement of these activities can break "the train of everyday thought and calm both the body and mind", leading to a relaxation response which reduces stress and therefore, pain in the physical body (*Pain Relief*, 2019, p. 24).

In a study conducted on the use of art therapy and other expressive modalities with adults experiencing chronic pain, it was discovered that participants' pain symptoms "subsided when patients were able to resolve some of their psychological issues connected to their past" and they cultivated a felt sense of connection between the mind and body (Angheluta & Lee, 2011, p. 117). Additionally, art therapy as pain modulation in a case study helped a woman with severe arthritis in her shoulders process her pain by identifying the nature of the pain through color and expressing her internal physical experience through a metaphorical pain monster. Through the process of "vanquish[ing] the pain monster, the pain in her shoulder subsided" (Angheluta & Lee, 2011, p. 117).

To build on the concept of the mind-body connection, it is recognized that pain exists bidirectionally with social engagement, psychological functions, and life experiences (Hass-Cohen et al., 2021). With a deeper body of knowledge exploring art therapy's benefits to an

individuals' social engagement and psychological functions, a connection can be made that the healing aspects of art therapy could potentially reduce physical pain by managing the psychological comorbidities and improving quality of life. Art therapy literature also recognizes that the creation of art and expression through art can distract a person from physical pain sensations, while simultaneously allowing a space for adults with chronic pain to process “subconscious psychological material” (Stahl, 2016, p. 2).

Accepting and Coping with Chronic Pain

Chronic pain acceptance can be described as “the willingness to experience ongoing pain” and continue to engage in daily life activities despite the physical pain sensations (Kim & Kratz, 2021, p. 102). The concept of chronic pain acceptance “has emerged as an important construct in pain management and rehabilitation” (Kim & Kratz, 2021, p. 102). Accepting and coming to terms with chronic pain can be challenging for many adults, as they navigate both the physical pain and life challenges or changes that come with it. The acceptance of chronic pain has been identified as a factor in improving mental health, social functioning, and even physical wellbeing (Lynch et al., 2013).

One individual experiencing chronic pain shared that the acceptance of pain through art allowed him to move forward and have a sense of control and responsibility over his own experiences and happiness (Lynch et al., 2013). In a community art therapy group created for adults with chronic pain, a participant reflected in the fourth week of the art therapy group. He shared that after fifteen years of experiencing chronic pain and receiving various treatments and pain management protocols, the art therapy group was the most effective in helping him come to terms with his condition (O’Neill & Moss, 2015).

In a focusing-oriented art therapy approach, an intervention called ‘Clearing a Space’ was implemented by having individuals with chronic pain imagine what may be holding them back from feeling at ease or peaceful (Malchiodi, 2012). Once they were able to identify one aspect or struggle, the individual imagined or created an image that reflected themselves removing that barrier or pain. This approach or intervention has been helpful in reducing physical pain, anxiety, and depression as well as increasing a sense of “relaxation and calmness” for adults with chronic pain as well as members of various other populations such as cancer patients and those with chronic illnesses (Malchiodi, 2012, p. 226). This intervention has also been seen to increase positivity toward one’s body and participants’ relationship with their body (Malchiodi, 2012). With the key elements of this intervention and a focusing-oriented approach to art therapy, adults experiencing chronic pain have the potential to use this method in their process of coping.

Limitations and Gaps in Research

The body of research on the use of art therapy with adults experiencing chronic pain appears to be mainly with small sample sizes, relatively short-term groups with a lack of longitudinal data, and is primarily exploratory. The findings in this literature review are not generalizable, due to the small sample sizes and nature of the research. However, it offers a window into the potential of what could be seen and discovered if research were further developed on this topic and expanded upon. Most studies lacked a control group, which may be useful in future studies to compare outcomes. Additionally, while some studies had a highly structured approach to research, some case studies did not implement a systematic research method (Angheluta & Lee, 2011). Personal individual reflections were highlighted throughout the research, with limited quantifiable data due to the nature of the content and themes in some

of the studies conducted. Thematic analysis was a useful tool in various case studies due to the subjective nature of both pain and aspects of quality of life and psychological well-being.

Distinguishing Art Therapy and Therapeutic Artmaking

Therapeutic artmaking and art therapy differ from one another, as therapeutic artmaking is using art as a form of entertainment or distraction that does not require a trained, professional art therapist. “Art therapy is a specialization within the realm of psychology and requires additional education” (Angheluta & Lee, 2011, p. 126). Art therapy can only be conducted by an art therapist, while therapeutic artmaking and art-based groups can occur in various settings without a trained professional. The research gathered in this literature review discussed mainly art therapy, with a few studies included on arts-based groups and therapeutic artmaking. While therapeutic artmaking has impacted individuals with chronic pain positively, it is important to note that art therapy “is the mechanism that ensures patients’ emotional safety and allows them to resolve personal conflicts that exacerbate their pain” (Angheluta & Lee, 2011, p. 127). There is more depth and well-rounded healing in the art therapy setting, which can lead to more longevity in the individuals’ recovery and positive outlook.

Of the few studies conducted that were not with an art therapist, the researchers and facilitators still had a background in counseling, and therefore, were able to support participants in a professional capacity. A differentiation was made between the two throughout the literature review, using the phrases ‘art therapy’, ‘therapeutic artmaking’, and ‘arts-based’ when applicable. This again, highlights the necessity to conduct further research on art therapy with adults with chronic pain to strengthen the body of knowledge and to potentially compare this to therapeutic artmaking to make differentiations between the benefits and limitations of each

method. With a limited body of research, it was necessary to explore both methods in a combined manner.

Multicultural Considerations

In the studies conducted on the use of art therapy with adults experiencing chronic pain, multicultural considerations were not commonly noted or addressed as a prominent aspect of the research and discussion. Considering the race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, environmental factors, and cultural background is significant when assessing the impact of chronic pain on individuals as well as the impact of art therapy on chronic pain. “Cultural ideas of pain” come into play (Angheluta & Lee, 2011, p. 113), as well as perceptions of and accessibility to mental health treatment, medical care, and art making in general.

As stated by Angheluta and Lee (2011),

How people experience their pain is influenced by cultural ideas of pain, gender expectations of how one must cope with pain, the quality of personal relations with family or society at large, personal coping capacity, and the presence of other stressors, such as job loss. (p.113)

Various life challenges and barriers can be compounded with an individuals’ experience of chronic pain which needs to be recognized in order for art therapists to accurately assess the needs of individuals. These compounded life experiences could potentially increase physical body pains, as stress levels are tied to the ability of an individual to manage their physical pain (*Pain Relief*, 2019). With the knowledge that stress can exacerbate chronic pain, it must be brought to light that one’s cultural identity, socioeconomic status, and access to treatment play a role in the mental and physical health of those experiencing chronic pain. While the lack of

treatment itself could harm an individual, the increase in stress level could potentially increase the physical pain sensations even further.

An art therapist must not assume chronic pain is the only factor impacting an individual's life, but rather, a piece of the larger picture that must be carefully considered as it has already been noted that pain and mental health function bi-directionally. To approach this area of study with no cultural context or holistic view of the individual diminishes the extent to which this body of research can be applied. With multicultural considerations and a higher level of cultural competency within research, future art therapists can better assess how to be inclusive and accommodating of various cultures, needs, and perspectives and continue to improve accessibility in the field.

Discussion

With increasing evidence supporting the connection between chronic pain and lower quality of life and mental health challenges, it can be suggested that a multidisciplinary approach to treatment is vital. Approaching chronic pain treatment in a holistic manner could improve the mental and physical wellbeing of individuals more significantly than a strictly medical model. With only targeting physical pain symptoms that cannot be fully alleviated, individuals are left to manage the impact it has on various domains of life. Tying in research on the mind-body connection with clear evidence of increased mental health challenges faced by individuals with chronic pain, it becomes apparent that mental health treatment should be an equally significant part of the picture.

Not only is art therapy a viable mental health treatment option for adults with chronic pain, but it is uniquely situated in the fact that pain and its impact can be visually represented, expressed, and processed. This creates an added layer of conscious understanding of an

individual's life. Internal physical, mental, and emotional experiences can be expressed in a tangible way to help individuals process lived experiences, sensations, and feelings on a deeper level and to share their experience with others. With the integration of this research and the themes explored in the literature review, future studies on the utilization of art therapy as a treatment method with this population could further develop and bring to light the healing aspects that are possible and probable. In turn, both healthcare workers and art therapists will be better equipped to understand adults with chronic pain and their needs. While it was consistently recognized throughout the literature that a multidisciplinary approach would be beneficial, there were not a lot of multidisciplinary studies where the various aspects of chronic pain treatment were researched in conjunction with one another. It may prove to be beneficial to conduct studies in a holistic manner that explore both the medical and mental health aspects of treatment in relation to each other, to deepen providers' understanding of how to connect those pieces when a multidisciplinary approach is implemented.

While art therapy has the potential to increase quality of life and decrease mental health struggles for an individual with chronic pain, it can also strengthen family relationships and partnerships. The impact on relationships has been discussed at length, but no research was found on conducting art therapy with both the individual with chronic pain *and* their loved one(s). This potential area of study could be beneficial to build on the understanding of how chronic pain impacts individuals and those in their social sphere and further contribute to the body of knowledge suggesting art therapy can improve these relationships. With incorporating an individual's family, partner, or loved one in the therapeutic space, healing could occur bidirectionally and therefore, there is the potential for an even deeper level of healing as those social connections are strengthened for the individual in a long-lasting way. The research

highlighted in the literature review serves to encourage art therapists to explore this realm and conduct research on the efficacy and utilization of art therapy with adults with chronic pain in a family or couple setting. While art therapists do embrace family and couple therapy models of treatment, it would be valuable to conduct research on implementing an art therapy space specifically focused on the impact of chronic pain on the family system and deepening the understanding and connection between all members involved in treatment.

Through the gathering and collection of data, it has become apparent that more research is needed in general on the use of art therapy with adults with chronic pain. The intention of this literature review is to inspire future art therapists and researchers to explore these themes and benefits of art therapy in the context of this population, while considering the aspects of research that are currently underdeveloped. In anticipation of future art therapists expanding this body of research, it is encouraged that they consider their own cultural competency and how various aspects of individuals' cultural identity and experiences will be considered and implemented in their studies to enrich the depth and application of art therapy with adults experiencing chronic pain.

Conclusion

While medical treatment is seen as a necessity for many adults experiencing chronic pain, the impact on mental health and quality of life can often be overlooked as the focus shifts to the physical body. The impact of chronic pain being viewed from a broader perspective leads to a clearer, more holistic image which reveals that individuals with chronic pain experience increased challenges with their mental health, and quality of life is impacted beyond the realm of their physical wellbeing. Bringing light to these mental health and life challenges can encourage adults with chronic pain to seek mental health treatment, while also expanding the healthcare

system's view of what treatment is necessary for this population. Utilizing a multidisciplinary approach with art therapy can not only provide the mental health services needed, but it can expand one's healing even further as individuals are given the opportunity to express, process, and reflect their experiences in a visual way. Art therapy deepens an individual's connection to themselves and supports them in giving form to their experience to build understanding, communication, and connection with others and society at large.

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Student's Name: ___Kayley Nelson_____

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

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