

What is the lived experience of adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities who engage in art therapy for the first time?

The Lived Experience of Adults with Disabilities Engaging in Art Therapy for The First Time

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the lived experiences of disabled adults engaging in art therapy for the first time. The participants include adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities such as, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, and autism. The convenience sample, along with literature pulled from previous studies, and the methodology involved reflection through an art intervention and interviews. The setting was the art room at my internship facility.

Keywords: intellectual disabilities, developmental disabilities, adults, art therapy

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CHAPTER I: Introduction

This study explored the lived experiences of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities who engaged in art therapy for the first time. A review of literature reveals that art therapists frequently work part or full-time with this population. Unlike traditional approaches in psychotherapy where clients may be required to have the ability to express themselves verbally, art therapy allows for non-verbal expression and communication. Art therapy also allows clients to address both conscious and unconscious psychological content through the creative process (Hackett and Aafijes-van Doorn, 2019, Trzaska, 2012).

A study published in the *Journal of Intellectual Disabilities* (Author, 2022) examined the effects of interactive art. This study used a variety of settings and other digital art methods proven to be beneficial in improving cognitive functioning and social aspects of those with intellectual disabilities.

For the purpose of this study, I explored the lived experiences of the participants with intellectual and developmental disabilities using art therapy from their first experience to the present and also thoughts for the future. The art intervention I engaged the participants in was the Bridge Drawing Assessment (Hays, R. & Lyon, S. (1981).

CHAPTER II: Literature Review

The literature review is broken into sections of intellectual and developmental disabilities, intellectual disability, developmental disability, and art therapy for intellectually and developmentally disabled adults.

Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

Intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) are characterized by the onset in the developmental period and include both intellectual (e.g., reasoning, learning and problem solving) and adaptive functioning deficits in conceptual, social or practical domains that limit functioning in on or more areas of daily life (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

The Special Olympics (2022) states approximately 6.5 million people in the United States have an intellectual or developmental disability. Approximately 1-3 percent of the global population has an intellectual or developmental disability- as many as 200 million people.

According to the *DSM-5*, "Intellectual disability involves impairments of general mental abilities that impact adaptive functioning in three domains. These domains determine how well an individual copes with everyday tasks: the conceptual domain, social domain, and practical domain" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). These impairments affect clients through social connectedness and individual identification. Adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities may sometimes experience not being accepted by others. Art allows freedom of expression by building trust and relationships through creativity without limits.

As stated by the Institute for Exceptional Care, an estimate of 16 million Americans with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities (IDD) experience common conditions like autism, cerebral palsy, Down Syndrome, intellectual disability, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and more rare conditions like William Syndrome or Rhatt Syndrome.

Intellectual Disability

A study conducted by Miller, S. M., Ludwick, J., & Couley Krcmar, C. (2020) found therapeutic services for people with intellectual disabilities (ID) often follow a medicalized narrative, focusing on treatment of the individual without attending to social and political factors. Drawing from disability theory and relational framework, art therapists can address and rebalance the therapeutic relationship. Three professional considerations for art therapy practice with people with ID are: (1) respecting autonomy and advocacy, (2) fostering reciprocal trust, and (3) honoring boundaries regarding space and time.

As explained through a study conducted by Candeis, A. (2023), mindset refers to a belief system designing how people can learn, think, adapt and behave in society. Previous research shows that a growth mindset empowers learning, competence and flexibility. Little is still unknown about how functions the mindset of adults with intellectual disabilities.

Schaepper, M. A., Hauser, M., & Kagadkar, F. (2021, August) note that intellectual disabilities affects about 1% of the population, and of those about 85% have mild intellectual disabilities. Males are more likely than females to be diagnosed with intellectual disability.

Developmental Disability

A training video conducted by Dr. Stephen Snow (2013, January 1), demonstrates expressive arts and ethnodramatherapy techniques with a group of developmentally disabled adults. Snow, with the aid of art therapists, guides the group through therapeutic mask-making, music, dance, poetry, and playback theater to build a live performance, helping them publicly reject the stigma of childhood taunts and promote healing. Not only does ethnodramatherapy support the expression and growth of the group, Snow maintains, but it also

facilitates social change through direct contact with the experience of "people who don't often get a chance to tell their own stories." You will find educational commentary, personal interviews, and an epilogue by Snow, including ways to incorporate expressive arts, poetry, music, and dance into work with adults with developmental disabilities. The idea behind this informative video is to assist adults with developmental disabilities socialize by opening up and engaging with others through various forms of art.

As stated in *Science Daily*, males are at greater risk for neurodevelopmental disorders, such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), than females, but the underlying reasons have been unclear (2014, February 27). Although this study also found that females diagnosed with a neurodevelopmental disorder or ASD had a greater number of harmful copy number variation (CNVs) than did males diagnosed with the same disorder. Moreover, females diagnosed with ASD had a greater number of harmful SNVs than did males with ASD.

Art Therapy for Intellectually and Developmentally Disabled Adults

A study conducted by Jane E. Harlan (1990), focused on a program for elders. The goals of this program are to provide (1) an age-appropriate creative activity for a population that often lacks meaningful retirements pursuits, (2) exploration of the developmental issues of aging, and (3) creative expression fostering an increase in self-esteem and autonomous functioning. The role of the art therapist was to motivate the participants, respond to the artwork, and promote autonomy. The model also suggests an agenda for training professionals involved in providing art therapy services and other persons responsible for the care and activities of the participating elders. There are many programs like the one in this study that aim to assist adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities in an engaging way, such as art therapy.

Another study developed by Liz Moffitt (2010), reviews several documents, including text by Snow Stephen (Ed) and D'Amico, Miranda (Ed). *Assessment in The Creative Arts*

Therapies (2009), which discusses designing and adapting assessments tools for adults with developmental disabilities. This book focuses on five different creative arts therapies, with the same population of adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities as they participated in a three-year program. The results were thoughtful, rigorous, and meticulous work and assessed the whole person in a way that was sensitive, artful, meaningful, and useful.

Summary of Literature Review

Adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities benefit from art therapy. As referenced by Bailey (2015) in the *Wiley Handbook of Art Therapy*, art therapy interventions can assist those with language skills impairments and provide them with a form of communication. This also includes creative self-expression to help individuals with disabilities feel empowered and to help them promote personal and social development.

CHAPTER III: Methodology

Of the main qualitative research methods, I will utilize observation (recording what you have seen, heard, or encountered in detailed field notes), interview (personally asking people questions in one-on-one conversations), and focus groups (asking questions and generating discussion among a group of people (Bhandari, P. 2023).

Recruitment

I used purposeful, convenience sampling and invited 4-8 of the clients I see regularly at my internship site as my participants. The recruitment process included, a recruitment flyer (Appendix B), informed consent (Appendix E) and media consent (Appendix D) as well as, assent forms (Appendix C) .

Procedures

I will have each of the participants do a specific art intervention, the bridge drawing to represent their start, now, and how they will be from this experience of art therapy. After, I would interview and have each of them reflect on their lived experience as adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities engaged in art therapy for the first time.

The art directive I utilized was the bridge drawing assessment to assess the participants.

Data Collection

My data was collected through observation, interview and focus groups. I protected the data with use of coding with symbolism to represent each participant and confidentiality of the participants are kept electronically on a word document under password protection.

Data Analysis

In the end, the session(s) would be recorded within my daily internship notebook, in which I noted responses after asking client individually their thoughts or feelings from this experience, and asked more general questions to the clients as a whole.

Ethical Implications

The ethical implications of this study are autonomy, beneficence, justice, and non-maleficence (Lisa M. Haddad; Robin A. Geiger, August 14, 2023). The idea of autonomy is represented through the ability to say they want to participate or not, as well as giving insight into what their thought is as a whole. The ethical implication of beneficence displayed by feeling an act of doing good for the research component of my thesis study. Justice as an ethical implication was shown through consent and assent giving equal rights to participation into this thesis study. Lastly, the implication of non-maleficence interpreted through the consent and assent developing an understanding that participants will not be harmed when participating in the study.

Researcher Bias

As stated by Pannucci CJ, Wilkins EG (2010), bias is defined as any tendency that which prevents unprejudiced consideration of a question. In research, bias occurs when “systematic error [is] introduced into sampling or testing by selecting or encouraging one outcome or answer over others.” Bias can occur at any phase of research, including study design or data collection, as well as in the process of data analysis and publication (Figure 1). I believe research bias was identified fairly quickly within this qualitative study through approval of the IRB application process. Then when collection of data occurred it led to bias of concluding results of the same outcome for each participant making them feel equal.

CHAPTER IV: Anticipated Results

Three themes emerged from this study, including:

1. Experiencing something new
2. Seeing the difference from their first time to the second time
3. Understanding the meaning of art therapy as a group.

Theme 1. Experiencing something new

These participants experienced how the use of art therapy with how this new experience of art therapy work to assist them in life.

Theme 2: Seeing the difference from their first time to the second time.

From this experience each participant will experience art therapy for the first time resulting in growth and change to better assist them in life.

Theme 3: Understanding the meaning of art therapy as a group.

After explaining and giving an example of art therapy the participants were able to proceed with the study as it was defined.

CHAPTER V: Discussion

The overarching themes that are identified within this study were identified as the participants experiencing transformation from something new, observing growth and change from their first time to the following time and understanding the meaning of art therapy as a group.

Theme 1: The participants experiencing transformation from something new

Theme 2: Observing growth and change from the first experience to their second time of the study

Theme 3: The understanding of the meaning of art therapy as the participants as a group

Limitations

The limitations of this study can be identified as time the study occurred as some of the participants were available at different times of the day. It also lacked diversity because it was of all the same population and education.

Recommendations and Future Studies

I believe variations could occur for this study by working to resolve the limitations that were identified above. For instance, making sure the time was suitable for all participants so that they could complete it at the same time. To fix lack of diversity, the idea of being more diverse with race, gender, economic status, etc. I feel if these defined factors were conducted it would benefit research for the future. I see other populations conducting this study, but altering it if needed to best fit their needs to make for successful outcomes to further research.

Conclusion

After analyzing the results of this study the participants (adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities) benefit from engaging in art therapy for the first time as displayed by the outcome of their completed bridge drawing assessments. I believe this is only the beginning of what the future holds with art therapy and this study is a positive place to start.

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Appendix A

Art Directive

Bridge Drawing Assessment

Reference: Hays, R. & Lyons, S. (1981) The Bridge Drawing: A projective technique for assessment in art therapy. *Arts in Psychotherapy*. (8) pp. 207-217.

Purpose: Bridge Drawing is a projective assessment that may provide insight into a person's functioning, perception of his/her environment as a stable place, and perception of movement or stagnancy.

Ages: No age limit specified.

Materials: 8 ½ X 11 blank, white paper; drawing utensils of choice

Administration: The evaluator hands the client a piece of paper and requests that he or she "Draw a bridge going from some place to some place."

Inquiry:

Ask artist to draw an arrow representing directionality.

Ask the artist to identify his/her location on the bridge with a dot.

Ask the artist to write or speak a few short sentences about the bridge.

Interpretation: Examiner may look for the following indicators.

Directionality: The drawn arrow typically represents left to right travel.

Placement of self: The location of the person may be indicative of how that person is approaching problems/goals.

Places drawn on either side: These places may include named land masses, symbolic connections, and un-named land masses.

Solidness: It is common to see the right side (which may represent the future) depicted as less grounded than the left side (which may represent the past).

Emphasis by elaboration: Certain areas may be given greater emphasis than other areas. Which areas are emphasized?

Construction of bridge: The construction of the bridge may imply the stability and security of the bridge. For instance, what materials were used to build the bridge?

Type of bridge: Most people draw familiar bridges. In some cases, arch bridges represent femininity whereas suspension bridges represent masculinity.

Matter under bridge: What is under the bridge? It is typical to see water. If water is present, is it calm or turbulent?

Vantage point of viewer: If the bridge is seen from above, the person may wish for control. If the bridge is seen from a worm's-eye view, feelings of insecurity/inferiority may be present.

Axis of paper: A horizontal page is more typical. A vertical page may indicate passivity.

Consistency of Gestalt: Are there indications that parts of the picture don't fit? Incongruence is noted.

Written Associations: The evaluator reads or listens to the picture's verbal caption, and asks questions where deemed appropriate.

Strengths: The Bridge drawing does not necessarily take much time to create, and in most cases, can be completed in one session. It is likely to stimulate a conversation about movement or stagnancy, and goals.

Limitations: The Bridge drawing has not been proven to be significantly valid or reliable. It only produces one picture, which does not provide a lot of information to make an accurate evaluation of how the person is functioning.

Reflection: I like the Bridge drawing even though it is not a precise and proven measurement tool. I perceive the Bridge drawing more as an intervention than as an assessment. The interpretation considerations would aid in observation and in processing.

Appendix B

Recruitment Flyer

CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS – QUALITATIVE STUDY ON THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF ART THERAPY

Are you a participant in PARC Center for Disabilities' Art Program and have you experienced art therapy for the first time? If so, I invite you to take part in this research!

Here are the ways in which you can participate:

ART INTERVENTION AND INTERVIEW:

In a 45 minute session (split into two parts over a two week period between August 2023 and August 2024) at PARC Center for Disabilities at 3190 Tyrone Blvd, Saint Petersburg, FL, 33710, co-investigator will guide participants through a Bridge Drawing art assessment and reflection, engaging individuals separate and in a group setting. You will be asked to share your drawings, reflections, and how they relate to your experience of art therapy.

POTENTIAL RISKS: The procedures involved are minimal risk. However, this is a 45 minute session over a two week period can seem like a lot to stay focused for this period of time. You will be encouraged to take breaks when needed or you can take the assessment process slow if needed. The study will not occur during any required activities and will schedule the group during a time when other activities are not occurring. This assessment and sharing of personal can trigger memories and feelings in a good or bad way. Co-investigator will do brief check-ins as well.

COLLABORATION AND BENEFIT: As part of this study, you will be able to meet in a safe space with others who have a shared experience of art therapy. You will contribute knowledge about your experience of art therapy and how it has assisted you with your disabilities. You will receive updates about the study, including the opportunity to specifically check your contributions for accuracy. No identifying information will be included in any published research.

Thank you in advance for your time and effort.

Please forward any inquiries or concerns to Lindsey O'Hara (lindsey.ohara@smwc.edu).

Appendix C: Assent Form

ASSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Title of the Research Study: The lived experience of adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities who engage in art therapy for the first time.

Principal Investigator: Elizabeth Markman, PhD, LCPC, ATR-BC, Saint Mary of the Woods College

Co-investigator: Lindsey O'Hara, BA-AT, MA-AT Candidate, Saint Mary of the Woods College

We are doing a research study about **your lived experience using art therapy**. A research study is an opportunity to learn more about people. If you decide to be a part of this study, you will be asked to complete the bridge drawing assessment to reflect on your experience with art therapy.

There are some things about this study you should know. The entire assessment will take 45 minutes (split in two parts over a two week period) including 30 minutes of drawing time. The remaining 15 minutes will be for reflection and interview process.

Risks or discomforts from this research study may include the possible use of materials such as, sharp instruments which must be noted when collecting and distributing. Examples include, scissors, pens and pencils. There is also the possibility of participants using materials incorrectly.

Not everyone who participates in this study will discover the benefit of art therapy. Some benefits that may be expected from this research study include gaining a better understanding of how art therapy can create change and help you grow as a person.

When this study is complete, the findings will be compiled into a report. Participants in this study will remain confidential.

You do not have to participate in this study, it is voluntary. You can decline participating and withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

If you decide to participate in the study, please give your assent below.

I, _____, am 18 years or older and wish to participate in this research study.

(Print name)

(Signature)

(Date)

Appendix D: Consent Form

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Title of the Research Study: The lived experience of adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities who engage in art therapy for the first time.

Principal Investigator: Elizabeth Markman, PhD, LCPC, ATR-BC, Saint Mary of the Woods College

Co-investigator: Lindsey O'Hara, BA-AT, MA-AT Candidate, Saint Mary of the Woods College

You are being asked to consent to the participation in a research study of a person under your guardianship about **their experience in art therapy**. Key information for you to consider is provided below. Please carefully consider this key information and read this entire form to obtain more detailed information about this research study. Please feel free to ask questions about any of the information before deciding whether to allow your ward to participate in this research project. Participating in this research project is voluntary.

Key Information

- Purpose of the researcher study
: This study is to get an understanding of adults with disabilities lived experience in art therapy for the first time.
- Procedure and Duration
: The participant will be asked to complete the bridge drawing assessment to reflect on their experience with art therapy. The entire session will take 45 minutes, including 30 minutes of drawing time and 15 minutes to reflect.
Risks and discomforts
: Risks or discomforts from this research study include the possible use of materials such as, sharp instruments which must be noted when collecting and distributing. There is also the possibility of participants using materials incorrectly.
- Potential benefits
: Benefits that may be expected from this research study include getting a better understanding of how art therapy has changed and made you grow as a person from this experience.
The participation in this study is voluntary.

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of the research study is to get a better understanding of adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities and how they respond and benefit from their experience of art therapy. The participants are simply being asked to participate because they are clients of PARC .

Procedures

The session(s) will begin with explanation of the study investigated. Then begin by introducing the bridge drawing assessment based on their experience of art therapy and distribute supplies necessary. Participants will then be instructed to start the assessment and notified that they will have 45 minutes to complete within two sessions. Once all participants have finished each will share their complete assessment and reflect on this experience as it relates to art therapy. Last, individually each participant will be interviewed and asked to reflect on their experience of art therapy as it relates to it being their first time.

Risks or Discomforts

Although, the risks are minimal we still have to review it, the possibility of materials such as, sharp instruments must be noted when collecting and distributing. There also is the possibility of participants using materials incorrectly such as, putting the pencil their mouth. A way the researchers minimize the risks or discomforts is by disturbing supplies only when necessary and putting them in a comfortable environment. To manage the discomforts or research-related injury is by taking it slow and easing into it.

Potential Benefits

Potential benefits include, seeing change and growth in a positive way, feeling a sense of accomplishment and having fun while doing it.

Confidentiality

To maintain confidentiality data will only be shared between the principal investigator, co-investigator and the review board.

Any of your information that can directly identify you will be stored separately from the data that will be maintained for a period of three years in a password-protected electronic storage [or in a locked box].

Compensation/Costs

N/A

Voluntary Participation

It is entirely voluntary for your protected person (ward) participate in this research study. You can refuse their participation in the study by not signing the consent form. You or your protected person can withdraw from the study at any time without penalty by contacting the co-investigator, Lindsey O'Hara, at phone: (941)504-7861 or email: lindsey.ohara@smwc.edu even if you decide to be a part of the study now.

Use of Data for Future Study

Data that does not contain information directly identifying your protected person (ward) could be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies without additional informed consent or the information collected as part of the research will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

If you have questions about this research study, please contact the principal investigator or co-investigator.

Principal Investigator

Elizabeth Markman, MPS, ATR-BC, LPCC, Ph.D. Candidate, Saint Mary of the Woods College

Contact information: email- Elizabeth. Markman @smwc.edu

Co-investigator

Lindsey O'Hara, BA-AT, MA-AT Candidate, Saint Mary of the Woods College

Contact information: email- Lindsey.OHara@smwc.edu

This study was approved by the Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College Human Subjects Institutional Review Board on _____. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board.

Chair, IRB

Dr. Lambrini Pantazi, Chair, Human Subjects Institutional Review Board

Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College
Saint Mary of the Woods, IN 47876

(812) 535-5232

lpantazi@smwc.edu

My signature below indicates that I give consent for _____ to participate, I have been informed about this study, and I have received a copy of this consent form.

Signature

Date

My relationship to participant _____

Appendix E: Media Consent Form

Media Consent Form**CONSENT TO PHOTOGRAPH ARTWORK & AUDIOTAPED TEXTUAL DATA**

Thank you for your participation in this research project. As part of this project, you may choose to be photographed, videotaped, and/or audiotaped and also invited to make art. Please indicate below the use of the media to which you are willing to consent by initialing to indicate “yes” to each item, based on your comfort level. You will not be penalized for refusing to be photographed and/or audiotaped or to have your personal artwork published.

The results of this study may be presented in educational settings, scientific journals, popular press or newspapers, professional conferences, or social media. The researchers agree to only use the materials in ways to which you agree.

Only aggregated data and pseudonyms will be used in presenting this research.

Please initial your approval.

I give my approval to be videotaped during the art intervention and reflection. Yes: _____ No: _____

I give my approval to be audiotaped during the art intervention and reflection. Yes: _____ No: _____

I give approval for my spoken contributions within the research to be recorded and transcribed.

I understand that I will be given the opportunity to review transcribed text for accuracy and intent before the research is finalized (member-checking). Yes: _____ No: _____

I give approval for my artwork to be photographed and published. Yes: _____ No: _____

I understand that I can withdraw my permission to be photographed and/or audiotaped, and for my artwork to be photographed, at any time without prejudice and with no explanation required.

I have read the above and give my consent for the use of the photograph/ audiotape as indicated. I certify that I am eighteen (18) years of age or older and that I have been given a copy of this form for my own records.

Signature _____

Date _____

Witness _____

Date _____