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## Development Art Therapy Methods for Korean Immigrant Elders in an Independent Residential Community Setting

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**Development Art Therapy Methods for Korean Immigrant Elders  
in an Independent Residential Community Setting**

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

May 5, 2022

Wansu Kang

Specialization: Art Therapy

Thesis Instructor: Raquel Stephenson, Ph.D., ATR-BC, LCAT

## Abstract

This paper addresses how art therapy methods can improve life quality, empowerment, and well-being for immigrant elders in the US. Participants were first generation immigrants aged 71-86 years old (birth years ranging from 1935 to 1950) who moved to the USA 20-30 years ago. Art groups were held weekly in one-hour long sessions. Data included observation notes of the participants throughout the sessions, a review and discussion of the participants' art responses, as well as closing interviews. This thesis found art therapy can a) allow immigrant elders to engage with peers and communities, relieving social isolation and loneliness, b) support them in sharing their emotions symbolically without eliciting an extreme emotional response, c) offer a chance to review their lifespan and view their strengths and resilience, and d) provide an appropriate space to discuss life-death education. This thesis sheds light on the importance of art therapy in immigrant populations and offers recommendations for future research like this should be explored further in the future.

*Keywords:* art therapy, first generation, Korean, immigrants, elders, community setting, social isolation, strengths, emotions, life death education

*Author Identity Statement:* The author identifies as a minority, underserved population, and international female student from Korea. The writer is currently an intern in a multicultural diverse independent residential community for Korean elders.

## Development of Art Therapy Method for Korean Immigrant Elders in an Independent Residential Community Setting

### **Introduction**

The immigrant experience is full of challenges and obstacles. Immigrants are in a place where they can't understand the language, they can't read, and they can't express themselves. They moved their life to whole new place, and they didn't know what laid ahead. Throughout history, the United States has increased in a large number of immigrants; according to Conway (2014), immigration will be the primary driver of U.S. population growth in the next half-century. However, immigrants are still treated as an underserved population, and they feel the burden of being socially isolated, depressed, and having a limited connection with communities.

In my final year of school, I had the great opportunity to work with Korean immigrant elders in an independent community setting as my second-year internship practice for my program. Participants were first-generation immigrants and barely involved in the US culture because of their limited English language skills. In addition, due to the lack of a Korean native speaker in staff on site, they faced social isolation and consequently had even more difficulty connecting with others in the community. Nevertheless, I observed how they were eager to connect with this community and the US culture throughout the sessions; this project was a great way to have initial contact and an outlet to get in touch with their culture.

While I was offering them weekly individual sessions and weekly Korean art group sessions, I perceived one fact about Korean immigrants' elders: they often suppressed explicit emotions, particularly negative feelings- such as anxiety, fear, and boredom- because of the cultural heritage known as expressing emotions as an impolite behavior. As a consequence, Korean immigrants suffered from *Hwabyung* (Lin et al., 1992) due to the unexpressed emotions projected on the body (Park et al., 2001) that could raise their risk for chronic distress and psychiatric illness (Lee et al., 2016). In addition, Korean elders, who were at the end of their

lives, may restrain from having a proper conversation about death because talking about it was forbidden in Korean culture. As a result, this project investigated the benefits of using the creative process in life-death education for immigrant elders to help their ambivalent emotions regarding life-death issues and encourage them to prepare for death.

This paper explores how art therapy experience could support immigrant elders in sharing their feelings, emotions, and thoughts symbolically without eliciting an extreme emotional response and thus allowing them to have a sense of belonging with others and within the community, ultimately resolving their social isolation. Additionally, this gave them a chance to become self-aware of their resilience and strengths, and finally offered a space to discuss life-death education. The reason why I chose this topic was that I hoped that participants would have a chance to look back on their life experiences and recognize what they achieved so far.

I acknowledge my race and experiences living in the US as an Asian international female student from South Korea. My experience moving to different cities in Korea since I was young due to my father's job and even moving to other cities in the US made me feel like I did not belong anywhere, which caused isolation. Due to these experiences, I resonate with the minority groups who are an underserved population in the US. The immigrant elderly populations are one of them and often lose the opportunity to express their emotions safely due to the language barriers, and this is why this topic is important to address. This project is another step of my art therapy journey of exploring how the creative visual art process can support elders experiencing social isolation, aid them expressing emotions, allow self-aware of resilience and strengths, and finally offer life-death education.

## **Literature Review**

### **Korean Immigrants Elders in the United States**

The first meaningful wave of immigration began on January 13, 1903, when a shipload of Korean immigrants arrived in Hawaii to work on pineapple and sugar plantations; by 1905, more than 7,226 Koreans had arrived in Hawaii (Chung, n.d.). In current days, the immigrant

population in the United States is approximately 44.4 million, and every year it drastically contributes to the diversity of the population of the US (American Psychological Association, 2012). According to O'Conner and Batalova (2019), around one million Korean immigrants settled in the US, representing 2.4% of the 44.5 million immigrants in the nation in 2017. Despite this increasing population, many immigrants from Asia encountered racial discrimination for the first time in the US that caused a substantial impact on their physical health and mental health (American Psychological Association, 2012). Additionally, immigrants often struggled to adjust to their new land, and they faced various risks and stressors such as poverty, discrimination, fewer years of schooling, social isolation, and job insecurity (American Psychological Association, 2012).

Korean immigrants were likely to preserve stronger ethnic attachment to Korean traditional cultural values. Due to their ethnic attachment, they isolated themselves from different cultures and as a result, their English proficiency levels were lower than other ethnic immigrants in the U.S. (Hurh & Kim, 1990; Min, 1995; Seo et al., 2019). Although Korean immigrants in the US were known as a highly educated and successful immigrant group (Zhou & Lee, 2017), the first-generation Korean Americans, who were the first group to come to the U.S, were one of the most understudied ethnic groups (Jang, Kim, Hansen, & Chiriboga, 2007). Furthermore, first-generation Korean immigrants were at greater risk for mental health issues compared to other ethnic groups (Ding et al., 2011; Kuo, 1984; Shin, 1993, as cited in Seo et al., 2019).

According to Jang (2016), Korean immigrants who had less social support were more likely to struggle with psychosocial adaptation, such as quality of life issues within the elderly population. In addition, Korean elder immigrants often struggled with sociocultural challenges due to immigration-related experiences that could negatively impact their well-being (Seo et al., 2019). Elders were often challenged by the loss of social ties when they left their home country and underwent acculturation stress related to migration in the US because of the large cultural

distance between their heritage and new environments (Berry, 2005; Garcia, Ramirez, & Jariego, 2002, as cited in Seo et al, 2019). Among those stressors, an inability to communicate in the language of their new land was a major challenge for them (Lee, 2013). Moreover, due to the language barrier and other remaining obstacles, they often underutilized mental health services because of limited resources (Loo, Tong, & True, 1989; Snowden & Cheung, 1990, as cited in Mui, 2001).

Immigrant populations frequently experienced psychological distress which caused immigrants to reduce social activity and boosts the risk of suicide (Chang, 2019). According to Chang and Moon (2016) and Park (2009), most Korean immigrants in the US experienced severe psychological distress because of a lack of ability to cope with stressful events, socio-economic status, job insecurity, and challenges in adjusting to new cultural environments. In particular, exposure to social support and networks of family and friends influenced their psychological well-being. Conversely, a lack of social support could be negatively associated with psychological distress (Chang, 2019). In addition, Han et al. (2007) described how increased social support was strongly correlated with reduced psychological distress among older Korean immigrants. Quality of social support and network were associated with the rising quality of life and coping skills when immigrant elders face stressful events (Mui & Kang, 2006).

### **Emotion- *Hwabyung***

According to Lee (2013), Koreans often didn't show their negative emotions such as anger and frustration to others to prevent the possibility of losing respect in their interpersonal relationships. Additionally, Koreans had difficulty expressing their inner feelings and thoughts in their interpersonal relationships while under the hierarchically structured collectivistic social norms of *Confucianism* (Cho, 2003). These suppressed inner feelings could increase their risk for chronic distress and psychiatric illness (Lee et al., 2016). As a result, 12% of Korean immigrants suffered from *hwabyung* (Lin et al., 1992), and the extremely high prevalence of

*hwabyung* among Korean immigrants in the US was unprecedented (Lee, 2013).

*Hwabyung* was a Korean word that depicts a mind and body concept in the psychological perspective of Korea (Lee, 2013). It meant fire illness which was Korean for anger syndrome; it was formed by two nouns, *hwa*, meaning fire, which metaphorically represented anger, and *byung*, which meant illness. (Lee, 1977; as cited in Lee, 2013). In traditional Korean medicine lenses, *hwabyung* was caused by the imbalance between yin (negative elements) and yang (positive elements), which was initiated by suffering intense distress for a long time (Lee, 2013). In Western psychiatric lenses, *hwabyung* resulted from an unexpressed suppression of negative emotion projected on the body (Park et al., 2001). While both approaches explained *hwabyung* from their own theoretical perspective, they agreed that accumulated stress was the major source of *hwabyung* (Lee, 2013).

Berry (1980) introduced the term acculturative stress to describe the negative psychological consequences of immigration. Immigrants learnt and adjusted to new cultures, languages, and social norms (Berry, 1980). Under this circumstance, for day-to-day survival, they took jobs that often did not fit with their professional experience and felt a sense of loss for what had been left behind, including family and friends (Berry, 1980). Even though *hwabyung* represented both men and women due to acculturative stress, *hwabyung* mainly affected women since they were marginalized in social positions and lived the patriarchal norms of Korean culture (Lee, 2013). As a result, Korean women must silently bear gender stratification restricting their participation under their patriarchal cultural norms (Lee, 2013).

According to Lee, there were two kinds of coping resources: psychological and social. Psychological coping resources indicated individuals' positive stance toward the self (Rosenberg, 1979; as cited in Lee, 2013), and social resources were both the tangible and emotional support offered by family, friends, neighbors, and members of the community (Thoits, 1986; as cited in Lee, 2013). Noh and Avison (1996, as cited in Lee, 2013) found the positive consequences of self-esteem on reducing psychological distress; Korean immigrants



with higher self-esteem were more likely to experience lower psychological symptoms. Korean immigrants frequently looked for social support through their affiliation with Korean churches in their ethnic community (Lee, 2013). The Korean church played a role as a “reception center” for firsthand immigrants by providing help for their relocation (Kim & Grant, 1997; as cited in Lee 2013). In the church, they shared the understanding of immigration experience and challenges, attained a sense of comfort, enhanced the positive experience, and overcame the difficult immigration experience (Lee, 2013). Since self-esteem and social support played a significant role in the level of *hawbyung*, available social support and self-esteem were less likely to experience higher *hwabyung* symptoms (Lee, 2013).

### **Art Therapy for Elders**

With the aging of the population, the number of aged 65 years old and older increased significantly in our society (Chetelat et al., 2018; Stephenson, 2013). Demographers expected that the number of people aged 65 years old and over would increase from 550 million to 973 million between 2000 and 2030, and the ratio of this age group to the total population would grow from 6.9% to 12% (World Health Organization, 2015). Due to the fast-growing number of elders and the mental health insecure they were facing, in the future, it would be crucial to help elders to achieve a quality of life that maintained health and was meaningful to them (Stephenson, 2013).

One of the most common feelings among older adults today was loneliness (Gardiner et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2017b; Tufan et al., 2019; as cited in Aydin and Kutlu., 2021), and 80% of older adults over aged of 65 experienced loneliness (Akgul & Yesilyaprak, 2018). Dereli et al (2010) described that the feeling of loneliness occurred more extremely when emotional and social relationships were absent or limited. Accordingly, the loneliness may lead elders to think that their lives were useless and experience a sense of emptiness and abandonment (Erol et al., 2016). The literature indicated three essential methods to dealing with loneliness (McWhirter et al., 1996; Rook, 1984; Schoenmakers et al., 2012; as cited in Aydin and Kutlu., 2021): as social

support groups, social skills training, and cognitive-behavioral approaches (Hamamcı & Duy, 2005; as cited in Aydin and Kutlu., 2021). Garcia and Gomez (2003) found that handicrafts and painting groups decreased the feeling of depression in older populations and increased their life satisfaction. Art therapy including drama, music, dance, painting, writing, narrative, photography, and clay therapy (Cam & Altinkopru, 2013) helped elders to cope with the level of loneliness and hopelessness (Mann et al., 2017). Moreover, art therapy supported elders to express themselves, gain insight and coping skills, reduce stress, solve conflicts and problems, improve resilience, self-esteem and self-confidence, and growth interpersonal skills by using art as a tool (Cam & Altinkopru, 2013; Rubin, 2010; as cited in Aydin and Kutlu., 2021).

Elders faced a number of life changes related to loss, such as losing social role, legacy, friend, family, and achievement. Stephenson (2006) described art therapy as a useful modality in working with for those elders because art therapy could support them cope with, adjust to, and adapt to age-related changes (Stephenson, 2006). Art therapy as a useful modality in working with for those elders because the creative process evoked many emotions and memories to assist older adults with reviewing and reflecting on their life, using methods that drew on the strength and abilities of each person (Stephenson, 2006).

Chilton et al. (2015) described the potential benefits of using arts in life-death education for elders at the end of their lives. Especially in Asian culture, talking about "death" was forbidden, and the use of arts for the elderly could facilitate them to view their art products as a mindful and symbolic process to reflect on life and death issues without eliciting extreme emotional responses (Nan et al., 2020). Furthermore, arts could enhance the reorganization of life experiences, promote dealing with ambivalent emotions regarding life-death issues, improve communication, and induce ideas to prepare for death (Nan et al., 2020).

Riley (2001) described art therapy as a means to decrease stress by providing responsibility and pleasurable projects. Especially in the community setting, art therapy allowed elderly residents to open themselves up with their community (Zeltzer et al., 2003).

Group experiences often provided a safe place for participants and offers the opportunity to express emotions with group members, increasing socialization and a sense of belonging (Jensen, 1997). Citakbas and Ucok (2019) described how group work could benefit from the mirroring and supporting functions of the group. Regarding the community setting, a group session could create a strong identity and promote feelings of belonging within the minority immigrant group (Zeltzer et al., 2003).

### **Flow Experience**

Flow was a state of mind in which time lost meaning, cognitive functions were fully involved, and action felt effortless, which was an enjoyable moment (Csikszentmihalyi, 1998). Flow in art therapy had benefits such as supporting concentration, raising self-esteem, and improving health and well-being, and contributing to the overall quality of life (Chilton, 2013; Kapitan, 2013; Wilkinson & Chilton, 2013). Flow tended to occur when a person's talents were fully involved in a task that precisely matches their skill. They experienced a state of mind in which time loses meaning and a sense of effortless action (Csikszentmihalyi, 1998). According to Lee (2013), the flow state played a critical role in how immigrants coped with their everyday struggles, and art therapy helped them access their strength and potential to cope with people's difficulties. Lee (2013) found that flow experience in art therapy empowered them to cope with the everyday challenge of anxiety and boredom associated with social isolation. The flow theory in art therapy provided immigrants' the power to be transported to an imaginative realm, empowering them to cope with their realities, increasing immigrants' sense of empowerment, control, pleasure, security, concentration, and motivation (Lee, 2013). Flow was a source of psychic energy in that it focused attention and motivates action. Learning new skills or requiring control by increasing challenge allowed elders to access the more enjoyable flow state (Csikszentmihalyi, 1998).

### **Visual Stimuli**

According to Silver (2002), stimulus drawing techniques involved offering two or three

options out of 50 small stimulus drawings of symbols and using them in an art image.

According to Betts (2016), when given a stimulus drawing, the participant completed the image providing rich psychological information. Moreover, using stimulus drawing, participants felt more confident and comfortable with the drawing part because it accounted for the difference in creative ability (Betts, 2016). The visual stimulus form allowed participants to have more confidence by letting those who were afraid of creating and didn't have artistic creativity participate in the session.

### **Lifeline**

For many years, the lifeline had been used as a therapeutic tool in a treatment setting in the mental health field, and art therapists had applied lifelines for symbolic imagery (Martin, 2003). The lifeline was designed to help respondents discover and integrate meaningful incidents and the corresponding feelings relating to the memory (Martin, 2003). It was a cognitively oriented activity and problem-solving art task that inspires participants to draw a graph from their life from birth to the present moment (Martin, 2003). This lifeline method allowed participants to communicate their emotions, structure memories to present behavior, and plan for the future (Martin, 2003). Moreover, to complete this process, they needed to reflect through and evaluate their experiences, represent their lives in an abstract way, and express their complicated thought procedures (Martin, 2003). Developing a lifeline allowed participants to promote clarification and better understand incidents and the corresponding feelings (Martin, 2003).

### **Sensory modality**

One of goals of art therapy with older people was often to increase sensory stimulation to encourage creative information processing (Hinz, 2009) because sensory stimulus could elicit long-term memory and facilitate new connections (Landgarten, 1981; Wald, 2003, as cited in Hinz, 2009). Sensory pleasure utilized materials related to smell, touch, and looking at colors (Riley, 2001) because sensory modalities elicited more material than the use of only one

modality (Jensen, 1997). Sensuous materials such as spice and nostalgic music could evoke individual memories (Hinz, 2009). In addition, using multisensory experiences helped participants retrieve memories, emotive experience recall, and increase self-esteem by creating artwork, giving evidence of a once healthier self (Jensen, 1997). The use of the senses allowed emotional recall to safely emerge in the visual image as an expression of self and as a container for people who could not articulate the felt emotion verbally (Jensen, 1997). Moreover, group sensory experiences allowed participants to develop memory and executive functioning and find personal meaning in aging (Jensen, 1997).

## **Methods**

### **Setting**

Art therapy methods developed for this thesis were utilized in a weekly Korean art group with immigrant elders in an independent community. I had a great opportunity to have in-person group sessions with face masks and safety distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic. The session ran weekly for one hour and participants were invited to the sessions by flyers. This group had been meeting before this project was conducted and built connections and rapport as a long-term group; however, this paper focused on the last three sessions. The method was used during three series sessions and the sessions were held in Korean. This thesis contains my observations with the help of a co-leader who was present during the session. My therapeutic stance was to present myself as empathetic and supportive without being pushed to interfere.

### **Clients**

The clients who participated in my thesis study were three to five Korean immigrant women aged 71 to 86 years old (1935-1950) who moved to the US around 20-30 years ago. Additionally, they have lived in this residential community for 5 to 15 years. Due to the non-medical setting nature of the site, resident medical history was not available to confirm the clients' past diagnosis.

**Preparation**

While developing a method based on my previous sessions experience with clients, I observed four specific things that the clients needed: a) they felt severe social isolation on a large level in the United States and on a micro-level in their community b) they had challenges regarding the opportunity for affective expressions, c) they expressed social isolation and loneliness, d) they felt a loss of identity and meaning of life and goals, and e) they feared creating art; they especially felt challenged with abstract art and preferred concrete instructions.

**Materials**

I offered a variety of art materials- clay, glue, paints, brushes, palette, water buckets, paper towels, watercolor papers, cardboard frame easel, colored pencils, pens, glass bottles, threads, cinnamon sticks, and lavender have been used. In addition, movement and music were used as well.

**Procedure**

I informed participants that these three sessions would be a series of sessions. Each session started with an “emotional, warm up movement” to increase group cohesion; all participants and leaders shared a word of their current emotion, feeling, and mood out of the emotional words sheet. They then expressed it as a movement, and other participants repeated those as reflections. Furthermore, I offered sample artwork each session to have an introductory visual example. Finally, participants shared artwork and process experience with the group for closure. The emotional warm up movement and sharing sessions as closure, were rituals used in each session.

***The first session***

The first session of the art experiential was called “Emotional palette.” Participants were introduced to various emotion words using an emotion chart. They were offered psychoeducation on how there was no right and wrong and good or bad emotions. The participants were guided through a meditation to reflect on the question, “what might be a

shape and color that represents each of the following emotions: happy (기쁨), love (사랑), proud of (뿌듯함), fear (두려움), sad (슬픔), anger (분노)?” Then, they utilized clay to create a shape of each individual emotion using the version of Visual Stimuli Method by Silver (2002) and I adapted it by creating a new version called the Emotional Palette Visual Stimulus Form. Furthermore, participants were invited to paint colors representing each emotion. This project's goals were to a) practice gross and fine motor skills, b) increase sensory stimulation, c) explore emotions symbolically, d) develop self-awareness through exploring emotions, and e) gain perspective through exploring artistic process and product.

### ***The second session***

The second session of the art experiential was called “Lifeline.” The participants were introduced to the “Lifeline” experiential where they chose a piece of colored paper representing their life cycle, using drawing materials. As a part of the Visual Stimulus Method, there was a pre-drawn line. The participants were introduced that high points did not always mean “happy” feelings, and low points did not always give “sad” feelings; they were encouraged to include both positive and negative moments. Moreover, they revisited the Emotional Palette they had created the week before to reflect on, include and draw their emotions on the lifeline. This project's goals were to a) review one’s lifespan; towards integration of memories and feelings, b) recognize one’s resilience and strengths, c) promote self-understanding and reflection, and d) gain perspective through sharing artistic process and product.

### ***The last session***

The last session was called “Memory Bottle.” Participants re-visited the lifeline they had created the week before and shared what they recognized as resilience and strength. With music, they were invited to write a letter for themselves. After they wrote a letter, they sensed lavender and cinnamon sticks as sensory integration, rolled the letter with thread, and put the letter with sensory materials in the Memory Bottle. Lastly, they closed the lid as a metaphor to celebrate their life as well as the “closing” of this session. Eventually, participants had reflection time

sharing their experiences, thoughts, and feelings about sessions and this art group. This project's goals were to a) recognize one's resilience and strengths, b) reflect on life cycle and share thoughts about life and death, and c) gain perspective through sharing artistic process and product.

### **Record keeping**

The plan for tracking progress included observation notes, reviewing emotions through art, and discussing the symbols and metaphors that participants identified in their art. The record keeping was done throughout my observation of the participants, participants' artwork, reflection of the participants' responses. The opportunity to observe immigrant elders resulted in a comprehensive review of these methods within this population. All sample artworks and specific group plans are included (see Appendix).

## **Results**

### **Session #1 Emotional Pallet**

#### ***Observations***

Three participants arrived on time and started with a warmup movement. Since this was the first time they tried it, they spent time understanding how this warmup movement works. Participants shared their emotions and movements, such as “glad” (반갑다) and “appreciate” (감사하다). Participants sometimes expressed fear about creating art; however, visual stimulus form relieved their anxiety to ‘create’ artwork. Participants complimented other participants. Some shared thoughts about art- for example that children would be much better at doing the activity because they are more emotional, and it would be easier for leaders to have a class with them.

#### ***Art Responses***

Participants were initially psycho-educated about the emotion they felt- that there was no right or wrong, and this was a safe place for everyone and where we could express and explore our internal world. Many participants could not fully understand the intention of the Emotional Pallet and the process because some of them mimicked what sample visual



representation. Therefore, and the co-leader spent time explaining the process and notion over again.

For art responses, many participants interestingly chose heart shapes and pink or red colors for their Love (사랑) emotion. Likewise, sad (슬픔) and anger (분노) were represented generally in more angulate shapes than organic with gray and black colors. Moreover, some participants reported that the clay was too hard to create art with even though it had't been opened yet. One of the frail participants felt challenged using her hands, and I observed she had trouble using her motor skills, so I helped her as a "third hand."

### *Art session results*

When it came to the availability of materials, it would have been nice to use more soft clay because an obstacle with the materials was that they felt like a barrier to expressing their emotion into the clay. The participants could not finish their work in one session, so I informed them to continue it in the next session. In addition, I informed them that this would be a series of sessions and encouraged them to come back next week to finish and share their work. Due to the time constraint, there was not enough time to conduct this project's closing interview. Even though most participants couldn't finish it on time, I set the time limit because limits are essential in the creative effort and a supportive environment (May, 1975; Hinz, 2009).

Participants reported that an hour-long session was too short, and it would have been nice to have more time to have a more fruitful discussion. One of the participants stated that this group was enjoyable and that they were thankful for it; I observed that group cohesion started to build, and participants felt connected with group members. Overall, this showed everyone had different experiences, and the participants could learn from each other.

### **Session #2 Lifeline**

#### *Observations*

The group started with a warm-up movement, and participants showed less hesitation and resistance to the movement than in the last session. A few of the participants were

challenged to follow the session initially, so I had to explain several times that this was for “your” lifeline. A new participant, who did not participate in the past session, showed anxiety following the process; however, as time went by, she followed well to the process. One of the frail participants ended up with limited work, so she spent time observing what other people were creating. A few participants expressed resistance to reflecting on past memories and events, and one reported that thinking about it made her sad. I observed one of the participants in the “flow” moment that she appeared to be fully involved in the work with time lost meaning while other participants had conversations. Flow experience in art therapy empowered immigrants to cope with the everyday challenge of anxiety and boredom associated with social isolation (Lee, 2013).

### ***Art Responses***

I informed the new participant that this project was planned as a series of sessions, and she needed a product from the first session to jump this session. I briefly explained and psycho-educated her about emotions with flexibility and invited her to create her own Emotional Pallet using colored pencils rather than clay. Most of the participants artwork showed how their immigration experience was low at a point in their lifeline. One of the participants did not have any curve in the lifeline, and she stated that her life had been even.

### ***Closing Interview***

Many participants stated that they chose immigration for their family, children, and grandchildren- immigration may not have been not a choice for themselves. Participants shared their immigration experiences throughout the session, and they felt empathy and connection with others. During the closing interview, positive comments were shared by some participants; on the other hand, there was another moment where two participants showed dissent and engaged in what appeared to be small arguments.

### ***Art session results***

Lifeline, the creative art experience, allowed elders to reflect upon their life and

support healthy aging. Five participants shared their immigration memory and experience and built rapport with each other. To immigrant elders, immigration hugely impacted their life, and this event showed in their lifeline as a low point, and others agree with this. Since other participants may have felt unsafe because of the small arguments, the group needed to work on shared agreements.

### **Session #3 Memory Bottle**

#### ***Observations***

Due to the last small arguments, the environment was slightly down, and a few participants hesitated to involve themselves in the warm-up movement. When I brought up the previous week's disagreement to remind everyone that the group it is a safe space for everyone, participants pretended as if nothing had happened and said it was not an argument but just an expression of different opinions. Even though participants showed hesitation initially, they expressed curiosity in the Memory Bottle project.

#### ***Art Responses***

Throughout the art process, calm music was played. The group started by reviewing the lifeline they created last week. When today's work was presented, one of the participants shared she already wrote her last will and testament after the COVID-19 pandemic came. Two participants started writing a letter right away. One of the participants refused to write a letter while expressing discomfort; she felt challenged to start the art process while saying that she went through a hard time in the past and did not want to remember it. She reported that writing a letter made her feel sad and cry. She also reported that she had forgotten the correct Korean spellings. So, I suggested to draw a simple picture that represented her life journey and how this would inform her future. However, she refused again and stated that she did not want to show the difficult parts of life journey and only wanted to keep the happy moments in her memories. She spent time watching others working and ended up just cutting her current and future lifeline, which was a "happy" moment, and glued on the letter. She crumpled the

remaining past section in her lifeline. Looking back on her life and writing a letter might have triggered her, and she may have had residual trauma memories; or, I wondered if her feelings at the session might have been impacted by day to day stressors such as stress from family conflicts or difficult interactions with friends and peers during that day.

Even though they had trouble smelling sensuous materials over the mask, they could sense it, and they showed a curiosity about what each sensory component meant. I briefly introduced them to the language of lavender and explained sensuous materials such as lavender and cinnamon sticks can evoke individual memories (Hinz, 2009).

### ***Closing Interview***

For confidentiality, the group did not share much about the letter's contents; however, one shared that she would like to live for herself and not sacrifice herself for others. During the closing interview, one participant shared that being in the group made her feel connected and relieved of social isolation and feels good to have a place to go. Others agreed with what the participant said. Another participant reported that she initially was not interested in joining this group; still, she stated that she enjoyed the group.

### ***Art session results***

This last session, a closing, was valuable in that it allowed participants to see and remember the challenges and the progress they have made in therapy as a final evaluation (Hinz, 2009). They could discover their resilience and strengths, reflect on their lives, and share it in the group. In addition, I witnessed that using these three methods had positive effects. It allowed participants to use their cognitive skills to decide the visual stimulus images and combine them into their artwork through a series of works while projecting, expressing, and defining (Silver, 2002).

## **Discussion**

This project intended to explore how art therapy can help to improve life quality for elders and promote empowerment and well-being. The art therapy methods developed for this

thesis were utilized during three sessions in a weekly one-hour-long session with an elder Korean immigrant art group in an independent community setting. The steps of these methods included a warmup of emotional movement, visual art process, and music. The data for tracking progress included: observation notes of the participants throughout the sessions, a review and discussion of the participants' art responses, and closing interviews.

The primary outcome of this project was that art therapy a) allowed elders to belong with peers within the community, reliving social isolation and the feeling of loneliness, b) supported those unfamiliar with expressing their emotions due to their cultural heritage- because of *hwabyung*- in sharing their feelings, emotions, and thoughts symbolically without eliciting an extreme emotional response, and c) offered a chance to review their lifespan and become self-aware of their resilience and strengths, as well as offer a space to discuss life-death education.

## **Findings**

***Theme One:*** Art therapy can provide a safe social gathering space to address relieving social isolation for immigrant elders

One of the outcomes of this project was that art therapy in a group helps people to communicate feelings and decrease social isolation. This project was a great outlet for participants to get in touch with their culture as the art therapy in the group played an essential role as the “reception center”; this provided social support for first hand immigrants in their relocation (Kim & Grant, 1997; as cited in Lee 2013). The warmup of emotional movement had been a role to form group cohesion. McGarry and Russo (2011) describe that "at present, mirroring is practiced by the therapist in Dance Movement Therapy as a way to enhance emotional resonance between a therapist and patient, and sometimes is used between patients in group therapy to promote group cohesion" (p. 180).

In addition, I observed that group art therapy could offer a place for immigrant elders to open themselves up about their experiences and challenges, attain a sense of comfort, and

enhance their positive involvement, which allowed them to build rapport with each other and belonging. Jensen (1997) stated that group experience often provided a safe place for participants and offered the opportunity to express emotions with group members, increasing socialization and a sense of belonging. Han et al. (2007) described that increased social support was strongly correlated with reduced psychological distress among older Korean immigrants. This was essential because social support and network quality were associated with a rising quality of life and coping skills when one faced stressful events (Mui & Kang, 2006).

***Theme Two:*** Art therapy can support immigrant elders to release their emotions

Growing up in a culture that considers holding back emotions as a virtue makes it difficult for people to be vulnerable. Lee et al. (2016) pointed out that immigrants often suppressed their feelings which led to increasing chronic distress and psychiatric illness; as a result, the chance to have *hwabyung* could hugely impact their life and wellbeing. *Hwabyung*, from a various theoretical perspective, this was the source of accumulated stress (Lee, 2013) due to the lack of unexpressed emotions. Immigrants were often challenged to articulate their feelings, emotions, and concern due to language barriers. Art therapy helped them communicate their non-verbal expressions (Brunick, 1999) since emotions were too abstract to articulate. As a result, expressing emotions with art therapy could help decrease the chance of *hwabyung*. In the sessions, participants represented their experiences and memories related to the emotions as color, shapes, and lines; Hinz (2009) described that color is correlated with the recall of emotions.

The results reported that group art sessions offered Korean immigrant elders a safe space to share their thoughts and emotions and hear positive feedback from their peers. In addition, the flow experience in art therapy empowered them to cope with the everyday challenge of anxiety and loneliness associated with social isolation (Lee, 2013). Overall, art therapy has a great benefit in allowing Korean immigrant elders to share their feelings symbolically and release emotions at a safe boundary distance.

**Theme Three:** Art therapy allows self-awareness of resilience and strengths as well as offer life-death education in elder immigrant population

Elders were often challenged by the loss of social roles when they left their country and underwent acculturation stress related to migration to the US because of the huge cultural differences between their heritage and new environments (Berry, 2005; Garcia, Ramirez, & Jariago, 2002, as cited in Seo et al, 2019). Living in a different country was not easy at all; however, I observed how immigrant elders don't often credit their resilience, strengths, and wisdom even though they went through challenging times to survive in a different country. Stephenson (2013) pointed out that it would be essential to encourage elders to achieve a quality of life that supports and is meaningful to them.

Especially for elders, art therapy would be more beneficial to help them recognize their strengths and resilience as a goal of therapy because it could offer an opportunity for self-expression for an individual to build on one's strengths and life experience (Stephenson, 2006). I found that art therapy methods may help immigrant elders gain psychological resources to view their strengths and resilience. In the second session, the 'lifeline' project, they reviewed their lifespan and recognized their courage and adaptability.

Throughout the sessions various sensory pleasure materials were utilized, such as clay, lavender, cinnamon stick, and color; group sensory pleasure related to smell, touch, and looking at color (Riley, 2001) allowed participants to emotional recall and develop long-term memory and executive functioning and find personal meaning in aging (Jensen, 1997). Furthermore, art therapy helped elders talk about life-death education, which is forbidden in South Korea. In the third session, the 'memory bottle' project, they wrote a letter to themselves while reflecting on their lifeline. The process was a metaphor for writing a will and allowed them to share how they felt about death. During this time, elders were able to view their letters as a way to reflect on life; art therapy allows for the creation of art products as a mindful and symbolic process to reflect on life and death issues at a safe boundary distance (Nan et al., 2020).

## **Contribution**

This development of methods contributed to art therapy by exploring a possible approach to improve quality of life, help express emotions, foster self-awareness of resilience and strengths, resolve social isolation, and conduct death education for immigrant elders in the US. In addition, this paper addressed suggestions to serve the immigrant elder populations better; as well as it showed fruitful and significant results worthy of further investigation.

## **Limitations of the study**

My co-leader found that cultural value might exist in the lifeline process. For instance, people living in America mainly experienced the lifeline as part of their education curriculum; however, Koreans were not likely to know the concept as they have no experience with it. Thus, it made sense after the session that the participants were confused during the process. This could be a cultural effect, and therapists who were unaware of cultural effects play a key role in mental health, and they would have trouble effectively engaging with this client (Cardemil & Battle, 2003).

Another limitation of the study was the time constraint within the sessions. Participants could not spend time on the closing interview in the first session due to limited time; even though participants spent ten minutes in the closing interview in the second and last session, they were rushed. As a result, the data might have been affected by this factor and this may have not allowed enough time to reflect upon their perspectives that they explored in the artistic process and the final product.

## **Suggestion for Further Research**

This study only included three to five participants; in light of this, the result section has a reliability constraint. Moreover, since the whole process was done without a quantitative measure, this qualitative research is not statically representative, and due to this, it isn't easy to investigate causality. Additionally, other psychological elements should be considered for future studies; the studies should consider validity and reliability. As a result, more research is



needed to be done with a larger sample, control group, and quantitative data to have more comprehensive results. Lastly, to acquire artwork products from the participants and make a complete evaluation of the results, self-report, quantitative data, and analysis of the data would be needed.

## **Conclusion**

These findings suggest that art therapy helps promote well-being and empowerment for immigrant elders, allowing for improved life quality. This paper also addressed how the art therapy method can help immigrant elders review their lifespan, offer a chance to view their resilience and strengths, provide a safe space to discuss life-death education and emotional expression, and help relieve social isolation. This project has been another step of my art therapy journey of exploring how the creative art process can aid elders.

I have frequently doubted myself as an art therapist; I have often felt that I was not enough to be an art therapist due to the language barrier. Nevertheless, I feel confident now because I learned and experienced that even without spoken words, the creative art process stands as a statement by itself (Lusebrink, 1990). I argue that although cultural heritage elements separate us, there are great common similarities within the art we share. I hope that future therapists who integrate the arts feel confident that in the therapeutic practice words are not always necessary when the creative process is involved (Hinz, 2009).

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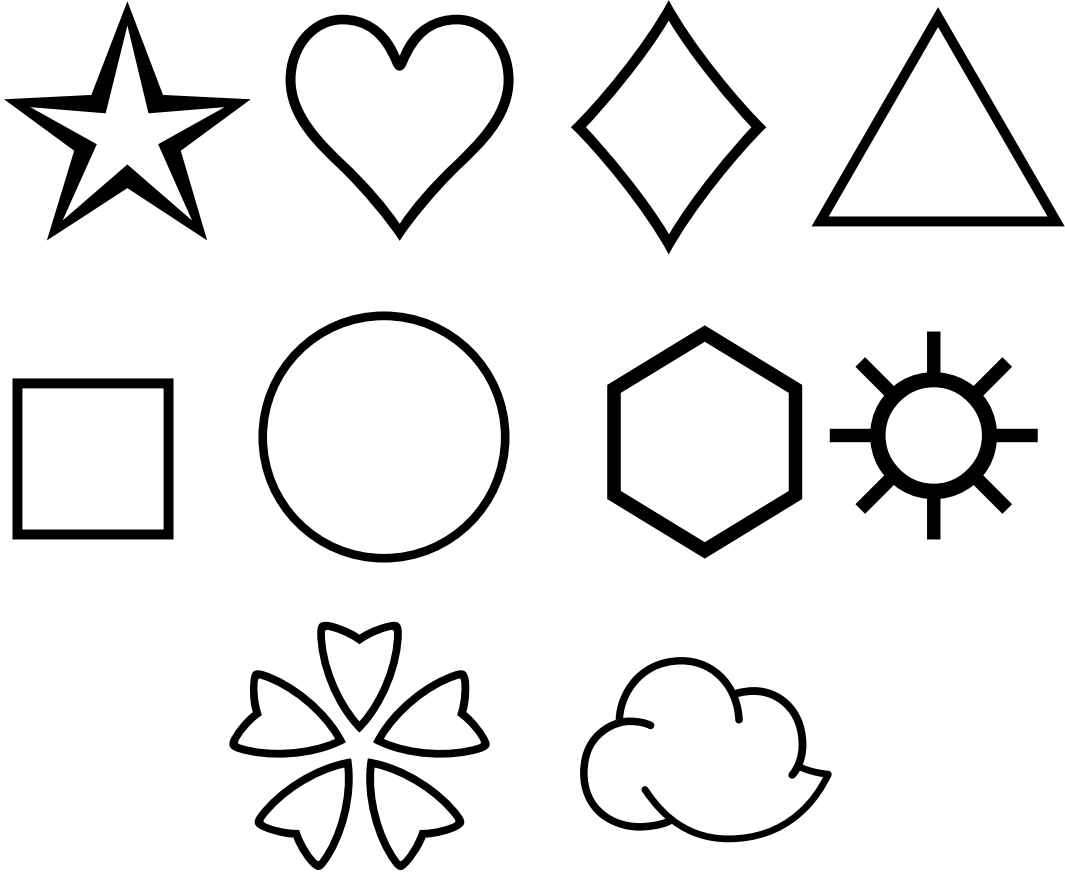
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## Appendix


<p><b>Population:</b> Immigrant Korean elders</p>	<p><b>The first session</b></p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Art Exploration:</b> Emotion Palette</p> 	<p><b>Materials / Supplies:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 5x7 blank card paper</li> <li>● Cardboard frame</li> <li>● Emotional Palette Visual Stimulus Form</li> <li>● Emotion words</li> <li>● Clay</li> <li>● Glue</li> <li>● Paints</li> <li>● Brushes</li> <li>● Palette</li> <li>● Water bucket</li> <li>● Paper towel</li> </ul>
<p><b>Visual Art Standard:</b></p> <p>( ) Skills &amp; Techniques  (X) Creativity &amp; Communication  ( ) Cultural &amp; Historical Connections  ( ) Aesthetic &amp; Critical Analysis  (X) Applications to Life</p>	<p><b>Goals / Objectives:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Practice gross and fine motor skills</li> <li>● Increase sensory stimulation</li> <li>● Explore emotions symbolically</li> <li>● Develop self-awareness through exploring emotions</li> <li>● Gain perspective through exploring artistic process and product</li> </ul>
<p><b>Art Therapy Directive:</b> Create Emotional Palette (this will be first in a series of sessions that build on similar goals to encourage attendance for the consequent weeks)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Introduction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Check-in: share a word about current emotional state from the emotional word sheet. Express it as a movement; other participants repeat those as reflections</li> <li>● Introduce today's artwork using the sample visual representation</li> </ul> </li> <li>2. Art Making <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Provide psycho-education about six main emotions</li> <li>● Explore non-judgement regarding emotional states; no right and wrong, no good or bad emotions</li> <li>● Let participants to take a moment to reflect on emotional states; “happy”, “love”, “pride”, “fear”, “sad”, and “anger”</li> <li>● Guide a brief meditation and ask the following sensory inspiring questions- “what might happy smell like?”, “what might love sound like?”, “what might sad taste like?”, and “what might fear’s landscape look like?”</li> <li>● Ask participants “what might a shape and color be as a representation of each emotion?”</li> <li>● Utilize clay to make a shape of each individual emotion (six) using Emotional Palette Visual Stimulus Form</li> <li>● Use color pallet to choose paint color that represents each emotion</li> </ul> </li> <li>3. Share, Discussion and Closure <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Share artwork and process experience with the group</li> <li>● Discussion questions: Which emotion resonates with you most today? Which emotion do you struggle with? Which emotions are most present in your daily repertoire? For more in-depth exploration/sharing; Were there any specific events that came up your mind related to these emotions? Which emotions are triggers?</li> <li>● Clapping for wrap-up</li> </ul> </li> </ol>	



Emotional Palette Visual Stimulus Form



<p><b>Population:</b> Immigrant Korean elders</p>	<p><b>The second session</b></p>
<p><b>Art Exploration: Lifeline</b></p>	<p><b>Materials / Supplies:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Colored Papers with a visual stimulus line</li> <li>● Emotional Pallet Visual Stimulus Form</li> <li>● Colored pencils</li> <li>● Pencils</li> <li>● Erasers</li> <li>● Scissors</li> <li>● Glue</li> </ul>
<p><b>Visual Art Standard:</b></p> <p>(X) Skills &amp; Techniques  (X) Creativity &amp; Communication  ( ) Cultural &amp; Historical Connections  ( ) Aesthetic &amp; Critical Analysis  (X) Applications to Life</p>	<p><b>Goals / Objectives:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Review one’s lifespan; towards integration of memories and feelings</li> <li>● Recognize one’s resilience and strengths</li> <li>● Promote self-understanding and reflection</li> <li>● Gain perspective through sharing artistic process and product</li> </ul>
<p><b>Art Therapy Directive: Create a Lifeline</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Introduction <p>Check-in: share a word about current emotional state from the emotional word sheet. Express it as a movement; other participants repeat those as reflections</p> <p>Introduce today’s artwork using the sample visual representation</p> </li> <li>2. Art Making <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Introduce the ‘lifeline’, representing one’s life from birth to the future. Choose a piece of colored paper that represents their life cycle.</li> <li>● Invite participants to create lifeline on the chosen colored paper creating a visual stimulus line, using drawing materials and encourage people to include both positive and negative moments.</li> <li>● Guiding questions: “what significant life events have been markers in your life?”</li> <li>● Invite the participants to re-visit the Emotional Palette they made in the first session to reflect on, include and draw their emotions on the lifeline.</li> </ul> </li> <li>3. Share, Discussion, and Closure <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Share artwork and process experience with the group</li> <li>● Discussion questions: “which events feel the most significant?” and “what are the feelings that come up when you reflect on the lifeline?”</li> <li>● Clapping for closure</li> </ul> </li> </ol>	

<p><b>Population:</b> Immigrant Korean elders</p>	<p><b>The last session</b></p>
<p><b>Project Title:</b> Memory Bottle</p> 	<p><b>Materials / Supplies:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Colored paper</li> <li>● Pens</li> <li>● Colored pencils</li> <li>● Glass bottle</li> <li>● Thread</li> <li>● Cinnamon sticks</li> <li>● Lavender</li> <li>● Music</li> </ul>
<p><b>Visual Art Standard:</b></p> <p>( ) Skills &amp; Techniques  (X) Creativity &amp; Communication  (X) Cultural &amp; Historical Connections  ( ) Aesthetic &amp; Critical Analysis  (X) Applications to Life</p>	<p><b>Goals / Objectives:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Recognize one’s resilience and strengths</li> <li>● Reflect on life cycle and share thoughts about life and death</li> <li>● Gain perspective through sharing artistic process and product</li> </ul>
<p><b>Art Therapy Directive:</b> Create Memory Bottle</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Introduction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Check-in: share a word about current emotional state from the emotional word sheet Express it as a movement; other participants repeat those as reflections</li> <li>● Introduce today’s artwork using the sample visual representation</li> <li>● Review the lifeline created last week and recognize quality of resilience and strength</li> </ul> </li> <li>2. Art Making <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Invite participants to write a letter to themselves including areas of resilience and strength (throughout the session, calm music is played)</li> <li>● Guide to sense lavender and cinnamon sticks as sensory awakening and integration</li> <li>● Roll the letter with thread and put the lavender, cinnamon sticks, and letter in the Memory Bottle</li> <li>● Close the lid as a metaphor to honor their life as well as the ‘closing’ of this project.</li> </ul> </li> <li>3. Share, Discussion and Closure <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Share artwork and process experience with the group</li> <li>● Discussion questions: “were there any emotions came up while you are writing your letter?”, “what aspects of resiliency and strengths do you bring to your life at present?”, and “how do you feel right now?”</li> <li>● Clapping for closure</li> </ul> </li> </ol>	

### **Author Acknowledgements**

Immigrants are known for having challenging life circumstances as well as the stress of providing opportunities and a safe space for their future generations. This capstone thesis is dedicated to all immigrants living in foreign countries. I would especially like to thank the Korean elders who were willing to participate in my thesis project throughout my last school year. I cherished meeting, sharing, and interacting with them; I am honored and grateful to have learned life wisdom from them.

**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:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Wansu Kang** \_\_\_\_\_

**Type of Project:** Thesis

**Title:** Development Art Therapy Methods for Korean Immigrant Elders in an Independent Residential Community Setting

**Date of Graduation:** \_\_\_\_\_ **May 21, 2022** \_\_\_\_\_

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

**Thesis Advisor:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Raquel Stephenson** \_\_\_\_\_