

# Autoethnography and arts therapy: The arts meet healing

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## KEY WORDS

Autoethnography, Postmodernity, Research.

## ABSTRACT

This paper considers the role and function of arts therapy research and argues for autoethnography as a useful methodology in such endeavors. As a postmodern methodology, autoethnography encourages researchers to start with their own lived experiences as a way of uncovering new ways of knowing and understanding wider cultural beliefs. In locating arts therapy within a postmodern construct it asks arts therapists to consider how they can start generating research that allows them to find their own voice rather than remaining reliant on other disciplines for their professional legitimisation.

## INTRODUCTION

*However far man may extend himself with his knowledge, however objective he may appear to himself – ultimately he reaps nothing but his own biography* (Nietzsche, 1994).

In recent years I have been afforded the opportunity to join beginning researchers as they embark on the research component of their arts therapy training. I watch as they attempt to find meaning in a research process that at times seems out of touch with their own values and contradictory to other units of material that the course asks them to integrate. This is because the research component of their education is more often than not located in a modernist paradigm which asserts that people's lives can be categorised, measured and interpreted by an impartial expert. In almost all other components of their education arts therapists are taught to listen to the client and to see themselves as a participant in a process which assists the client to tell their story (Talwar, 2010). I watch as the students attempt to resolve this conflict and note how quickly

the system can overwhelm them and cloud their intuitive judgement.

I watch as students create dissertation topics that are manageable – both in length and breadth, to ensure that they fit neatly within semester deadlines. Because of the need to keep moving graduates through the program, the single case study approach offers a quick and simple way for a student to meet the requirements of the degree. In *Art-based research*, McNiff (1998a) acknowledges this phenomenon amongst students studying arts therapy and observes that their output is usually presented as a narrative with the images created over the course of the research being used to support already defined psychological constructs, rather than acting as the basis for the enquiry (McNiff, 1998a).

Although students are encouraged to develop more meaningful topics by working with a client population or within an established clinical workplace, ethical constraints act as a further deterrent towards creativity. Not only is the student expected to obtain ethics