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**Parallel Process: Making Sense of the Clinical Mental Health Counseling Internship
Experience Through Visual Art Journaling**

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

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Specialization: Art Therapy

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Abstract

The use of journaling and art has regularly been used in therapeutic practices as a form of self-expression and self-reflection. However, few studies have examined the impact that visual art journaling, a combination of written word and artmaking, has on those same topics. To expand upon the few studies on visual art journaling, this study implemented the application of using a visual art journal during a three-week period to explore what benefits, if any, it had on helping a graduate student make sense of a clinical mental health counseling internship. This study was conducted in response to individual therapy with two clients aged 13 and 15 at a small non-profit therapeutic organization that provides free therapy to youth and their families in a suburb outside of Boston. Literature revealed that visual art journaling has been found to aid in examining countertransference, decreasing stress as a form of containment, as well as increasing empathy for the therapists as well as their clients. Through this study, the researcher was able to come to a similar conclusion. By weekly visual art journaling and post-session reflection, the researcher was able to see the benefits of increased awareness around countertransference, increased opportunity for case conceptualization and reflection, as well as additional space for containment and self-care.

Keywords: art therapy, countertransference, journaling, reflection, response art, stress management, visual art journaling

Parallel Process: Making Sense of the Clinical Mental Health Counseling Internship Experience Through Visual Art Journaling

Introduction

This study is meant to explore how visual art journaling can be utilized as an art therapy graduate student to navigate the many learning curves of the clinical internship experience. As a graduate student in Lesley University's art therapy program, I have been expected to reflect upon my experiences as an intern at my sites. This has been expected in a variety of ways such as, individual supervision with a board-certified art therapist, individual supervision with a licensed mental health counselor, group supervision in Lesley's classrooms, and lastly, by keeping a visual art journal.

Visual art journaling is the combination of art and writing. Rather than just written words, the participant is also creating art to reflect their inner mind. Art therapists can use visual art journaling in a multitude of ways; such as in their own time as a form of diary-keeping on everyday life, or visual art journaling can be used as a post-session response as a form of case conceptualization.

Through this study I was hopeful to learn more about how visual art journaling can increase an art therapist's ability to examine countertransference, increase empathy for themselves and their clients, and provide space for containment. As art therapists, we are well aware of the ability art has on examining the unconscious and providing space for pre and meta-verbal communication, but it is not always the case that we extend that practice for our own use. Finding a practice that allows for a therapist to be exploratory and increase self-awareness is important as Sultan (2018), states that “therapists cannot fully connect with their clients unless they are aware of and accepting of their own personal experience” (p. 80). Having variations in

avenues for introspection is vital as it allows for advanced knowledge of why we may be reacting in a certain way to our clients. Eriq Racker explained his countertransference theory by saying “there is no normal emotional state for the therapist, but that the inner state is continuously, profoundly and in certain precise and definable ways, responsible to the patient and to what the patient is saying or doing” (cited in Hunt & Issachoroff, 1977, p. 97). Essentially, there is no way for a therapist to truly be a “blank slate” for a client, it is simply not human or realistic. Instead, it is our responsibility as therapists to find ways to look inward and develop habits and healthy mechanisms to self-reflect to be as authentic and ethical as possible in session. The hope was that through this study, I would be able to establish that one way to build that framework is through visual art journaling.

Literature Review

A Combination of Art and Writing

Through rigorous research, many researchers have shown the positive impacts visual art journaling has on not just art therapy students, but non art therapy students. In the Deaver and McAuliffe (2009) qualitative study, they explored how both art therapy students and counseling students responded to visual art journaling during their clinical internship process. The researchers explained that while the counseling students struggled initially at the visual art aspect of the journaling, in the end, all students found that combining writing and visual art maximized the overall experience of self-reflection. Deaver and McAuliffe (2009) explain that “writing and artmaking potentiate each other, as imagery reveals inner feeling states, and words can be used to make cognitive sense of the images” (p. 627). This statement reflects the idea that there is no “right way” to visual art journal. Some people may find writing first then creating a visual

reflection more beneficial, and others may find the opposite more valuable. No matter what comes first, they potentiate each other, it is an endless cycle of meaning making and processing.

Likewise, Sullivan (2006) noted that research at its heart is best supported when exploring “different, yet complementary pathways” (p.22). Sullivan (2006) explained that art-based research combined with language-based communication is one of those ways to explore those different pathways. Deaver and McAuliffe (2009) expressed that the reflective nature of art-based educational inquiry “fuels an exploratory tendency as new forms and images are created, and these open up the possibility of new meanings” (p.31). Essentially, as a person reflects on their artmaking experience, new meaning may be made which then results in more reflective meaning making.

Sullivan (2006) further expressed the importance of art-based reflective meaning making by stating that art-based data gathering “involves creating rich descriptive word portraits and visual documentation that reflect the insight of the insider and the intense focus of the observer. While the mode of communication is language-based, the means of representation invoke many artistic forms that are used to capture, reflect, and inquire into the multiple textural realities being explored” (p.23). Sullivan (2006) is supporting the idea that art when in combination with some form of written or language-based communication creates a strong framework for reflective inquiry.

Many graduate schools utilize the journaling process in connection to the clinical internship experience. Mercer, Warson, and Zhao (2010), explained that journaling is used because it is thought to encourage students to look inward and invoke positive change while also allowing the students to connect the knowledge learned in their coursework to their clinical experiences. By connecting the knowledge learned in their coursework to their clinical

experiences, they are integrating course content, constructing new thoughts and knowledge about the content, and learning how to apply such content to real life situations (Deaver and McAuliffe, 2009). Additionally, Deaver and McAuliffe (2009), expand on this idea by stating that visual art journaling is conceived from a constructivist perspective. This structure allows for advanced meaning making as “constructivism hold that individuals are always more or less instrumental in their own leaning, and that they learn best through thinking about and subsequently integrating their own diverse experiences” (Deaver and McAuliffe, 2009, p. 616). Through this constructivist perspective, visual art journaling allows the students to reflect on past experiences and compare them to their current experiences.

Looking back on past thoughts and beliefs can help provide space to make sense of who a person is in the present and where they may want to go in the future by addressing, processing and potentially resolving earlier feelings (Arslanbek, 2021). For example, Arslanbek (2021), conducted a study where the researcher went through and studied past dairy entries and visual art journals from her youth. Through the process, Arslanbek (2021) felt she was able to address and process earlier feelings and preconceived notions of her adolescence and as a result was able to more clearly understand her strengths, defenses, thought patterns and most importantly, who she is today.

Additionally, by incorporating both an art aspect and a written aspect in journaling it allows more space for emotional nuances as one aspect may come easier in the moment than another. Harter (2007), expanded on this idea by saying “visual images are not necessarily preverbal, but may also be meta-verbal, offering ways of knowing that are nonlinear, nonsymbiotic, and linguistically inaccessible” (p. 167). Sometimes there aren’t words for a

feeling that is being felt. By incorporating art into the journaling process, it allows for further introspection that may not be reachable linguistically.

The importance of using some form of visual art with students or in supervision is further explored in the Stone and Amundson (1989) study who compared the efficacy of traditional verbal processing versus metaphoric case drawings when it comes to case conceptualization. Through their study, Stone and Amundson (1989) were able to show that case drawings had a noticeable positive impact on increasing graduate students' understanding of crisis counseling, noting that utilizing art creates greater opportunity for introspection. The researchers give an example of a student drawing a picture of a knight with elements depicting feelings of defeat, failure, and shame. They describe this process as richer than “a verbal statement to the effect of “feeling lousy about the counseling session”” (p. 12). This study identified the importance of art when it comes to case conceptualization and supports the idea that art and linguistic processing support each other in reflective thinking.

Stress Management

In addition to journaling being helpful for graduate students in improving their academic performance, journaling has also been found to have beneficial effects on overall health and reducing stress for students or otherwise (Mercer, et al., 2010; Sgoutas & Johnson, 1998; Sultan, 2018). Pennebaker (1993, 1997, 2004) has conducted many studies that indicated the positive effect journaling has on people. Through these studies, it is found that people expressing themselves through diary keeping, and by association, talking about traumatic or stressful events, can improve social, psychological, behavioral, and biological aspects of their life (Pennebaker 1993, 1997, 2004). Additionally, Chan & Horneffer (2006) study showed that some people who journal may initially experience stress from the process of re-experiencing the stressful

experience, but that they will find that later they will experience the health benefits from having the space to talk about their feelings and emotions regarding the topic.

Travers (2011), brought up an important point, since journals focus are on learning and reflection rather than having a finetuned product, it shifts the focus to process rather than product. This can be greatly beneficial for academic settings as having a place to reflect without pressure of a finished product provides more space for exploration and empathetic reflection. In fact, this idea is very reflective of the theme many art therapists emphasis which is “process over product”. In the case of visual art journals, the art or writing within them does not need to have a grade based on their quality. Instead, it allows for liberation away from the Westernized emphasis on product and can have a sense of catharsis.

Sultan (2018), explained, due to the extensive work in the mental health field, many people experience burn-out, vicarious trauma, and compassion fatigue. Those ailments can result in loss of attention, self-perception, and harm to the therapeutic relationship. Sultan (2018) explained that written self-disclosure can prevent the negative impact and can enhance positive self-perception as “insight into and comprehension of the personal meaning of a stressful event...can give rise to a more resilient self-concept" (p. 78). Furthermore, Gibson (2018), conducted a study where she utilized a visual art journal while working in a traumatic psychiatric setting as a processing tool. Gibson (2018) found that by processing through the visual art journal, she saw a drastic decrease in the amount of vicarious trauma symptoms that carried into her home life.

It's extremely important in the mental health field to hold space for self-care (Harter, 2007). If mental health counselors are not taking care of themselves, then how can they be expected to hold space for their clients? For art therapists specifically, visual art journaling is an

accessible way to practice containment and reduce stress in the mental health field (Fish, 2019). Moon (1999), explained “We cannot shield ourselves from our own powerful feelings. Yet, we cannot afford to be consistently overwhelmed and traumatized by our patients either...Making art provides a healthy, practical, and authentic mechanism for art therapists to handle the intense feelings that accompany clinical work” (p.81). Often, after a session, there can be a buildup of emotion from witnessing and holding space for a client who is going through a tough time. This can be a lot to hold for a single person, even if it is their job to do so. By utilizing journaling after an intense session, it can be a great form of containment. Miller (2007) explained that journaling is “valued as an immediate outlet for the release of emotions, frustrations or identifications that were stirred up or projected onto me during the course of a session so that a more in-depth exploration of countertransference could then occur” (p. 186). Having a place to put those emotions, frustrations, or identifications allows for more space to open up to be curious rather than overwhelmed. Essentially, journaling helps improve self-regulation, self-empathy, and gives the therapist a sense of control which as a result reduces stress.

Countertransference

Being an art therapy graduate intern is no easy feat. A lot is expected in those years, but one of the key aspects drilled into all art therapy students' heads is that as a therapist you must be made aware of your own personal experience to fully connect and be present with your clients (Sultan, 2018). In fact, in the Ethical Principles for Art Therapists, it is stated that art therapists must be “aware of their own values and beliefs and how these may affect cross-cultural therapy interventions” (AATA, 2013, p.8). One way to be made aware of our values and beliefs is by visual art journaling.

Countertransference is a common experience every therapist will undergo during their career. Kielo (1991), explained that there are three categories of countertransference, neurotic countertransference, countertransference proper which includes concordant and complementary countertransference, and lastly, indirect countertransference. All three of these categories play a role in the everyday life of a therapist in the mental health field. Kielo (1991), expressed “the more we clarify what was happening with us, the more we can separate it from what was happening with the client and the more we can see how the interrelationship leads to a healthier functioning for the client” (p.18). With all of this in mind, journaling is helpful in keeping our work authentic because it is able to give space to understand and make sense of all of the different forms of countertransference we may be experiencing – both good and bad.

Gait and Halewood (2019), discussed the idea that countertransference is not necessarily a bad thing, unless it goes unmanaged; “countertransference which is contained, reflected on and managed, can benefit clinical work by illuminating both the client’s and the therapist’s interpersonal dynamics” (p. 257). In fact, Gait and Halewood (2019), explained that supervision is one of those ways that countertransference can be understood and contained, but they expressed that it does not come without limitations. In order for supervision to be beneficial in containment for countertransference, the supervisee must be willing to explore their vulnerabilities and personal limitations – which can often be a stalemate for therapists in training (Gait & Halewood, 2019). The private nature of the visual art journal could be seen as a safer place to be vulnerable.

Carl and Natalie Rogers emphasized the importance of being willing to be vulnerable and learn from new experiences through the person-centered theory. They mention the relationship between client and therapist being monumental in providing an authentic learning experience,

“they are always our best teachers” (Sommers-Flanagan, 2007, p.122). Being able to look inward at any reactions that may occur due to countertransference provides therapists with opportunities for new insights and self-exploration.

Moon (2001), emphasized the importance of continued knowledge seeking and self-exploration, “there will always be more to know than any of us will ever have time to learn. The crucial factor is to remain a learner, committed to an ever-developing base of knowledge” (p. 53). This commitment to learning is connected to knowledge in the field, but also to our own personal experience. By working with people and their experiences daily, we are opening ourselves up to their lives and their artistic practices. This provides a lot of room for our own reactions. Fish and many other art therapists have written literature on the benefits of response art (Deaver & Shiflett, 2011; Fish, 2019; Miller, 2007; Moon, 1999). In a way, the response art that these therapists mention, is similar to visual art journaling. They use response art to reflect on their sessions with their clients to examine countertransference, establish empathy for clients, and as a place for containment (Moon, 1999).

Increased Empathy Through Art-making

An integral part to being a mental health counselor is having a heightened sense for empathy. Empathy shouldn't just extend to your clients, but also to yourself. Having empathy for yourself, by association, provides space for more empathy for your clients. Moon (2009), explained that he felt he could not truly understand his clients without making art during or after their sessions together. Moon (2009), uses this response art-making as a way to more deeply empathize with his clients by making a physical manifestation of the way he may impact others lives and how they impact his.

Moon (2001) explained that empathy in art therapy is the “softening of boundaries that allows us to project our subjective state onto an object or person” and that it “occurs in art making as well as in our capacity to resonate with clients’ affective experience” (p.48). Incorporating art into the journaling process is important as art therapy interns because we should practice what we preach. Why should we expect our clients to create art about what they are going through if we do not make time to do the same? Moon (2001), explained that in fact, it is our ethical responsibility to engage in our own artmaking as “the use of art making to access our inner awareness and wisdom helps us stay authentically connected to the experiences of our clients in art therapy. It also helps us to develop and maintain a trusting relationship with our own artistic process, which is critical if we are to be authentic in our encouragement of clients to do the same” (p. 59). By cultivating our vision of who we are as an artist, we can more clearly and empathetically guide our clients to cultivate the artist in themselves.

Moon (2001), reinforced this thought process by saying that having those first hand experiences with art materials and the artistic process are “essential experiences to know, not from a detached, intellectual perspective (for example, reading about it in a book) but from the intimate, paint-on-one’s-pants, clay-on-one’s-hands, gutsy, self-exposing, plunging-into-the-darkness way of knowing that comes from making art” (p. 54). Only by creating art regularly ourselves, can we understand the emotional impact of the artistic process and have firsthand experiences with different art materials.

Furthermore, by visual art journaling in response to our clients and our sessions together, we are preparing for our future sessions. Our past experience brings light to our future experience with clients, both clinically and artistically. By regularly putting yourself in the shoes you're expecting your clients to also walk in, you can better understand what may be

uncomfortable for them. When art therapists are regularly undergoing the practice of creating art and reflecting on such art, they are better equipped to make connections and explore different avenues that may be expected of their clients (Moon, 2001). It's important to lean on art making as it keeps us authentically connected to our own experiences, the experiences of our clients, and build an empathetic and trusting relationship of our own and our clients' artistic process.

Methods

Setting

This study took place at a non-profit therapeutic organization in a suburb of Boston, MA. This organization offers individual, family, and group therapy to youth aged 11-22. This organization offers 10-12 short-term therapy sessions for free, no insurance needed, to the youth and their families of the organization's town. Within these 10-12 sessions, the first few sessions consist of an intake and background needs assessment. Following these sessions, goals are discussed and set. The therapist and client then work on achieving these goals in the remaining sessions. This study includes me and two clients: Elizabeth (13y/o) and Jarrod (15y/o), who are given pseudonyms for the purpose of confidentiality. Elizabeth and Jarrod were at different points in their therapy during this study.

Procedure

This study examined the impact of visual art journaling on a graduate art therapy student immersed in a clinical mental health counseling internship. To do so, visual art journaling was to be implemented several times during the week for several weeks. Additionally, clients were given the opportunity to utilize their own visual art journal during our work together. The idea was to examine how parallel processes can occur between therapist and client during the

counseling relationship. The visual art journal was to be used as a source to explore those processes as well as to reflect.

Procedure for researcher

This method was implemented by weekly journaling. Visual art journaling may be done in a journal with blank or lined paper. I decided to utilize a journal with lined paper. In order to properly explore the abilities of visual art journaling, I created several journal entries throughout the week for three weeks. I decided to visual art journal after every session with the two clients who were on my case load at the time. I set an expectation that I would take 10 minutes after these sessions to: create some form of visual art in response to the session with the client and utilize a written aspect; whether that's reflection of the art piece or of the client during the session. In these journals, I set the intention to pay careful attention to reflect on my reactions to my clients and what may be coming up within me. Through this process, I was able to jot down what I noticed about the client in session, any reactions that I might have felt in session, and reflect on why those feelings may have emerged.

Additionally, during those three weeks, I created a visual art journal specifically about myself and my life. This was an open prompt that could include aspects of my internship or not. While this journal may not have been specifically internship based, the idea was that aspects of my life outside of my sessions may be impacting my behaviors or relationships with my clients in session. Through these visual art journals, I was hopeful that by looking back at the variety of journals done throughout the week, that I would be able to gain insight on things I may not have noticed in the moment while writing the journals, or at least be able to put things into perspective.

Lastly, following the three weeks of journal making, I decided to create a cumulative reflective art piece. This was made to examine themes or similarities that may have emerged in the visual art journaling process.

Procedure for clients

To further the idea of parallel process with my clients, I implemented journal making with them. Since I was exploring the benefits of visual art journaling to my reflective process, I wanted to open the opportunity for my clients as well. In order to do this, the intention was to build their own journal out of decorative paper, manilla folders, twine, and blank drawing paper. Once their journals were completed, participants were encouraged, but not required, to immerse themselves in the visual art journaling process by creating art, writing, or both in their journals between or during our sessions together. Participants were informed that they were welcome to share as much or as little of their entries with me. The only other procedure set in place for my clients was for them to attend their appointed sessions. This was set in place so that my data would be consistent, and I would have something to reflect on in my visual art journal post our sessions together.

Results

Week 1

Session 1, Elizabeth

Session description. This session included myself, my supervisor, Elizabeth and her father. Elizabeth and her father showed up 15 minutes late to their session, but I decided to see them anyways. At this point in our therapy together, we had met three times previously and had worked on the intake and her needs assessment. During these sessions, Elizabeth self-disclosed suicidal and intrusive thoughts. For this session, I requested my supervisor's support in session

and Elizabeth's father to be present to discuss our steps moving forward, such as thoughts on hospitalization, medication for depression, a partial program, and long-term therapy. Elizabeth talked very little in this session, and only responded with a brief response if asked a question directly. The journal we started assembling last session sat untouched on the table between us, unfinished. She made no effort to finish gluing the edges despite the materials being at her disposal. Elizabeth and her father both seemed hesitant about medication and hospitalization, but my supervisor and I were able to emphasize the importance that Elizabeth find long-term or a higher-level of care given her risk level. I was also able to suggest that Elizabeth and her father communicate through writing instead of talking as Elizabeth expressed her struggle with speaking with her father face-to-face.

Visual art journal description. Following this session, I allotted myself to have 10 minutes to process the session through visual art journaling. For this specific journaling session, I started with the art first as I didn't quite have words yet to describe my feelings regarding the situation. I was drawn to the markers she used our first session together when I utilized the House, Tree, Person assessment with her. Despite the abundance of colors provided, she only used the black marker until she drew a single red apple. For this piece I decided to only use black in reflection of that piece. I was struck by this apparent distance between her and her father. I drew this cliff with a figure at the top and water below with another figure far off to the right. This drawing is also reflective of some of the intrusive thoughts she has such as jumping from somewhere high and drowning. Through this art-making process, I started unintendedly imitating her art style. Afterwards, I utilized the free association method and started jotting down words that were coming to mind post session. Words and phrases like: "disconnect", "distance",

“stuck”, “numb”, “for feelings sake”, “leaving room to breathe and process” came to mind. I then briefly wrote my thoughts in sentences.

Personal reflection. I found this process extremely helpful in the moment. I felt unregulated after this session and was grateful to have a few moments to breathe and process what was said in the session and what thoughts I have moving forward. I was empathizing greatly with her after this session and felt like I was holding a lot of her sad and helpless feelings as well. I could see how stuck she felt, and I started to feel stuck also. I wasn't sure where to go with the therapy and was feeling extreme feelings of inferiority because the case felt too big for me. I became highly aware of how her case was triggering me.

Weekly journaling #1

Visual art journal description. For this specific artistic reflection, I had containment on the mind. This visual art journal includes a colored pencil drawing of 5 boxes of various sizes and colors. Each box has a knob to show they can be opened and closed. Some boxes are more open than others. I decided to use the visual of a box to symbolize containment because when things are overwhelming for me, it helps to visualize putting the overwhelming aspects into a box and putting them to the side for the time being. In my written reflection, I express how this internship is teaching me a lot about compartmentalization. For the first few weeks, when working with Elizabeth, I was beside myself with anxiety. In my journal I write, “I'm learning that this field is so mentally taxing, especially as a person with anxiety. It's hard knowing that you're working with people through their hardest times, and that there's is so much out of my control”. I write about learning how to utilize work-place boundaries by putting my thoughts and feelings about my internship into a box when I'm not there.

Personal reflection. Through the visual art journaling process, I was able to take the time to reflect on my overall feelings regarding my internship so far and how it was affecting my day-to-day life. I was overwhelmed and frustrated with how it was bleeding into my life outside of my internship. As I drew each box, I felt myself reflecting on what could be placed into each of those boxes. During the process of reflecting, I felt a somewhat increase in stress, but similarly to putting things into a box, when I got the thoughts off my chest and onto the page instead and then closed my journal, I was able to leave those thoughts and feelings there for the most part.

Session 1, Jarrod

Session description. This session involved me and Jarrod. In previous sessions I gained background information, built our rapport, and we assembled a journal to use in the future. Last session, since we finished the journal, I asked him to create one journal entry before our next session. During our check-in, I asked if he journaled at all in the week between, he admitted that he had not because he forgot about the journal.

The goal for this session was to take a closer look at Jarrod's reactions to his thoughts, feelings, and actions in different settings. Jarrod expressed his anxiety around talking to other people and his tendency to keep to himself. At first, I gave him a prompt to explore what is going on inside his body when in his classes and he is not talking to anyone, but he turned down this prompt and asked for something different. Instead, through an art therapy intervention, we explored how he felt when creating music versus how he felt when showing people his musical compositions. Jarrod was hesitant to participate in this art prompt, but still gave it a go. He was given a piece of paper and markers and asked to draw how he felt given these two scenarios. He took the prompt literally and started drawing himself in each of those scenarios. Much of his time during this art-making process was spent making negative comments about his artistic

abilities. When he finished his drawings I asked a few prompting questions, but I felt that he didn't gain much from the process, so I decided to switch gears and ask him to take the same prompt but express himself using just lines, shapes, and colors. He appeared to find more meaning through this process as he did not talk negatively about his artistic abilities and was focused on the task. He expressed that he found the abstract prompt a lot easier for him to express how he genuinely felt.

Visual art journal description. After our session, I got to creating a visual art journal response. This visual art journal includes a small artistic reflection. At the top of the page is one side with several uniform black lines and on the other side are squiggly lines of different colors. Between the two is a big red “no” symbol. This artistic reflection came to mind as a result of watching his artistic process. The first felt so structured and hesitant, while the second felt a lot more free-flowing and willing. In my writing, I reflect on the potential countertransference that occurred in our session and I empathize with his struggle between literal and abstract art. I wrote about being uncertain about when to push and when not to with a client. I felt there was a lot I could've pushed him on in that session, but I often pulled back. I wrote: “I want my clients to like me, to be comfortable in session. Is that getting in the way of their progress?”.

Personal reflection. Following that session, I felt slightly disappointed. The session didn't go as well as I hoped, and Jarrod did not seem interested in the artistic elements I incorporated into the session. I started doubting my ability to include art in a way that was meaningful to my clients. I wondered if perhaps art therapy just wasn't for this client, or if I just wasn't utilizing it in the correct way. Through this journaling session, I was able to reflect greatly on how my feelings about my abilities may impact his therapy. I questioned if I was pushing too much in some areas and too little in others. Through this reflection process, I felt

that I gained a better understanding of where my ego was getting in the way of progress on both of our ends. By the time I finished journaling, I felt I had a clearer idea on where to take his therapy in the future.

Week 2

No-show, Elizabeth

No-show description. Elizabeth did not show up to her scheduled session. I reached out to her dad and he informed me that she wasn't feeling well physically and that she will be going to a partial hospitalization program for the next two weeks.

Visual art journal description. Following the email from Elizabeths dad, I decided to utilize my visual art journal as I had many thoughts I wanted to reflect on. For the visual art aspect of this journal, I decided to once again use the black markers. My drawing depicts two hands reaching out, but they're cupped as if holding something within them. I utilized a cross-hatching technique to show value and sketched in the background to create contrast. For the written piece of this visual art journal, I simply reflect on my feelings, thoughts, and bodily reactions to my client. I write, "I feel like I'm providing as much as I can. My hands are held out with all that I have, but I also feel like so much of it is out of my hands". I write about being grateful that her father took our suggestion seriously about going to a PHP. I write about imposter syndrome and feeling like I'm at a loss with where to take her therapy if she were to come back after her PHP program.

Personal reflection. At this point in my work with Elizabeth I was feeling overwhelmed. Through visual art journaling, I was recognizing ways in which her experiences were triggering for me. Her risk level was frightening to me, and it reminded me of aspects of my own relationships with people in my personal life. By visual art journaling, I took the time to look

inward at my own physical reactions to my work with her. I explored what I felt when I was waiting for her to show up, what I felt when she didn't show up, how I felt when I finished journaling, and how I feel about my future work with her.

Weekly journaling #2

Visual art journal description. This visual art journal was created with a black pen and depicts a staircase leading to an open door. Inside the door is a black void. I created this visual depiction to reflect myself taking the steps necessary to plan for my future. Beyond the door is a black void because I felt as though I only had a fuzzy idea of what I want for my future. In my written reflection I speak about having a meeting with a woman who helped me with my resume. I write, "It felt good to go over my resume and have a small thing I can work towards for my future without having a full freakout". I reflect on experiencing imposter syndrome and write, "I've learned so much over the past several years, but I still feel like I've only barely scratched the surface".

Personal reflection. This visual art journal was helpful in giving me space to reflect on the good and stressful feelings I was experiencing due to my work in the mental health counseling field. I was able to establish that while I am feeling a sense of imposter syndrome, I'm also taking the steps necessary to be educated and ready for a career in the field.

Session 2, Jarrod

Session description. Rather than expecting Jarrod to come into session having journaled in-between our sessions, I decided to present him with a prompt at the beginning of our session together. Given that I knew a great deal about his background and knew that a goal of his with our therapy together was to look deeper into his identity, I decided to ask him to take five minutes to write about his identity and how it has impacted him. He took this prompt seriously

and used the full five minutes to write his response. When he finished, he handed over his phone to me to read his written words. When I finished reading, I prompted him to talk to me about what he felt he wanted me to know more about. For the remainder of the session, we talked about aspects of his identity that he felt had been ridiculed. He opened up in a big way in this session, and expressed to me that he found the journaling to be helpful as he wasn't sure he would've felt comfortable sharing what he did out loud.

Visual art journal description. After our session together, I jotted down some words that I felt reflected our session together. These words included: “openness”, “trust”, “guidance”, “attachment”, “trauma”, “teenage angst”, “understanding”, “reflection”, and “willingness to share”. I then followed up my listing with a few sentences. I wrote about feeling great about how the session went. I reflect on feeling like the rapport between us really strengthened in this session by saying, "as soon as I showed him an openness and willingness to understand something that he received a lot of ridicule over, it's like the floodgates opened." I then reflect on self-disclosure and how I would feel if he were to ask about my own LGBTQIA+ identity. Afterward, I used markers to draw a rectangle with the colors of the rainbow.

Personal reflection. After this session, I felt rejuvenated. I was reminded that therapy can feel good and not anxiety inducing. I felt happy that my relationship with Jarrod was increasing and that we were forming a closer bond. The visual art journal was able to capture my feelings on the matter. I feel that the brightness of my art response is reflective of how I'm able to see the bright side of my therapeutic experiences. Additionally, it was a space where I was able to reflect on self-disclosure and how his experiences may affect my life.

Week 3

No-show, Elizabeth

No-show description. At this point in our therapy together, I knew that Elizabeth was not going to be able to make it to this appointment because she had been admitted to a partial hospitalization program for two weeks. That being said at the time, I was unsure if she would be returning after her two weeks at the PHP. My supervisor and I were actively still discussing her case and looking into options for long-term care for her.

Visual art journal description. For this visual art journal, I drew a field of flowers with colored pencils. I write about being unsure about where things will go with Elizabeth once she is out of her PHP. I write about my anxiety regarding her case and my hope that she is getting the proper care that she needs. Lastly, I reflect on my drawing by saying that I was inspired to draw flowers because I felt I needed to remind myself that I'm growing and learning and that I should allow myself the space to give myself grace.

Personal reflection. While I knew Elizabeth was not going to be making it to our appointment together, I still decided to create a visual art journal as if she had. I felt this was valid as I was still actively talking to my supervisor, her dad, and her school about her case, so it was still on my mind. Just because I wasn't seeing her didn't mean that I wasn't thinking about her and her case. I felt this visual art journal was important as it gave me space to reflect on the idea that sometimes cases are not cut and dry. Sometimes cases get stuck in a limbo of uncertainty regarding where they will go in the future. This journal felt as though I had finally given myself the permission to release a breath. It was a reminder that oftentimes situations are out of my control.

Weekly journaling #3

Visual art journal description. This visual art journal shows a collage of glued down tissue paper. The tissue paper is torn randomly and glued down. There is an abundance of colors

included in the piece. In the written part of the visual art journal, I explained wanting to create something that is reflective of the art I typically make on my own time. I wrote: “I thought to do this because when looking over past journals, I noticed that my art often reflects their art. I think this is indicative of trying to understand my clients by reflecting their art style in my own artwork – AKA to help me gain more insight to their inner self”. I wrote about feeling as though my clients impact me in big ways and in small ways and how this week for my weekly journaling, I wanted to do something for me. Additionally, I comment on why I like collaging with tissue paper, I state that it feels “calming and meditative”.

Personal reflection. This visual art journal helped me take a step back and evaluate what I needed for my own personal self-care. The past few weeks, I’ve felt so engrossed in my clients and their needs, that I felt as though I needed a moment to think of myself and what I needed. Additionally, while in the moment, I felt as though I was focusing on myself, I was by association, also helping my clients in the long run in a few ways. First, by establishing that I needed a moment for myself so I could be fully authentic and present for them in session, and secondly, by examining how certain materials make me feel when using them

Session 3, Jarrod

Session description. Jarrod came into this session with an abundance of journal entries that he wrote over the past week that he wanted me to read over. Incorporated in his journal entries are little doodles that have to do with his written words. After reading his journals, together we reflected on areas that he felt are holding him back from breaking out of his “cycle of loneliness” that he felt he was stuck in. We created a list of action steps to break him out of this cycle and marked them on a scale of one to ten on their attainability. We then reflected on why some actions are more attainable than others.

Visual art journal description. Following this session, I jotted down a few quick words or phrases that came to mind, such as: “great energy and flow” “willingness to improve” “getting somewhere” “rapport” “self-reflection” “steps in the right direction” “art?”. For my artistic response, I first drew steps with a blue marker. The ones at the bottom are small and the higher up they go, the bigger they get. With those steps, are orange and pink marker scribbles that also grow in intensity. After my artistic response, I wrote a few sentences. I wrote about feeling as though I was a “real therapist” in this session, that we were able to “reach some great insights despite his initial hesitancy.” I wrote about being impressed with his commitment to the journal and I report being curious on if he will keep it up. I also examine the role art plays in our session. I express uncertainty about how to incorporate it or if it’s necessary with him.

Personal reflection. This visual art journal was helpful as it reminded me that it’s good to journal about the good as well as the bad. I reflected on my happiness that the therapy we are doing together is moving forward. In the past, I found that I mostly only journal when I’m feeling down, but through this process, I’ve found that reflecting on when things are going well is also helpful. Positive feelings are just as important to reflect on.

Week 4

Cumulative/reflective art piece

Art piece description. This art piece (Image 1) includes 5 mirrors of various shapes and sizes. Each handheld mirror was drawn with a black marker and has an art piece reflected on the inside. Each of the art pieces are depictions of some of the visual art journals that were created throughout this study. They are not exact re-creations, but rather reflections of the pieces. Some of the reflections are colorful and others are devoid of color. The background was shaded with a soft graphite pencil to create depth to the piece.

Personal reflection. When considering what I wanted to create for a cumulative piece, the main object jumping out to me was a mirror. Through this visual art journaling process, I felt as though I reflected more deeply than if I were not to go through with this process. With each of the visual art journals I created, I felt like I was looking more clearly back at myself by looking more closely at my clients. To depict this, I decided to draw different mirrors with the different iterations of the visual art journals in each of the mirrors.

Discussion

Through this study, I set out to determine what benefits, if any, were gained from regularly creating entries in my visual art journal for a three-week period during my clinical mental health counseling internship. During this period, I created three entries each week for a total of nine entries and in the end, included a cumulative art piece to reflect my experience of the process. Each of these entries included an artistic and written element. Following the creation of the visual art journals and cumulative art piece, personal reflections were then written to examine key themes or insights gained through the visual art journaling process. Through this process, three key themes emerged: countertransference, meaning making, and containment/empathy.

Themes

Countertransference

In every visual art journal entry, there is a mention of how my client, or my internship may be affecting me. Through the visual art journaling process, I was able to create a tangible way to examine how I may be affected, whether that's in a good or bad way. This impact can be seen in three keyways in my journals.

Firstly, my clients had a large impact on the art I would then make in my visual art journals. This can be seen most clearly through my work with Elizabeth. Session 1 and the first no-show journal entry were both done in black marker with a similar artistic style to hers. This wasn't done intentionally, but I find through reflecting upon her, I unconsciously found a way to try and empathize with her by incorporating her art style in my creative process. Similarly, many art therapists utilize the process of post-session response art or recreating their client's art as a way to increase empathy with their clients (Kielo, 1991; Miller, 2007; Moon, 2009). Moon (2009) is a strong advocate for response art as it is a way to more clearly understand and honor the lives of his clients, "when clients paint, I paint; when they draw, I draw; when they struggle to put into words the deeper meaning of their lives, I share in the struggle" (p. 125). When I was sat in the room post-session, all I wanted to do was gain a clearer perspective of the struggle my clients were going through, the most straightforward way to start getting answers was by putting myself in their shoes and creating art with their artistic process in mind.

As well as countertransference becoming apparent in my artwork post-session, it could also be seen in my written reflections about my internship work. Through the journaling process I was able to more clearly see moments when I was being triggered by my clients. For example, with Elizabeth, I often found myself not wanting to acknowledge out loud that her case was affecting me negatively, but by reflecting post-session through visual art journaling, it became apparent that it was. This is reflective of Deaver & McAuliffe (2009)'s study where through visual art journaling, the participants were able to address two elements of countertransference; their identification with their clients and how their personal thoughts and feelings may influence or impact their internship work. Through visual art journaling, I was able to identify first off, that

I was affected by my work with her in the first place and secondly, what elements of *my* life were flooding into my work with *her*.

In addition to the benefits of being able to examine countertransference by seeing it in the moment while journaling, I found that there are also many benefits to the lasting effects that journaling can have. With journaling, there is tangible, written word of my feelings and emotions when I was in that moment. Being able to look back on something and be transported back to the moment I wrote that entry can open up a whole new avenue of exploration. When looking back at my visual art journal entries I was able to make new connections, provide space for empathy for myself and my clients, but also allow for a more critical examination of what was truly there in the unconscious. Kielo (1991) supports this idea by stating that art therapists are experts at examining the unconscious due to the meta-verbal nature of art therapy, but that the effort is often put on the client and not themselves. Kielo (1991) suggests that in order to examine the same within themselves as they expect in their clients, that they should be partaking in post-session imagery making. By being able to look back at past entries, I was able to better integrate my past insights of what I was going through into a clearer understanding of who I am in the present.

Meaning making

Visual art journaling provides space for reflection and meaning making. A key element explored through my visual art journaling process was the integration of art and writing and how they intertwined and supported each other in order to enhance the ability to make meaningful connections. There were moments in the journaling process where I would start with art and other times where I would begin with written words. Typically, I found that I would start with art when I didn't have the words to express how I was feeling yet. This can be explained by Harter's

(2007) thoughts on pre-verbal and meta-verbal communication. Harter (2007) explains that “visual art making offers access to levels of construing that are difficult to verbalize. Visual images may be more intensely personal and more immediate than verbal descriptions. They may better capture tacit emotional nuances and an emerging edge of experience” (p. 167). There were many times where I needed to put down an image first to give myself time to process enough to put my thoughts into words.

Within these moments, I often found that I was able to then find meaning or the words through the artmaking process. Deaver and Shiflett (2011) explain this process as “knowledge construction: a process of coming to know...and was likened to the circular nature of research in that, during artmaking, ideas lead to the creation of imagery which in turn generates knowledge, more thought, then more imagery, and so on” (p. 260). Similar to being able to find the words or meaning through the artmaking process, the same worked the opposite way. Through the writing process, I was able to find the images or inspiration for what I wanted to convey non-verbally. Having the opportunity to create art and write opened avenues for reflection that may not have been accessed if I were only to be doing one or the other.

Containment/empathy

Through the visual art journaling process, I was able to explore how journaling can be a source of containment and self-care for me. There were many entries where it was apparent that I needed a private place to get my thoughts and emotions out; the visual art journal gave me space to do so. Gibson (2018) emphasizes the importance of having that space by saying “I feel that the only way I can continue to work in the face of trauma is to confront the emotions and experiences through art to process them and release them back out of my heart” (p.103). Through the journaling process I was able to self-regulate myself and give myself grace.

While many of my journals were specifically in response to my clients, in weekly journaling #3, I more specifically focused on myself and what I needed. In that entry, I express that collaging with tissue paper was “calming and meditative”. Through that process, I was able to learn more about myself artistically as well as becoming more in-tune to my somatic reactions. Moon (2001) explains that “there is a natural link between the empathic response and the artistic response...in cultivating the artist within, we become better equipped to empathically connect with and cultivate the artist in others” (p. 48). Essentially, by taking the time for self-care for myself, in the end, I created space to better support myself as well as my clients. By learning more about myself and what works for me, I will be better prepared to help others learn what works for them.

Limitations and Implications

While I do feel as though I gained a lot of insight into the benefits of visual art journaling during a clinical mental health counseling internship, that is not to say there are no limitations to this study. In this study, I was hopeful to get more insight into how the visual art journaling process may have felt for my clients as well. Unfortunately, Elizabeths journal was never finished due to our sessions being crisis management focused. There was never an appropriate time to finish or talk about the journal. This halted my ability to gain insight on how visual art journaling may have been beneficial for her.

Additionally, Elizabeth was not able to attend two of the three scheduled sessions during the data collection stage. That being said, entries were still created and analyzed, but I am curious as to how this study may have been different had she been able to attend all three sessions.

Lastly, this study was implemented when I only had two clients on my caseload. I'm curious as to how post-session visual art journaling would've gone had I had a larger caseload. I am uncertain I would've been able to stick to creating an entry for every single one of my clients had there been more in the day.

I'm hopeful that I will continue to use the visual art journaling practice in my internship and future career. With this in mind, I'm curious as to how a research study would turn out with a full-time therapist. As mentioned in my limitations, I only had two clients on my caseload, I'm curious as to how visual art journaling could be implemented when managing over 25 clients a week. I'm left pondering a few questions for a future research study. Would creating a visual art journal for every session be achievable in the first place? Would the abundance of journal entries do more harm than good for the therapist? What does harm look like in this case? What would be the ideal amount of visual art journaling to still experience the benefits of the process without experiencing burn-out?

Additionally, I recommend the literature that is mentioned in this study, as well as the utilization of a visual art journal be implemented more commonly in undergraduate and graduate counseling programs. It would be beneficial to incorporate these readings into course curriculum and make it a requirement to keep a journal while participating in an internship as the implementation of the visual art journal would provide a strong framework and understanding in containment and self-reflection for therapists in training. As mentioned in the research, many schools already do this, but I feel it should be more commonly utilized given its benefits.

Conclusion

This method was implemented to examine the impact visual art journaling has on a graduate student in a mental health counseling clinical internship. This topic was inspired by the

utilization of reflection methods used in graduate schooling such as individual supervision, group supervision, and visual art journaling. Through this study, I wanted to explore how utilizing art and word through a visual art journal may help examine the unconscious and aid in supporting the internship experience.

Literature revealed that the mental health counseling field can result in burn-out and vicarious trauma, which is why it's important for self-care and reflective tactics to be set in place to provide new therapists an ideal framework when a part of the field. By implementing reflective tactics, new therapists will be better equipped to process and understand case conceptualization and examine any countertransference that may come up when working with clients.

Following examining the literature about visual art journaling, diary-keeping, and response art, I decided to implement my own method to examine how the visual art journaling process may have an impact on me during my clinical internship. This was achieved by utilizing a visual art journal throughout a three-week period. During these weeks, I created a visual art journal entry post-session with my clients as well as incorporated a weekly visual art journal that could be about my internship or not. As a result of this process, I experienced firsthand, the benefits post-session reflection and weekly visual art journaling has on examining countertransference, providing opportunity for case conceptualization and reflection, as well as giving space for containment and self-care in a high stress career.

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Appendix

Image 1



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: _____ Stephanie Seifert _____

Type of Project: Thesis

Title: Parallel Process: Making Sense of the Clinical Mental Health Counseling Internship Experience Through Visual Art
Journaling

Date of Graduation: _____ May 18, 2024 _____

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

Thesis Advisor: _____ Raquel C. Stephenson _____