

Exploring and sharing arts therapy experiences through fiction-based research

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Abstract

Fiction-based research (Leavy, 2013), blended with autoethnographic a/r/tography and arts therapy, has potential to provide arts-based ways to create useful arts therapy session descriptions in contexts where it is unethical to reference recognisable clients. This paper grounds this idea in theory alongside examples from my PhD research journey, during which I used expressive and reflexive processes, including creative writing, to pull apart and re-configure true-to-life moments, processes, successes and challenges I faced as quake-arts therapist. Having found this me-search approach illuminating, I offer other arts therapists insight into this emergent practice both as a way of coming-to-know and of sharing our work.

Keywords

Arts-based research, autoethnography, a/r/tography, fiction-based research, arts therapy.

Introduction

“We need to tell our stories more” writes a/r/tographic researcher Carl Leggo (2008), as “the stories we write and tell about our living experiences will teach us how to live with more creativity, confidence, flexibility, coherence, imagination, and truthfulness” (p.21). As arts therapists, however, our professional stories often intertwine with the life stories spoken, painted and sculpted, enacted and danced by our clients within the confidential containment of the therapeutic space – a dilemma that became figural when, in 2013, I began a PhD exploring my experiences as quake-arts therapist in Christchurch.¹ My earthquake-battered clients did not come to me as research subjects, yet their creative journeys are inextricable from my tale of coming-into-being as beginning arts therapist. During my arts-based inquiry, I thus found myself blurring fact and fiction within composite client stories in my attempts to honour the ethical boundaries of confidentiality while simultaneously plumbing these lived experiences to gain deeper

understanding of my therapeutic practice. This process proved personally illuminating and I believe other arts therapists may benefit from this emergent practice – both as a way of coming-to-know and of sharing our work.

Rather than present a ready made formula, this paper intends to open conversations about the potential value of fiction-based research (Leavy, 2013) to arts therapy and therapists. To this end, I begin with an example. I then ground my use of ‘factual fiction’ within my quake/research context and core ideas about arts-based research (ABR), autoethnography, a/r/tography, and fiction-based research, before teasing apart my use of arts therapeutic processes as research. Finally, I conclude with a piece of ‘factional’ writing to demonstrate how this process may produce provocative session vignettes.

Example 1: Finding heART

As my work deepened with those enmeshed in the distressing liminality evoked by the earthquakes and their enduring aftermath,