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Systematic analysis of art therapy research published in *Art Therapy: Journal of AATA* between 1987 and 2004[☆]

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Abstract

This paper presents a systematic analysis of methodologies used in research published in *Art Therapy: Journal of AATA* between the years 1987 and 2004. The context of epistemological paradigm shifts affecting research in general and art therapy research in particular is examined. Quantitative inquiry supports hypotheses that the number of publications has continued to grow over the years and that author demographics differ from general demographic of art therapists. A qualitative analysis identified eight methods common to art therapy research: clinical case studies, self studies, survey research, interviews, art therapy tests, historiography/anthropological research, behavioral observations, and exploration of clients' artworks. Thematic exploration of each method and integration of findings suggest indicators of methods' maturation and shifts in how and when methods are utilized, field-specific challenges, and emergence of art therapy research norms.

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Art therapists, as ambassadors of a relatively new field, are frequently confronted with a question most mental health professionals no longer face: But what exactly is art therapy? Indeed, not an easy question to answer; art therapy is an interdisciplinary, unique field. It combines artistic, scientific, mental health, and educational components but does not seem to fit completely into any single mould. Art therapy research endeavors might reflect this evolving identity and promote development accordingly. This article, therefore, presents a systematic analysis of research published in the American Art Therapy Association (AATA) journal over a decade and a half in an attempt to identify what art therapy research brings to the field within the context of general research debate and what image of art therapy is reflected through such research.

First, theoretical underpinnings of research methodology and general developments in research perceptions are explored through presenting (1) the broader context of epistemological paradigms underlying the theories of valued knowledge, (2) current conceptual methodology debates within the social sciences, and (3) an overview of research dialogue within the art therapy field.

Next, the methodology used for examining art therapy research over the years is brought forth. The systematic analysis utilizes mixed methodology with the assumption that quantitative or qualitative methods are complimentary and their combination offers more comprehensive findings possible than through the limited scope of either form of inquiry alone. Findings regarding art therapy research trends then lead a discussion of possible implications for the field's advancement endeavors.

[☆] This paper is based on my work as Prof. Linesch's research assistant at Loyola Marymount University and my final research project.

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Epistemological paradigms and conceptual debates

Kuhn (1970) describes the way in which scientific thinking has changed throughout the ages as determined by shifts in paradigms. The term *paradigm* seems to have several meanings, based on a broad definition culminating “the entire collection of beliefs, values, and techniques shared by members of a given community” (Kuhn, 1970, p. 175). Thus, scientific method could be understood as a technique as well as a manifestation of values and beliefs. As Sprung and Sprung (1996) state, “it is in the area of application and development of new methods that the goals and the requirements of a society set upon a science. To that extent methods indicate the stage of historical development of a science” (p. 138).

Current debate about scientific inquiry tends to focus on two paradigms—modernism and postmodernism. Often, these terms are used interchangeably with others. Modernistic inquiry, for example, is frequently termed “positivist,” “traditional,” “quantitative,” or “mainstream” research, or simply regarded as synonymous with “scientific.” Postmodern inquiry is frequently interchanged with “constructionist,” “post-positivist,” “phenomenological,” “qualitative,” or “humanistic” inquiry (McGuire, 1983; O’Neill, 2002).

Postmodernism proposes that all knowledge is socially constructed, based on language, and immersed in specific contexts. Therefore, it is impossible to gain objective knowledge, understanding all concepts as relative, including “reality,” “truth,” and “scientific proof” (Smith, 2001). From a relativistic standpoint, these concepts are meaningful only as part of their cultural scientific community. These are core disagreements with modern science, which assumes objectivity and the existence of a knowledgeable truth, attainable through hypothesis testing (Smith, 2001).

While many researchers believe that moderate positions of postmodernism could be taken into account and support the development of science, others view them as a real threat for scientific inquiry and its achievements thus far (Smith, 2001).

Shifting paradigms within the social sciences

Many researchers and theoreticians (Lykes & Stewart, 1986; Rennie, Watson, & Monteiro, 2002; Rogers, 2000) claim social science’s methodology has been strongly affected by re-examination of what constitutes *science* and *knowledge*. The use of methodologies within the social science, and specifically the distinction between quantitative and qualitative methods, correspond with the discussion of modern and post-modern paradigms (O’Neill, 2002). For example, Creswell (1994) emphasizes that the implications of methodological choices go far beyond practical considerations and directly relate to researchers’ philosophical stance. Methodology choices thus indicate philosophy of research, goals, and perception of knowledge deemed desirable or relevant to the social sciences (Rennie et al., 2002).

Psychological research is often seen as spearheading social science’s research agenda (Rogers, 2000), and often determines what is considered “legitimate” or “worthy” inquiry for mental health (Lykes & Stewart, 1986). Since art therapy is frequently perceived as a modality of mental health, the standards set by psychological research might be especially pertinent to its advancement (Kaplan, 1998).

Proponents of advancing qualitative psychological inquiry suggest it as a way of making psychological research more personal and contextual, and more coherent with feminist criticism of mainstream scientific establishments (Rogers, 2000; Smith, 2001). These goals of qualitative inquiry, sometimes called “Big Q research” (O’Neill, 2002), differ from typical mainstream research goals that aim at objective findings that can be generalized to different people, times, and places.

Rogers (2000) and Lykes and Stewart (1986) refer to opponents of qualitative inquiry as “gate keepers” who are preserving the present power structure through giving legitimacy to traditional, quantitative research, while dismissing other types of knowledge and meaning.

Opposite claims are heard from mainstream quantitative researchers arguing that their achievements should be assessed in light of the intended goals, rather than having findings scrutinized for not presenting aspects they were not intended for (Smith, 2001). Mainstream researchers also express worries that qualitative methods undermine valuable achievements available through traditional inquiry due to postmodern opposition to such concepts as “truth,” “validity,” “reliability,” “proof,” and “causality” (Haig, 2002).

Currently the majority of researchers and institutions seem to hold quantitative methods as more valid and legitimate; most research that is undertaken and published is based on traditional quantitative practices (Lykes & Stewart, 1986).

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