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Art Therapy and Experiences of Acculturation and Immigration

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Abstract

This article describes an expanded case study methodology that was used to explore the value that art therapy processes have in expression and understanding of the complications of immigration and acculturation. Data collected from two art therapy groups of Hispanic/Latino youth and immigrant women at an urban parish were analyzed to develop an understanding of art therapy as a support in the sharing of difficult and complex cultural stories.

This project is a follow-up to a grounded research study (Linesch, Aceves, Quezada, Trochez, & Zuniga, 2012) that demonstrated how art therapy helps facilitate expression of the complex nature of acculturation within families. The current study continues to explore art therapy with acculturating, recently immigrated families who moved from Mexico to the United States. Although the project was intended to duplicate the protocols of the previous research, the sponsoring parish requested that access be granted to the populations of single mothers, unemployed men, and adolescents at risk for acculturation stress. Case study methodology was extended to include interviews with the participants to explore the themes that emerged from an initial analysis of the data.

Literature Review

Among the many psychosocial concerns of immigrants who are acculturating to the host society, a loss of identity, which many experience after leaving their country of origin, can be especially difficult (Akhtar, 2011; Farrugio, 2010). According to Montreuil, Bourhis, and Vanbeselaere (2004), the concordance between immigrants and the host majority often results in interpersonal and familial conflict. To succeed in the host society, immigrants need to recognize the impact that the immigrant experience has on their identities (Rong & Fitchett, 2008). Chen, Benet-Martínez, and Bond (2008) reported that the process of cultural adaptation changes psychological processes, social behaviors, and individual experiences.

Although immigrants often try to resolve or minimize their cultural differences, the research enumerates frequently adopted coping strategies such as community support and social connections (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). DeLuca, McEwen, and Keim (2010) pointed out that immigrants are susceptible to mental health stressors; for those who enter the United States without legal documentation there may be added consequences stemming from the dangerous risks and stressors of crossing the border.

Sapienza, Hichy, Guarnera, and DiNuovo (2010) identified the kinds of resources that can reduce the hazards of assimilationism, segregationism, and exclusionism. These include a well-functioning community, good support from family, and a strong immigrant/national identity. Additionally, such values as self-transcendence, conservation, and individualism, as well as the intention to integrate, are strengths that help immigrants resist the potential adversarial impacts of the dominant society on their quality of life (Rong & Fitchett, 2008).

Acculturation can be seen as a process of adaptation that is considerably more complicated than simply shedding old or native values for new ones and embracing a new culture (Bialystok, 1999). Although the art therapy literature has contributed useful ideas about multicultural interventions and sensitivities (e.g., Calisch, 2003; Emberley, 2005; Hooy, 2002; Lemzoudi, 2007), very little research has been published about the actual role that the arts may play in contributing to successful adaptation and acculturation experiences.

Methods

Participants

The parish where art therapy took place serves a large Hispanic/Latino urban community where poverty, unemployment, and various issues associated with immigration...
are common. The parish priest, the catechism teacher, and the parish school principal helped recruit participants for three art therapy focus groups, each comprised of single mothers, unemployed men, or struggling adolescents. At weekly religious services trusted clergy and school staff explained how the groups might be helpful to parishioners who were struggling with acculturation experiences. Although many expressed interest and agreed to participate, in the end the men’s group was populated by individuals who, distracted by issues of health and employment, were not willing to participate in art making and therefore were excluded from the case study. Three adolescents volunteered to attend the group for youth and eight participants engaged in the women’s group. The group sessions, including all consent and procedural conversations, were conducted in Spanish. Given the particular vulnerabilities of undocumented immigrants, the project was carefully scrutinized and ultimately approved by the Loyola Marymount University Institutional Review Board.

Procedures

Each art therapy group was facilitated by a Spanish-speaking art therapist, either an art therapy student or a registered art therapist who also was a licensed marriage and family therapist. The groups were structured for two consecutive Saturdays to encourage expression of the participants’ experiences. The groups met for the entire day on both weekends with child day care and lunch provided. The sessions were structured to provide open-ended art experiences for the expression and sharing of immigration and acculturation stories. Materials and prompts were selected by the research team with sensitivity toward cultural and developmental appropriateness. For example, in the women’s group where traditional gender roles are expected, large pieces of burlap were provided on which participants applied fabric and found material to create “tapestries” of their experiences. The same activity was adapted to the developmental needs and interests of the adolescent group by encouraging them to repurpose and transform vinyl records to create “recordings” of their narratives. The behaviors, verbalizations, and art products of the participants were carefully observed and recorded to create a comprehensive data set for analysis.

Data were gathered initially through group observation. The entire research team met after each of the group sessions, discussed the processes and artworks created, and took extensive notes. From these notes, the team identified patterns in the artworks and clustered the stated concerns and issues of the participants. Based on the clusters and patterns, the researchers collaboratively and carefully articulated emergent themes. Subsequently, the team decided to interview two participants each from the women’s and adolescent groups about their experiences in the groups. Two Spanish-speaking members of the research team conducted the interviews, which were loosely structured, open-ended conversations about the experiences the participants had in the art therapy groups. Next, the entire research team transcribed and explored the interview transcripts for possible alignment with the themes that had emerged from the earlier analysis of the case study data. The aim was to compare and to confirm or disconfirm the group facilitators’ observations with the voices of the participants. The methodological intention was to question the authenticity of the therapists’ observations of the group experiences by exploring for similarities of themes in the participants’ own descriptions of their experiences.

Results

Case Study Summaries

**Women’s Group.** The eight participants met as a group over two consecutive Saturdays. In the first session the women were invited to create an individual art piece that reflected their journey of immigration and to talk about their experiences. The women immediately began gathering materials and started work on a 5’ × 4’ piece of burlap using a variety of media. It appeared as though the textures and colors of the materials worked as a catalyst in finding images to tell their stories. As the women shared their feelings at the end of both sessions they discovered insights and meaning in their lives. In addressing the challenges of immigration and acculturation art making acted as a form of meaning making, communication, catharsis, and emotion regulation. The creative process appeared to support empowerment, giving the women an experience of voice, community, and relief of psychological distress. The women also reflected a sense of freedom and control in their use of material. They used their art to clarify their feelings and as a safe “haven” for increasingly open expression. Because the art reflected the women’s uniqueness and cultural background, it provided a source of support and pride, and assisted in reconnecting to their nurturing roots.

Figure 1 is an example of art created in the women’s group. A common theme depicted in the artworks was the

![Figure 1 My Immigration Story (Burlap and mixed media, 5’ × 4’)](image)
value of family and community. It was important for the women to have a place where they could find other women like themselves with whom to share their stories. A catalyst for insight, art connected the women on deeper levels as they viewed and told their stories. The women experienced a desahogo (catharsis) in expressing feelings of longing and loss; the art became a place to identify this loss. The rich, lush depictions of the Mexico they left behind, in contrast with sparse representations of life in the United States, seemed to depict this loss. Through the creative process, the women were able to articulate and express an inner strength and to gain a sense of identity in the active process of interpreting, constructing, and reconstructing their personal and social identity.

Adolescent Group. Three participants participated in the art therapy sessions (two females and one male). All participants were born in Los Angeles, their families having migrated from different areas of Mexico. After being provided with vintage vinyl records and record jackets, the adolescents eagerly engaged with the materials, apparently finding the project aligned with the invitation to tell their stories. One of the adolescents created a “book” using a boxed record set to share her experiences with acculturation and the story of her bicultural identity. She covered the inner right side of the book, describing it as “the layer people see when they get to know me.” The layer below revealed deeper vulnerabilities, with rocks and broken pieces of pottery to represent her struggles. Another adolescent created a mobile that represented “dangling” experiences in her life and pieces of herself. She described having struggled with unexpected changes as well as having embraced multiple obstacles. The two girls created a collaborative installation of their individual work in the second session, by suspending the mobile over the book and creating an “ocean” scene underneath (Figure 2).

The art sessions seemed to increase the participants’ self-confidence. They increasingly shared more of their personal experiences over time and repeatedly expressed comfort about sharing with others who had similar experiences. They expressed pride in their accomplishments and discussed how their personal struggles could be reframed as positive lessons. Initially reluctant to speak to each other in Spanish, the participants increasingly used their first language with each other, possibly reflecting the potential for community arts to reignite heritage lost to the dominant culture (Haedicke & Nellhaus, 2001). Respectful and attentive to each other, the youth disclosed that they rarely shared personal issues and struggles with their families.

It was evident through the individual art process and the collaborative art installation that the participants enjoyed utilizing art materials in these personal explorations. The art process allowed participants to process and reflect on their personal acculturation stories.

Follow-Up Interviews

Two participants from the women’s group and two from the adolescent group volunteered to be interviewed.

The open-ended interviews were approximately one hour in length and invited the participants to discuss their experiences making art about their immigration and acculturation. Pseudonyms are used to protect their confidentiality.

The Women. Luisa, a Mexican woman, stated that her community activism was motivated by her concern for her children’s safety. She spoke of the efforts she made to not become racially segregated and to focus on family unity. Luisa described the art therapy workshop as helpful for identifying feelings she had never expressed.

Julie identified as Hispanic. She discussed the sacrifices her parents made in immigrating to the United States. She was raising her children to follow Mexican tradition but described not fitting into either the Mexican or the U.S. mainstream cultures. Julie described art therapy as opening her eyes and helping her make imagery to understand her identity.

The Adolescents. Jessie, who identified as Mexican, discussed the acculturation challenges she encountered while attending a predominantly White college. In order to assimilate, she stopped speaking Spanish but reached out to her family to retain her identity. Jessie reported that art making gave her an opportunity to look closely at her history.

Betty, who identified as Mexican American, discussed the discrimination she experienced when traveling outside of her predominantly Hispanic neighborhood. Betty described how the art process helped her to remember forgotten things about the past that she could integrate into her present identity.
Data Analysis

An analysis of both the women’s and adolescent groups yielded five emergent themes that became the building blocks for constructing an understanding of the immigration/acculturation experience of the participants. Initially data from the art and process descriptions underwent a careful and collaborative analysis by the research team. This involved scrutiny of the notes from all of the group sessions alongside a review of all the artwork created. As the art therapists examined the imagery and discussed the group process in detail, several issues and concerns clearly dominated the data. Once these themes became apparent, the team then collaborated by translating the group and art data into categories that required the consensus of the entire team and links to multiple sources of evidence. For example, each of the five themes listed below required several manifestations in the imagery and vocalizations in the group notes before the thematic categories were crafted and accepted by the research team. The five themes were: (a) complexity of acculturation experience; (b) importance of community, church, and family; (c) severity of psychosocial risks; (d) development of coping mechanisms; and (e) value of the art process. Once the categories were established, the research team used them to structure the case study analysis. Table 1 illustrates how the categories structured the analysis and the findings.

In the next step of the data analysis the team considered the second data set (the interviews) within the same set of categories (emergent themes) that the team had developed to understand the group case material. The interview transcripts were carefully reviewed and a sequence of excerpts that matched the five different emergent themes were identified and color-coded. These excerpts were organized into narratives that aligned with the initial themes, summarized in the following sections in the voices of the participants.

Complexity of Acculturation Experience. The participants’ discussions focused on the acculturation process. In general they reported hardships and identity struggles within both cultures, commenting that living between two cultures was a necessary part of life in United States. Luisa spoke about the many hardships she and her family had experienced over a long time. She stated, “I was very afraid. Not being able to work without any legal documents, you cannot work and so you cannot go and see your family for a very long time. So there is a lot of discrimination.” Julie explained that it was important to retain her roots and transmit them to new generations, saying, “I have returned to Mexico more times, so I don’t forget our roots. I think it was showing my kids more about their culture.” She went on to say that she saw “only one, Hispanic culture. I am Hispanic, not Mexican. I appreciate a bit of both cultures.”

Jessie spoke about the discrimination she encountered attending a college that had a predominantly White student body. She said:

There were a lot of racist people [and] I was the only Mexican. A lot of people laughed at me. I did not even want to speak Spanish anymore. However, I identify more with Spanish, with [the language] of my parents because I grew up with them.

Betty described her experience of living in two different societies but maintaining a strong identity. She said, “I would say ‘Chicana’ but at the same time I would

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<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Excerpt Examples</th>
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<td>Complexity of acculturation experience</td>
<td>Luisa: “There is a lot of discrimination.”</td>
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<td>Julie: “I [teach] my sons [to not] forget our roots.”</td>
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<td>Jessie: “There was a lot of racism and I was the only Mexican.”</td>
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<td>Betty: “It was kind of hard to come up with a conclusion of how to find out my identity.”</td>
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<td>Importance of community, church, and family</td>
<td>Luisa: “To live in the community is to work for it; if there is community there is family.”</td>
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<td>Julie: “To follow our Mexican traditions; the second and third generations often lose it.”</td>
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<td>Jessie: “I have appreciated everything they have done and succeeded in.”</td>
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<td>Betty: “I felt a connection because we could relate to each other.”</td>
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<td>Psychological risks</td>
<td>Luisa: “There was no control of anything; there were no rules.”</td>
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<td>Julie: “One does not fit in, neither here nor there.”</td>
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<td>Jessie: “In the beginning I saw everything negative.”</td>
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<td>Betty: “They kept looking at us like we were going to do something—the only Hispanics.”</td>
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<td>Coping mechanisms</td>
<td>Luisa: “We tried to coexist; we would go outside [the community].”</td>
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<td>Julie: “I think giving that part of culture is enriching.”</td>
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<td>Jessie: “I will study to become a better person.”</td>
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<td>Betty: “With both cultures it is easier.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Betty: “Uh-huh! It is just my dreams.”</td>
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just say, ‘Mexican American.’” She went on to reflect that she was “kind of more into my parent's culture.” She explained, “That's how I was raised to be. And then when I go to school it's totally different because you have to speak English.”

**Importance of Community, Church, and Family.** The participants spoke about the importance of creating community, participating in church events, and fighting for their families. They identified that integration into U.S. society is critical to their success. Luisa identified the power and necessity of creating a sense of community as a way to protect new generations. She said, “I think to live in a community, one has to work in that community because it is a part of oneself.”

Jessie commented on the importance of the family and how it can shape one's cultural identity. She said, “I've appreciated my family, how they say one comes here to have a better life. I appreciate everything they have done and succeeded in. It is time to improve to give [back to] them.” Betty referred to the connection among the immigrants' experiences in the workshop, explaining that it “felt like a connection because we could relate to each other even though it was different experiences.”

**Severity of Psychosocial Risks.** The participants spoke about the hardships they experienced, particularly the discrimination against them for being Hispanic/Latino. They agreed that the best way to face difficult situations is to integrate both their culture of origin and their new culture. Luisa described the difficulties of not having legal documents in addition to her experiences of discrimination. She stated that because of her economic situation she had to live in a risky community with “war against the gangs. . .day and night. . .there was no control of anything; there was no rules.”

Julie commented on the difficulty of not fitting into either culture and that others often defined her identity by her skin color and facial features. She said, “One does not fit in here nor there, [or] know anything from over there, and also [one] does not know much of here.” Jessie spoke of her culture shock, which she at first viewed with a negative attitude. She said, “I saw everything negative. Later I revealed more of who I really was.” Betty described feeling different and discriminated against when she was the only Hispanic in a place. She said, “I felt kind of violated, in a way, because they kept looking at us like we were going to do something. Like we were aliens or something.”

**Development of Coping Mechanisms.** The participants described risky situations in which they and their families experienced fear and how they had to strengthen themselves with new and creative strategies to face difficulties. Luisa looked for everything possible so that her daughters didn’t feel fear as a result of being a different race or not a member of the majority group. She said, “I worked for my daughters and family. I would go outside, wherever there were people of color. We did not see them as any less. We tried to coexist, because one has to integrate and control the fear.” Julie believed her role was important in teaching her children the value of culture because it could enrich their lives. She said, “[as] a mother, I would like to give them that. I think giving that part of the culture is enriching.”

Jessie asserted that the support she has found is a necessity to cope with her bad experiences of being the only Mexican woman in other cultural contexts. She said, “I saw everything negative, with my experience of going to another culture, another place where there were no Mexican women. I talked with my parents and a counselor who helped me tremendously.” Betty explained that her experience with both cultures was shaping her dual identity and that her ability to integrate herself in both cultures has helped her. She said, “It helped me a lot to identify what I am, Mexican American, or Chicana, you know? With both cultures it's more easier to come to terms.”

**Value of the Art Process.** Most importantly for the purposes of this research, the participants affirmed that creating art helped them express fear and reflect on their past lives, enhancing their ability to discuss the above themes. Luisa compared the imagery of how she saw Mexico many years ago and today. She reflected on the ways in which her art helped her to see things differently and value what she has now. She said:

> I released a lot of things I had inside. It is good because you remember how you once lived, how things are. It helped me think about something different. Really, out of fear art would release the aggression built inside. By art one could reflect on the past and could see how now we are better. It has given me more energy to move ahead, because I was a bit smothered.

Julie said that art helped to open her eyes and to express deep feelings inside, reflecting, “To be more open with things . . . it has opened [my] eyes more to express that I don't lose anything but gain much more. It will help me remember what we did and it will give me strength.”

Jessie explained that art making could let her express herself and be heard without the others having to know her story. She knew and understood that the expression of her identity is very necessary. She said, “I had the opportunity to look at my history. In art one could express their history, so other people could see.” For Betty, art let her express her dreams for one moment; with that expression she reenergized herself. She said, “I liked it because it was just my dreams.”

**Discussion**

The emergent themes that were confirmed through the analysis of the interviews can be conceptualized in the following understandings. With respect to the complexity of the acculturation experience, both groups recognized that acculturation is both richly empowering and tragically challenging. The women recognized the legal, cultural, and emotional consequences of the acculturation challenges that they have lived. The adolescents were more likely to view both cultures as part of their identity and utilize them successfully.
Interestingly, the latter group was more identified with their Hispanic/Latino culture than with mainstream U.S. culture because of strong familial connections. Although the more mature women expressed the acculturation process to others, the adolescents appeared to be more private about their experiences.

Both groups identified the community, and specifically the church, as significant in their lives. At least one of the women felt that working in the community meant having an impact on and being part of the dominant culture. One of the women identified that strong family units guaranteed the transmission of tradition from first generation to second and third generations. The adolescents identified the connection to families of origin as being based on gratitude and obligation, recognizing the difficult endeavors of their parents.

Difficult experiences with discrimination were identified, particularly the fear that arises with uncertainty about expectations and the perception of being seen as different. The women referenced their economic situations, having to live in a “risky community” where there were no apparent rules for behavior, and the difficulty of not fitting in when others defined their identities by appearances. The adolescents also referred to experiences of discrimination, explaining that hostility and aggression made them feel that they were “neither here nor there.”

The challenges that both groups faced emphasized how they have struggled for control over feelings of fear in particular. The women tried to keep the family unit strong, to protect their children, and to transmit their roots and values to their grandchildren. The adolescents have focused on integrating cultural differences into a bicultural identity with the intended capability of securely connecting with both cultures.

Central to this study, participants valued the art process and recognized that the consequent expanded expression of feelings (such as fear and aggression) was useful for them and their families. The women used the expressive process to review their roots, traditions, and personal histories, claiming that the art helped to open their eyes and to become more active as transmitters of their tradition. The adolescents found that art making helped them gain control over their feelings and to find creative voices. Their art experience suggests that the expression of personal histories may help them to be more confident in their contact with different cultures.

The development of understanding was the goal of the research project. Emergent themes that were initially developed from systematic analysis of two focus groups subsequently became a framework for the analysis of a second data set, which comprised the interviews with four of the adolescents. In this way a coherent case was developed to make sense of the ways that facilitated art projects were helpful for participants in sorting through the complex lived experiences of immigration and acculturation. The resulting developed understanding—in many ways a simple narrative constructed from the five emergent themes—illuminates the experiences of recently immigrated and acculturating individuals. It reads as follows: The complexity of the acculturation experience, which is embedded in community values and, at the same time, innumerable psychosocial risks, can be released, expressed, shared, and relieved by engagement in art processes.

Conclusion

This exploration of the acculturation experience may contribute to clinical practice in the field of art therapy. As an example of expanded case study methodology, it encourages continued and careful attention to participants’ experiences that extend understandings of art therapy. As a depiction of a clinical intervention, it illustrates the particular value of using imagery to explore the complicated experiences of members of our community who struggle with the consequences of immigration and acculturation.

We are currently in the preliminary planning phases of projects that will test the emergent themes with larger numbers of recent immigrants who are currently engaged in mental health services. It is our hope that the ideas understood from this project will ensure more compassionate, informed, and expressive interventions.

References


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**Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association**

**Call for Papers—Special Issue**

**Culture, Diversity, and Identity**

*Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association* is seeking submissions for a special issue that will deepen the discourse on culture, diversity, and identity in art therapy. Art therapists are practicing in a rapidly changing world in which cultural diversity is a mode of social existence. Beyond descriptive encounters with diverse populations, however, there is a pressing need for a more nuanced, critical examination of the effects and practices of diversity in the field of art therapy. How does art therapy address culture as it intertwines with such identity markers as class, race, ethnicity, gender, age, disability, diagnosis, and place? What does diversity mean in different contexts? How do art therapists grapple with the structures of oppression, racism, discrimination, and obstacles to care in the institutions, settings, and programs in which they practice?

We invite submissions that offer original research (quantitative, qualitative, art-based, etc.), comprehensive literature reviews, theory and practice papers, or viewpoints that address these and related critical questions; that interrogate institutional, educational, and supervisory assumptions and methods; or that present innovative programs or effective interventions to counteract oppression, exclusion, conflict, and injustice, among other possible themes. Papers should demonstrate a critical approach to the topic and a sound conceptual or evidence base. Authors and thematic content that entertain non-dominant perspectives on art therapy are especially welcomed.

**The deadline for submissions is November 1, 2014.**

Please refer to the “Guidelines for Submissions” for specific manuscript requirements and submit your paper online at www.tandfonline.com/loi/UART