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Title: *Art Therapy, Arts-based Research and Transitional Stories of Domestic Violence and Abuse*

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Bio: Dr Jamie Bird is an Art Therapist and arts-based researcher who has taken an interest in the study of experiences of migration and of domestic violence and abuse through the employment of the arts. He has been involved in the teaching of undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral students within therapeutic arts and creative expressive therapies for 12 years and is currently Head of Department of Therapeutic Practice at the University of Derby.

Abstract

Visual imagery within qualitative research is an established method of gathering data that has parallels to the way in which images are used within art therapy. This paper explores how visual imagery was used to investigate women's responses to domestic violence and abuse and examines how art therapy principles shaped the development and conducting of that research. Through the use of collage, participants created visual representations of their responses to experiences of domestic violence and abuse. The visual representations were, when combined with spoken words, created stories that reference the past, present and future. The stories created have been termed *transitional stories of domestic violence*. These stories show that the home has special significance for women as they transition away from domestic violence and plan for their future. The home becomes both a metaphorical and physical manifestation and container of hopes for a harmonious future that often incorporates the desire for the return to the idea of a complete family. This paper will present the findings of the arts-based research conducted, and consider the implications upon art therapy practice of those findings.

Keywords

art therapy, arts-based research, domestic violence and abuse, participatory action research, imagination

Introduction

This paper will set forth how as an Art Therapist I employed aspects of art therapy within the context of using arts-based research to better understand women's responses to their experiences of domestic violence and abuse and in particular how they imagined their futures. The research is an example of the synthesis of arts-based research and art therapy that has been outlined previously (Pink, Hogan & Bird, 2011). The aim of this paper is to present the findings in a form that will be of value to Art Therapists whose clients have experienced domestic violence and abuse.

The context for this discussion is doctoral-level research that set out to identify how an arts-based methodology can provide access to an understanding of women's experience of domestic violence and abuse that is different to that which traditional text-based methods can provide. The background to that research includes my involvement, alongside other researchers, community artists and refugees, in the conducting of arts-based research, which culminated in an exhibition entitled *A Sense of Belonging* that showed what experiences of migration and refuge meant to those people who had settled in the East Midlands region of England. That research identified the role of community and belonging within the journey from being the native of one country to the settled migrant of another (Ahmed, 2009). The exhibited artworks challenged common misconceptions and stereotypes that existed (and do still exist) about refugees and asylum seekers. The methodology employed made use of what O'Neill (2010) refers to as ethno-mimesis. Ethno-mimesis brings together ethnography, participatory arts and participatory action research (PAR) in order to create a space in which the arts can be used by participants to represent their life worlds in a way that captures the sensuousness and emotional quality of everyday life. It values participants' expertise as co-creators of knowledge and aims to engage the imagination of participants, researchers and audiences in order to illuminate injustices and make visible marginalised lives. Having seen the value of such a methodology within the study of migration I wished to determine if a similar value was present when applied to the study of domestic violence and abuse, which at the time I was encountering through my work as an art therapist for a charitable organization.

The outcome of the research presented in this paper is a demonstration of how an arts-based methodology gives shape to embodied and situated knowledge, accesses participants' imagination and provides ways of focusing upon the future as well as the past and the

present. The themes that emerged led to what I term *transitional stories of domestic violence and abuse*.

Terminology

Whilst the term domestic violence and abuse, is used within this paper, it is worth noting that the term covers a number of scenarios, and whilst the participants of the research referenced may not have encountered all of those, the widened definition is worth noting. As of 2016, the UK Government defines domestic violence and abuse as ‘any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are, or have been, intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality’ (Home Office, 2016). The crucial difference between this and previous definitions is the focus upon coercion and control.

Diversity statement

The participants were all white-British and female and I myself am white-British and male. Attempts were made to recruit a wider diversity of participants through locating the research groups within different geographical locations. Unfortunately, problems brought about by the insecure funding for those organisations I was working with, and the subsequent impact upon the ability of those organisations to support women to participate in research (through the provision of child care), did not enable this. Whilst experience of domestic violence and abuse is not confined to women, this research is limited to women’s experience.

Literature review

Literature pertaining to domestic violence and abuse is wide-ranging. Here I have chosen to focus only on that relating specifically to the arts as a research method and as a therapeutic intervention.

Arts-based research

There is limited academic research literature that employs arts-based methods of enquiry to investigate domestic violence and abuse. But those that do exist offer useful examples of how arts-based methods might contribute to such research. An early example is from a social work perspective. Working with elderly women in Israel, Lev-Wiesel and Kleinberg (2002) adopt a formalised and analytical approach to using art within research. Respondents were asked to create a Kinetic Family Drawing, which involved the women drawing themselves and their spouses. The resulting images were then analysed to physically measure the relative size and placement of the drawn figures. The authors state that ‘[t]he male figures evidenced

numerous indicators of violent aggression, whereas the female figures evidence helplessness and passivity such as lacking or disconnected hands, empty or shadowed eyes, and unstable stance' (p.16). The authors frame their conclusions by drawing upon the idea of learned helplessness and battered women's syndrome, the lack of social networks as a reason for the women continuing to stay with their spouses, and the cultural norms of the women's countries of origin, with eight of the ten women being of Moroccan origin. The research is limited in terms of its use of art: restricted to being illustrative and diagnostic and not contextualised by the women's own interpretation of the images.

Two later examples of arts-based research involve the use of photography and PAR. The first to be published was that by Lisa Frohmann (2005) reporting upon *The Framing Safety Project*. This was a collaborative community action and education project, involving Mexican and South Asian immigrant women in the US who had experienced domestic violence and abuse, which made use of participant-made photographs to '[e]nable women to identify, make visible, and value all the taken-for-granted work they do (i.e., their safekeeping strategies) on a daily basis to survive and to keep children and others safe' (p.1398). Participants were asked to take photographs of domestic and public places that were perceived as 'zones of safety' (p.1413), with the resultant photographs being used to elicit conversations about safety. The themes that Frohmann identified include examples of safety as a fluid concept where safe physical spaces are made un-safe when broken into, fractured concepts of the good family within which food and cooking play important roles, and strategies that women adopted for staying safe. A number of methodological observations are made by Frohmann. These include the effects of bi-lingual encounters, the need to take care of participants through access to therapeutic support, and the need for the researcher to take care of their own emotional well-being. Frohmann sees the use of photo-elicitation techniques as a way for participants to provide subjective responses to their experiences and to empower them through challenging the tradition of researchers setting the agenda and posing questions. She also views the method as having a healing potential, stating that '*[i]n the tradition of feminist work with survivors of male violence, the discourses of empowerment and therapeutic healing have been intertwined*' (p.1401).

A more recent example of this synthesis is presented by Haymore *et al* (2012). In a pilot study lasting ten weeks, involving five women, a technique called *Photovoice* was used, within which 'participants were given the opportunity to photograph their everyday lives, create narratives about the photos, and dialogue with each other in order to make meaning of their collaborative experience' (p.2). Theoretical influences include feminist ideas about

women's personal experiences being a valid source of knowledge and the link between everyday life and social structures. Like Frohmann's research, the process is one that draws upon notions of social support and attention to women's individual and collective voices. Beneficial themes that were identified by the participants and the researchers in the project described by Haymore *et al* (2012) included the positive value of creative expression, the value of being offered a space in which to process experiences of living with violence and leaving, and the significance of social support for the participants when taking part in the research. The limits of the research are identified by the authors as being the small sample size and the limited ability to generalise from the findings, but they end by stating that the 'program allowed the women – even though they had experienced different types of violence – to come together in a supportive, safe environment to discuss their photographs, narratives, and experiences with one another in a creative non-judgemental way' (p.10). This research, like the *Framing Safety Project* (Frohmann, 2012), includes a strong emphasis upon participation being in some way emancipatory for participants.

Therapeutic interventions

Those texts pertaining to the arts therapists include the use of drama therapy (Brosbe, 2008; Pendzik, 1997; Pierce, 2008), music therapy (Curtis, 2008), dance and movement psychotherapy (Chang & Leventhal, 2008), and art therapy (Lagorio, 1989). Observable within this literature is a tension between psychological and sociological understandings of domestic violence and abuse that is observed more widely within the field of domestic violence and abuse studies (Haaken, 2010); if not the causes, then the consequences of domestic violence and abuse, are most often framed by therapeutic literature within a psychological model. Lagorio's (1989) account of art therapy with "battered women" (the term that she employs) is dated in terms of its references to women purely as victims and their addiction to abusive relationships. The focus of Lagorio's readings of the images made by women is the emotional and personal responses to violence, i.e. guilt, anxiety, anger, loss and fear, as well as 'reminders of a time when they heroically made the quantum leap to save themselves' (1989, p.112). Lagorio's chapter therefore reflects well the tendency for art therapy to frame itself as a psychological intervention rather than a sociological intervention. It can be argued that because Lagorio was writing some twenty seven years ago she is not reflective of art therapy as practised now. Contemporary art therapy does though still predominantly draw upon a psychological understanding of experience. As Art Therapist Truus Wertheim-Cahen (2005) observes in her outline of work with refugees and victims of political violence '[a]lthough practically psychotherapy and art therapy may often seem

indivisible and intertwined, the two professional fields do hold different points of departure. The stronger the identification with psychotherapy the more the aspect of the healing quality of art-making itself disappears into the background' (p.215-6). An argument can also be made that just as a psychological approach can come to overshadow the intrinsic value of the art-making, so too can it downplay a sociological understanding of art-making and creativity. This questioning of a psychological interpretation that minimises a sociological interpretation appears within a description of music therapy with women who have experienced domestic violence and abuse that is presented by Music Therapist Sandra Curtis (2008). Adopting a feminist and socio-political understanding of intimate male partner violence Curtis states that she is guided by the principle 'that the major source of women's difficulties is identified as socio-political, not personal, resulting from women's experiences of oppression in a culture characterized by institutionalised sexism' (p.129). Curtis' account of her work is marked by the way that she is far more interested in collective empowerment, the finding of voices and ensuring 'that the client understands and is an active participant in the therapeutic process' (p.130).

Summary of literature

The literature presented points to the arts having a potential to assist in the understanding of domestic violence and abuse from the perspective of groups and of individuals, within the context of research that is sociological in character. The greater proportion of arts-based research literature, and some arts therapies literature, is concerned with collective participation and a sociological understanding, whereas art therapy literature appears more focused upon a psychological model. The literature relating to art therapy and domestic violence and abuse is limited and that which does exist makes greater use of a psychological framing of domestic violence and abuse. This attention to individual psychology reflects the reality that most clinical art therapy is focused on addressing individual needs rather than collective responses.

From the literature, a number of questions arise that I will attempt to answer in this paper. These are:

- What does an arts-based methodology add to knowledge of domestic violence and abuse that is qualitatively different to that which text-based methods can provide?
- What issues arise within the merging of research, emancipatory and therapeutic principles?

Methodology

Collection and interpretation of words and images

The use of visual images within sociological research has been covered extensively by a number of writers (MacDougall, 2006; Spencer 2011). Developments within arts-based methods have included: the incorporation of sensory narratives within ethnographic and biographic research (Pink, 2009); arts-based enquiry as political activism (Finley, 2005); and the synthesis of art therapy and social action (Huss, 2013; Kaplan, 2007). An example of the synthesis of art practice, collaboration and partnership includes work with refugees and migrants that advocates for the transformative role of the arts within a methodology that has an explicit objective of social action and democracy (O'Neill, 2010). The link between feminism and arts-based research has been set forth by Patricia Leavy (2007), this later point being particularly pertinent to this study given the strong influence of feminist thought upon contemporary responses to domestic violence and abuse, and thus my own alignment with its principles.

Both Sarah Pink (2009) and Gillian Rose (2012) identify that despite the extensive use of arts-based methods much of it is experimental in nature. The important point is to be clear about the aims and processes of such experimental methods. The method I employed involved small groups of women who had experienced domestic violence and abuse making visual images that represented their responses to thoughts and feelings about the past, the present and the future in relation to ideas such as home and support. A mixture of collage and easy-to-use drawing and painting materials were offered to participants to aid in the construction of images. Collage enables people to engage with making visual images in a tactile and layered way. Arts-based researcher Lynn Butler-Kisber writes that 'collage evokes embodied responses, and uses the juxtaposition of fragments and the presence of ambiguity to engage the viewer in multiple avenues of interpretation' (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p.103). Collage also allows for the tactile qualities of materials to be exploited in a way that enables a multisensory approach to the representations of memory, imagination, thought and feeling. The aim was for each woman to construct a visual response to their experience of living with and moving away from domestic violence and abuse. Discussions about those images took place during and after their making, and each woman was given an opportunity to speak about the whole process at the end of their participation. The resulting data were responded to and interpreted by myself in order to allow common themes to be identified, with those themes being related to contemporary understandings of domestic violence and abuse. Pink (2009) suggests that a researcher might approach visual or sensory data through making use

of their own imagination and embodied experiences in a way that enables a corporeal engagement with data. Gregory Stanczak (2007) claims that the meaning within visual images resides in the responses participants or researchers have to them rather than within the inherent properties of the images. Huss (2013) proposes that the analysis of visual images in research can be approached from a phenomenological perspective, in terms of acknowledging the unique interpretations that individual participants have about the images they have made. Huss also suggests that images can be approached from a social theory perspective, asking how the images might expose discourses of social knowledge and power. In this way, Huss argues that the 'analysis conceives of the art as a discourse that is both subjective and culturally embedded' (p.23). In addition, Huss also proposes that where images are made within groups then the interpretations made by the group form part of the analysis of images and reveal something of the social context within which the images were made. The methodological approach taken by myself to responding to the images and words made by participants reflects the methodology that Huss (2013) sets forth. Following the collection of words and images made by women within the groups, time was devoted to immersing myself in what had been recorded. Firstly, by recording my responses to images in an unedited and very immediate way. Later, by grouping the stories as presented and told by participants together into themes using a process similar to that used within the phenomenological interpretation of the written or spoken word, whereby many individual points of interest are slowly grouped into larger patterns. Finally, those themes were related to existing literature about domestic violence and abuse.

Recruitment

The research was conducted within the East Midlands region of the UK. A pilot phase involved a single group meeting for six weeks, whilst the main phase involved three groups meeting for between ten and twelve weeks. The pilot phase involved working with two women's services based within a medium-sized city; whilst in the main phase, a third service was involved that was based in a medium sized town, which drew its clientele from both urban and rural areas. There was a very clear difference between the ethnic profiles of the two women's services that were city-based. One appeared to be exclusively white-British, whilst the other was mixed but predominantly African and South Asian. This difference reflected the demographics of the areas of the city that the two services were located within. The participants who used the town-based service were all white-British. Such a clear difference between the services would have offered an opportunity to investigate how different ethnic groups experience domestic violence and abuse; however, in the main phase

of the research, problems to do with a lack of practical support for participants meant that all of the stories were produced by women who were white-British. As a consequence of the limited participation in the city-based group I was required to run two sets of meetings in the town-based service. Consistency of attendance was an issue there also but not to the same extent and one woman came to both of those groups. Across all three groups in the main phase a total of twenty women attended at various points and I was able to collect eight completed stories from seven women (one woman attended two of the groups).

Ethics

The research gained approval via the University of Derby's ethical approval process. All participants were fully informed of the aim and objectives of the study and consented to their images and words being used to disseminate the findings of the research. In fact they were very adamant that they wanted their experiences to be witnessed by as wide an audience as possible; a position that fits with the philosophy of participatory and feminist research.

A primary concern throughout the design and implementation of the research methodology was the welfare of those women who participated, with three key drivers being the emotional well-being of participants, the protection of personal details and the maintenance of participant anonymity. I adopted a situated ethics of care approach (Prosser, Clark & Wiles, 2008) that places the well-being of participants at the centre of research design. It became apparent early on that in order to achieve this I would be required to work closely with those organizations that supported women who had experienced domestic violence and abuse. Not only would this aid in the ethical concern for participants but would also enable me to work in partnership with organizations driven by feminist principles. Hearn's (1998) comments about ensuring that male researchers who investigate any aspect of violence against women align themselves closely to feminism entailed the need to make such links. Attention was paid to those particular issues identified within research literature concerning the unpredictable nature of participation, the awareness of risk, the vetting of researchers by agencies, how participants' details being anonymous can make follow-up difficult and the issue of disclosure in research (Abrahams et al., 2004). The nature of the research topic meant there was a high probability that participants would have strong emotional responses to their own experiences, and those of other participants. I therefore ensured that potential participants were made aware of the possible emotional responses so that they could make informed choices as to whether or not to participate. The services that

referred women to the research all provided a range of emotional support as part of their normal service.

Findings

Three themes emerged within the stories presented by participants and together they form what I have come to refer to as *transitional stories of domestic violence and abuse*. The three themes are: *escape and harmony*; *relationships and social support*; *agency and resistance*.

Escape and Harmony

Escape and harmony is used to identify where the participants' stories contained the following elements: representation of how they became aware of the effect of domestic violence and abuse upon their lives and started to move away from it; how the domestic environment, often in the form of a new home, could be managed in a way that expressed a growing sense of self-determination; and the natural environment as a literal and metaphorical manifestation of escape and the desire for harmony.

Figure 1 shows an image made by Emma (all names are pseudonyms) during the 5th week of the 3rd group. This is an image that encapsulates the time before leaving domestic violence and abuse and shows the experience of having being caught between the reality of living with domestic violence and abuse and the possibility of escape. The lyrics visible in the background of the image are taken from popular Elton John songs (John & Taupin, 1983, 1989) and were used by Emma as a way of managing her feelings both whilst living with domestic violence and abuse and since leaving. The use of the word 'sacrilegious' within those lyrics is significant because Emma stated that she felt that the violence and abuse was damaging to her self-respect and thus a sacrilegious act against her person. She also talked about the 'sacrifice' that she had made; staying in the hope of something better happening for herself and her children. Within literature this is suggested as a common reason given for staying (Campbell, Rose, Kub, & Nedd, 1998) and here we can see that within the huddled figure being placed between the darkness of staying and the light of hope of there being a non-violent relationship. This image shows how the past shapes identity in the present and how living with domestic violence and abuse includes acts of survival and strategies of resistance – in this case through reference to song lyrics – that can be carried beyond violence and into the future.



Figure 1: Emma, group 3, week 5

The appearance of women's desire for harmony was manifested in several ways: through association with nature; through management of the domestic space; and through the formation of a different kind of family. Sometimes women had achieved these, whilst for others they were presented as future possibilities. Harmony was imagined and embodied in two ways within the women's images. The first was in the use of representations of nature to represent thoughts about growth and renewal, and the second was in the use of representations of the physical home to show the creation of a safe space of one's own. These two elements can be seen together in Figure 2 that was made by Jane and shows how she used internal decoration, the preparation of food and the making of a garden as a way of asserting her independence and of creating a safe space for her and her child.



Figure 2: Jane, group 1, week 4

What was important for Jane was to be able to establish an environment and a pattern of domestic activities that was separate to that which her ex-partner and his wider family had imposed upon her.

Relationships and Social Support

The desire for harmony was also evident in the way that some women identified with a need to create a home that would be capable of welcoming back missing children and of sustaining a non-violent family, both of which merge with the theme of *relationships and social support*; a theme that incorporates the ways in which women explored the nature and quality of their relationships with others, especially with their immediate family, and of how those relationships aided and hindered their transition away from domestic violence and abuse. Figure 3 stands as a good example of how the women very often framed thoughts about relationships with family, friends and support services. Figure 3 shows the exterior of a three-dimensional object created by Carol. The words “New Life” and “Welcome Home” appear on the lid and the side of the box; neatly combining the sense of hope in the creation of something new with the desire for a return to something that has passed. Carol had three children, one of whom died naturally in infancy, and two others whom she had limited contact with. That limited contact caused Carol great frustration and anger that was directed towards the family of her ex-partner who controlled that access, and towards Social Services and the legal system which she experienced as being insensitive and controlling. It represents how Carol had, in her new home, created a child’s bedroom in readiness for the hoped for return of her children. This creation of a child’s bedroom is a powerful symbol of hope and return, and of the home as a potential space within which a family can be re-formed or returned to. Figure 4 shows both the exterior and interior of that box, showing how the home that Carol created was for her a “safe haven” into which her children could return. For Carol the making of the box was an important act that she was able to engage fully with. The sense of optimism is shown in these images of Carol’s work, where the home becomes a container for an imagined return to a safe and complete family.



Figure 3: Carol, group 1, weeks 8-10

Agency and Resistance

The theme of *agency and resistance* pays closer attention to the internal thought processes and narratives that women employed when presenting stories about their transition away from domestic violence and abuse. This includes the way in which they spoke about, and made images of, the process of making decisions, and the ways in which they managed their thoughts about how domestic violence and abuse had impacted upon their sense of self, their relationships and their plans for the future.



Figure 4: Emma, group 3, week 12

Figure 4, produced by Emma, was the culmination of many weeks of preparatory work. Emma spoke about how it represented the choices that she was faced with and the anxiety that accompanied that need to make a decision. It is an image that explores her acceptance of

what had happened to her in the past, acknowledging the anger she faced and her ability to survive a violent partner. Running up through the centre of the image is the representation of a cross-roads sign that asks the question “Which way?” On the left-hand side of the image is the appearance of those things Emma associated with her ex-partner: shouting, swearing, anger, coldness, and cruelty. On the right-hand side are representations and words that show Emma’s sense of survival and of how she had been affected by living with domestic violence and abuse, so that we see and read something about being battered, bruised, and “Driving off the edge”, as well as being shown a representation of how Emma was “still standing”. Dancing, music, art, sunshine and a “lucky white feather” contribute to that aspect of the image. Read in an anti-clockwise direction from the top-left of the image, the image can be seen to represent the journey that Emma had taken as she moved away from a violent partner. In one area of the image, towards the lower and central area are found representations of how Emma came to realise that she could not live with violence any longer; the words “Tip of the iceberg” (sic) and “Being pushed too far” repeat what Emma had previously explored in figure 1. Agency is an important concept to introduce at this point. It is a key component of Liz Kelly’s (1988) differentiation between the labels of victim and survivor and is introduced by Lempert (1996) as the way in which women form ‘distinctive internal definitions of self and situation and develop problem solving and coping strategies to resolve the conflicts and to end the violence’ (p.286). Agency can be both active and passive and can be considered to be in evidence where ‘women [use] conscious decision making to take action’ (Campbell et al., 1998, p.758). It is thus a term that gives value to any action a woman might take in response to domestic violence and abuse that is conscious and aims to keep them safe. It therefore challenges notions of the passive victim Emma’s use of song lyrics shows how simple acts are used to gain a sense of agency when living with domestic violence and abuse and after leaving.

What figure 4 shows is how Emma had to work hard on maintaining her sense of having made the right decision in choosing to leave when she did. Emma was exploring the delicate balance between going forwards with a sense of optimism and returning to a former state of fear. But that choice is not so much about choosing between staying away from a violent partner and returning to them, but more to do with uncertain feelings about the future: will it be a “Rough and bumpy road” or a “Smooth road” ? Emma’s image is a very complete image in the sense that it shows different aspects of a lengthy and on-going journey, incorporating thoughts and feelings about the past, the present and the future. Whilst there is uncertainty, there are also signs of optimism, represented by signs of pleasure and joy. These

include music, dancing and art. The image is thus one that encapsulates an ongoing journey away from domestic violence and abuse. This attention to the uncertainty that surrounds making decisions is one that corroborates what Abrahams (2010) observed within the narratives of women who had been controlled to such an extent that the making of any decision was accompanied by fear and anxiety. Figure 4 also exhibits the kind of ambivalence that has been identified as appearing within women's thoughts about what might happen in the future when contemplating and planning to leave a violent relationship (Campbell *et al.*, 1998).

Transitional stories of domestic violence and abuse

A transitional story of domestic violence and abuse is one that entails the representation of physical and emotional movement between places, movement through time, and changes in relationships. Together these transitions contribute to the changing ways in which women perceive themselves and engage in tactics of agency and resistance. There are elements of the story that contain acts of agency and control, and elements that highlight barriers to the achievement of goals and desired outcomes. A transitional story is one that encompasses the past, the present and the future and allows imaginative movement between those. How women survived can also be framed as how they resisted it, with that resistance persisting in the present and projected into the future. Resistance is manifested in states of mind – such as a determination to have a better life or to regain a sense of harmony. It is also manifested in a myriad of physical acts –internal decor, garden maintenance, choice of food, walks in the countryside and the creation of 'zones of safety' (Frohmann, 2005, p.1413). The stories showed how those internal and external features worked together. It is this inter-twining of the mental and the physical and the joining together of the past, the present and the future that gives transitional stories of domestic violence and abuse their unique quality. I also propose that such stories contain aspects of the kind of processes that Susan Brison (2002) has identified in how women attempt to remake the self following violence. Furthermore, transitional stories contain within them what Vanessa May (2013) identifies as being important to the concept of the relational self and social belonging. These are: change; motion; and the importance of everyday social actions. Both Brison (2002) and May (2013) identify relationships as key to ideas of identity and belonging and this aligns with my own findings that showed how relationships were central to women's stories.

domestic violence and abuse Implications for Art Therapy Practice

domestic violence and abuse domestic violence and abuse As an Art Therapist I was able to approach the use of images within a research setting with one eye on the requirement to be sensitive to the power and intensity of images. As indicated above, I was careful to make participants aware of the possibility of strong emotional reactions emerging from their taking part in the research. In spite of some concerns I had about arts-based research too easily becoming like art therapy, the women were able to manage their participation in a way that was both meaningful and safe, with some openly acknowledging the therapeutic benefits of taking part.

There are some observations to emerge from the research that I think can be of value to other Art Therapists working with similar issues. The first is that working in a time-limited way allows for a contained way of thinking about responses to domestic violence and abuse, and that when combined with a very deliberate attention to the future, means that participants can test how comfortable they are with working with images and with exploring their experiences of domestic violence and abuse. For some women this will be enough; for others it might be a step towards engaging in longer-term art psychotherapy. The second is that transitional stories indicate how important it is to take account of the past, the present and the future, as well as regrets and hopes, when working with women who have experienced domestic violence and abuse. Similarly, those transitional stories show how everyday and ordinary engagement with the world has great significance, and that ways of taking account of that engagement emerge within art therapy so that the emotional and physical journeys women make as they move away from domestic violence and abuse are worked with in a coherent way. As such, art therapy (or other therapies) and practical support would benefit from being coordinated in order to ensure that women are able to exercise agency in the present and the future that is founded upon an awareness of the emotional consequences of their having experienced domestic violence and abuse. The final implication to arise from this research is to note that Art Therapists are well-placed to conduct arts-based research given their sensibilities in relation to valuing the potential for images to reveal thoughts and feelings in ways that words alone are not always able to. Art Therapists are also very likely to be aware of how to work safely and ethically with people when asking them to make images in response to research questions.

Conclusion

Transitional stories fit with existing knowledge of domestic violence, aligning with other research that identifies the power of being listened to (Abrahams, 2007; 2010) and of being able to create narrative meaning (Allen, 2012). What a transitional story enables, particularly where it is told visually, is the expression of narratives from multiple perspectives and multiple points in time. It also gives shape to both memory and to imagination, and shows how the journey away from domestic violence is not a linear process, but rather one marked by moments of doubt and ambivalence, as well as moments of hope and joy. What transitional stories also reveal is how women are able to draw upon different discourses as they attempt to give meaning to their experiences. They challenge the idea of there being a simple and singular way of understanding the consequences of domestic violence. A feature to emerge late on in my understanding of transitional stories was the recognition that one way of thinking about the embodied qualities of everyday life is to make use of the idea of belonging; here taken to mean a sociological concept that brings together attention to political structures, cultural practices, physical space, corporeal experience and personal relationships (May, 2013). Just as violence has been shown to disrupt and make vulnerable ideas about a coherent relational self (Brison, 2002), so too does violence disrupt feelings of belonging.

The arts-based and participatory methodology was successful as it enabled a different kind of knowledge to emerge about how women experience and respond to domestic violence. It illuminated aspects that might otherwise have remained opaque; in particular the interweaving of physical space, the management of relationships, agency, and the construction of ideas about the self through time. The transitional stories that contained those elements emerged because the methodology gave space and time for women to work upon those ideas and formulate a response that made sense to them. The group-based approach enabled the coming together of women to share their thoughts and feelings and thus participation itself formed part of those transitional stories; in this way it can be said that the methodology is of value if emancipation and empowerment is an aim of the research and confirms Haymore et al.'s (2012) evaluation of the usefulness to participants of taking part in visual research. Despite issues of recruitment and the small number of participants, the methodology is a sound one within the practice of arts-based research. It is a methodology that, if managed carefully, can provide useful insights into how women respond to and make sense of experiences of domestic violence. It can thus be considered a legitimate research methodology to employ alongside more established qualitative or quantitative methodologies,

where a more nuanced and imaginative response is required of participants or where a more engaged level of participation is required.

The research shows that the visual element of women's stories aids the process of witnessing and validation that underpins participatory and emancipatory philosophies. It also shows that within the study of domestic violence collective visual storytelling is itself a powerful form of agency and resistance. The value of arts-based research has been documented within the study of refuge and asylum (O'Neill, 2010), whilst the value of paying attention to the sensory and embodied qualities of domestic and everyday life within ethnography has been clearly articulated (Pink, 2012). This paper demonstrates that bringing those qualities together provides tangible insights into how domestic violence and abuse impacts upon women's everyday lives and plans for the future, and how the sensibilities of being an Art Therapist allowed for the safe use of that methodology

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Figure list

Figure 1: Emma, group 3, week 5

Figure 2: Jane, group 1, week 4

Figure 3: Carol, group 1, weeks 8-10

Figure 4: Emma, group 3, week 12