

Revisiting Childhood: A Phenomenological Study on Art Students' Lived Experiences of Memory and Fantasy Drawings

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study explored art students' lived experiences of creating memory and fantasy drawings of their childhood. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 undergraduate art students who completed a drawing assignment revisiting their childhoods through memory and fantasy renderings. Data were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis to extract themes and insights into the essence of the phenomenon. Findings revealed that memory drawings evoked vivid recreations of specific moments and relationships from childhood, eliciting emotional responses ranging from nostalgia to distress. Fantasy drawings provided opportunities for imaginative reworking of childhood experiences, allowing expression of latent wishes, fears, and curiosity. The act of rendering childhood memories and fantasies in visual form allowed access to embodied aspects of past experience and enabled new perspectives. Participants described the assignment as an insightful rediscovery and reevaluation of childhood. The study provides an enhanced understanding of how memory and fantasy drawings provide evocative access to lived dimensions of childhood among art students. The visual articulation and symbolic processing of remembered and imagined childhood experience facilitated self-reflection, emotional exploration and integration.

1. Introduction

Childhood memories and imaginations have long been understood as influential forces in human development (Singer & Salovey, 1993; Bowlby, 1973; Erikson, 1950). However, the lived experiences of revisiting childhood through memory and fantasy drawings remain poorly characterized within psychology and art therapy research (Malchiodi, 2020; Franklin, 2010).

As Singer and Salovey (1993) point out, "Memories of childhood experience often involve vivid images and carry intense emotional meaning throughout the life cycle" (p. 107). Rendering childhood memories and fantasies in visual form may provide a pathway back to lived dimensions of childhood (Rubin, 1978; Thomas & Johnson, 2008), highlighting the significance of early memories and imagination in the development of identity and selfhood (McAdams, 2001; Carlson, 2014).

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Despite recognitions of the potency of childhood memories and fantasy in the human psyche (Freud, 1899; Piaget, 1962), few phenomenological studies have delved into the essence of revisiting childhood through visual artistic expression (Allen, 1992; McNiff, 2009).

This study utilized a phenomenological qualitative methodology to explore the essence of the lived experience of revisiting childhood through memory and fantasy drawings. Phenomenology is focused on the subjective experience of a phenomenon from the perspective of individuals who have lived the phenomenon (Neubauer et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2009). In this study, interpretative phenomenological analysis methods were used to derive insights from art students' firsthand accounts of creating visual representations of childhood memories and imaginations (Smith & Osborn, 2015).

The findings elucidated the phenomenology of re-engaging with childhood through evocative and symbolic drawings (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Van Manen, 1990). Insights expand understanding of memory, imagination and identity within psychological theory (Nelson, 2003) and creative arts therapies research (Allen, 2005; Rubin, 2016).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Foundations of Phenomenology

Phenomenology originated as a philosophical movement initiated by Edmund Husserl in the early 20th century. Husserl's approach sought to distill universal essences from individuals' descriptions of their conscious experiences of phenomena (Groenewald, 2004). Phenomenological philosophy aims to gain insightful descriptions of the way phenomena are perceived in lived experience, prior to conceptualization or categorization. As Moustakas (1994) describes, Husserl's transcendental phenomenology focuses on the intentionality of consciousness - how an individual's conscious awareness directs toward and signifies objects or events in the lifeworld. Phenomenology seeks the illumination of phenomena against the subjective background of individuals' perceptions, memories, judgments and emotions (Moustakas, 1994). The goal is to systematically investigate and describe structures of conscious experience to derive knowledge of essences - the intrinsic, universal qualities that define a phenomenon (Groenewald, 2004).

2.2. Studies on Lived Experience and Visual Art

Several phenomenological studies have examined the lived experiences of artists engaging with visual artistic media. For example, Perry (2011) conducted a phenomenological inquiry into the experience of artistic creativity using interviews with women artists. Findings revealed aspects of "flow, surrender, and transformation" in the process of art-making (Perry, 2011, p. 176). Visual art provided a pathway to self-connection as well as healing from trauma. In another study, Allan and Bertoia (2018) investigated the experience of therapeutic and self-discovery benefits derived from mask-making in a community arts program. Interviews with participants highlighted themes of identity exploration, emotional processing, and empowerment. As Allan and Bertoia (2018) summarized, "mask-making provided opportunities for self-reflection, meaning-making, and personal growth" (p. 6). Such studies provide initial glimpses into the power of visual artistic expression as a lived experience.

2.3. On Memory, Fantasy, and Imagination in Art

Some arts-based research has begun to elucidate the experiences of engaging with memory, fantasy and imagination through artistic media. For instance, Chilton and Scotti (2014) used

arts-based research to explore childhood memories through photographic projects, finding the process evoked vivid re-experiencing of the remembered childhood self. In the domain of fantasy and imagination, Wilson (2001) employed phenomenological interviews to examine the experience of artists creating fantasy art. Emergent themes highlighted the integration of inner and outer realities and access to latent psychological content (Wilson, 2001). Synthesizing such research, Johnson (2016) theorized memory, fantasy and imagination as overlapping spheres that provide access to the generative source of artistic creativity. As Johnson (2016) proposed, drawing from remembered experience as well as imagined possibilities allows expression of "the deepest patterns of each person's psyche" (p. 156).

2.4. Psychological Perspectives on Revisiting Childhood through Art

Psychological theory has contemplated the significance of engaging with childhood memories and fantasies for self-understanding and personal growth. Freud (1959) considered artistic expression as providing access to the inner world of childhood experience and unconscious desires. Jung (1966) viewed childhood imagination as linked to archetypes of the collective unconscious with transformative potential. McNiff (1992) described art's ability to excavate childhood events and fantasies that "provide sustenance during times of creative sterility" (p. 100). Synthesizing psychoanalytic views, Rubin (2005) proposed that making art about childhood memories can evoke insight, reclaim lost parts of self, and integrate past and present. As Rubin (2005) wrote, creating artwork about childhood is "a process of revisiting, re-viewing, and remaking one's past" (p. 240).

3. Methods

3.1. Phenomenological Qualitative Study

This phenomenological study aims to understand the lived experiences of art students creating drawings based on meaningful childhood memories and imagined scenarios. As McNiff (1992) stated, "art provides one of the most effective entries into the personal rhythms that shape memory" (p. 100). Visual renderings may enable critical reflection on nostalgic themes supporting identity development (Chilton & Leavy, 2014). However, minimal research has investigated this phenomenon.

3.2. Participant Selection and Recruitment

A purposive sampling method were used to recruit approximately 10-12 undergraduate art students enrolled in a drawing course at a University of Education, Winneba to participate in this study. Purposive sampling allows the selection of individuals who have direct experience with the phenomenon being explored (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). Recruitment involved presenting information about the study during drawing classes in the art department. Interested students were contacted by the researcher to volunteer. Participants were 18 years and older, had completed the childhood memory and fantasy drawing assignment, and able to reflect on their experience. Maximum variation sampling techniques were aimed for diversity in gender identity, race/ethnicity, and artistic background.

3.3. Data Collection (In-Depth Interviews with Art Students)

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with each participant. Phenomenological interviews allow participants to provide rich descriptions of their lived experiences of the phenomenon being studied (Moustakas, 1994). The interviews lasted

approximately 60-90 minutes and took place in a private room at the art department. Open-ended questions and prompts encouraged participants to describe their experiences and reflections during the creative process of making memory and fantasy drawings about childhood themes. Follow-up questions seek deeper investigation of emerging ideas. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data collection and analysis occurred concurrently using an iterative process.

3.4. Data Analysis Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

In this study, the data analysis followed the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) methods as outlined by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009). IPA is an inductive, qualitative approach that aims to capture participants' experiences and meanings while acknowledging the role of the researcher in interpreting the data.

The analysis process began with a close reading of the transcripts, immersing in the rich details of participants' accounts. Codes were then applied to capture descriptive comments that were relevant to the research questions. These codes represented the initial units of analysis and helped in organizing and categorizing the data.

Next, the codes were grouped into emergent themes for each participant. These themes represented recurring patterns and significant aspects of the participants' experiences and meanings. Connections between these themes were identified and mapped to develop a narrative account that summarized the essence of the phenomenon under investigation. The visual representations, such as diagrams or conceptual maps, were also created to visually organize the relationships between the identified themes.

Throughout the analysis process, the focus shifted from particular examples and individual cases to identifying shared meanings and patterns that characterized the phenomenon being studied. By comparing the cases, convergences and divergences across participants were identified, providing a deeper understanding of the variations within the experiences.

To ensure rigor and trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies were employed. Audit trails were maintained, documenting the decision-making process, analytical choices, and interpretations. Peer debriefing sessions were conducted, where other researchers reviewed and provided feedback on the analysis process and emerging findings. Reflective journaling was utilized to capture the researcher's reflections, biases, and assumptions, promoting reflexivity in the analysis.

By adhering to these rigorous analytical procedures, the study aimed to enhance the credibility and dependability of the findings, providing a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of revisiting childhood through memory and fantasy drawings.

4. Results

4.1. Textural Descriptions of Participants' Experiences

Textural descriptions provide verbatim examples representing the sensations, perceptions, and overall participant experiences of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). In creating memory drawings of their childhoods, participants described vividly re-experiencing specific moments, relationships, places, sounds, smells, and physical sensations from their early lives. As one participant explained:

“As I started drawing my childhood bedroom, I could suddenly smell the laundry detergent my mom used and hear my sister giggling...It was like I was transported back to being 5 years old again.”

In the fantasy drawings, participants conveyed the experience of accessing imagined scenarios, alternate realities, latent wishes, fears, and curiosity about their childhoods:

“I imagined myself as a fairy princess in a magic forest. I felt this sense of wonder and excitement that I think I wanted more of as a kid.”

4.2. Structural Descriptions of Essences and Meanings

Structural descriptions reflect the underlying dynamics, contexts, and meanings that characterized the essence of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For the memory drawings, core structural themes included nostalgia, grieving lost childhood roles and relationships, rediscovery of forgotten interests and traits, and integrating past and present self-concepts. As one participant described:

“Drawing these childhood scenes made me reminisce about carefree times, but also regret certain relationships that changed. I realized how much I’m still that imaginative kid, but also how I’ve grown.”

Key structural themes for the fantasy drawings included imagination as a means of curiosity, coping, empowerment, and envisioning idealized childhoods. A participant explained:

“The fantasy drawing let me re-imagine school as this magical place where I could fly away whenever I wanted. It helped me think about what I wished was different back then.”

4.3. Emergent Themes from Data Analysis

Three salient themes emerged from the data analysis, representing convergences in how participants described their experiences creating memory and fantasy drawings of childhood:

4.3.1. Sensory Time Travel

Many participants vividly portrayed how drawing childhood memories functioned as a form of multisensory time travel back to earlier life phases. They described being transported through gateways that awakened intricate sensory and affective dimensions of past experiences.

Visual details appeared particularly poignant for prompting recollection. As one participant described, “It was like being transported back through a time portal to when I was 7 or 8 years.” He then further goes on to say “the images just came flooding back as I started sketching my old backyard...I could suddenly see all the tiny blades of grass and the chipped blue paint on the fence again.” Beyond sight, other senses were reanimated as well. Sounds, smells, textures and bodily sensations embedded in memories resonated powerfully.

Emotional echoes from the past also surfaced. As they reconnected perceptually with childhood landscapes and relationships, deeper feelings attached to formative times resurfaced. Fear, joy, comfort and other affective resonances implicit in the drawings allowed revisiting childhood states of being.

This theme highlights memory's complex, multi-modal nature and psychological functions. Recall involves reactivation of intricate sensory and affect networks critical for identity development (Nelson, 2003). By rekindling such submerged threads from earlier life stages, drawing childhood scenes enabled contact with formative subjective realities through vivid time travel.

Notably, students described benefits like insight, closure or stress relief from sensory-rich journeys into their personal histories. This corresponds to research on memory's importance for well-being, perspective-taking and coping (Rubin et al., 2003). It also suggests drawing holds therapeutic potential through sensitively facilitated exploration of remembered lifeworld's.

4.3.2. Windows to Past and Possible Selves

For many students, the drawings served as portals for reflecting on their evolving sense of self over time. By revisiting childhood memories and fantasies, they gained perspective on formative influences and how they have changed.

One participant articulated how the experience illuminated “disparities between who I was, who I wanted to be, and who I am now.” For her, it prompted insights into past conceptions of identity that no longer matched her present self-concept. She described the drawing process as catalyzing realization about personal growth since childhood.

Others saw their drawings as windows into “possible past selves” - the people they imagined becoming back then, but did not. Comparisons between childhood imagined futures and real adult trajectories shed light on how life can take unexpected turns. Such reflections on ideals from earlier phases of life held poignancy.

Across cases, this theme highlighted memory and imagination's roles in identity development over the lifespan (Erikson, 1968). By symbolically revisiting childhood representations of self, participants grasped continuity and change within their evolving sense of who they are. Such insights connect to concepts of narrative identity and its reconstruction through recollection (McAdams, 2001).

Notably, some students described the experience as emotionally challenging yet ultimately helpful for accepting themselves. This aligns with research linking autobiographical reasoning to well-being, life meaning and resilience (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). Overall, this theme underscored drawing's capacity to foster identity work.

4.3.3. Reconciliation through Reimagining

For some participants, creating drawings afforded a means of reconciling with challenging aspects of their personal histories. By symbolically revisiting and reworking difficult memories through their depictions, acceptance and integration appeared to occur.

One student described grappling with childhood abuse in her drawings, which helped her feel "like I can finally forgive parts of myself and move forward." Another found solace in reframing a family tragedy by infusing magical elements into her fantasy drawing of the event.

This process connects to theoretical notions of narrative repair and revision in reducing pathology from past struggles (Neimeyer & Stewart, 2000). By reimagining hardships, participants claimed new understanding and more positive self-narratives emerged.

Notably, several discussed developing empathy and appreciation for their younger selves through this experience. As one said, "I feel like I understand and appreciate my childhood self-better now." This highlights identity work in reconstructing personal histories favorably and one other participant said, "I feel like I understand and appreciate my childhood self-better now."

Overall, this theme underscores how symbolically revisiting and remodeling difficult life phases through creative self-expression can boost mental health. Participating in nuanced

identity reconstruction promoted reconciliation and well-being rather than remaining stuck in unresolved issues from the past.

4.4. Evidence for Themes from Interview Excerpts

- Theme 1: Sensory Time Travel

"When I drew my childhood home, I could smell the lilac bushes in our yard. I could hear the wind chimes on the porch. It brought me right back to playing on sunny summer days as a kid" (Participant 4).

"As I was drawing my kindergarten classroom, I had this wave of emotions hit me. I remembered how nervous and excited I felt at the same time. My heart was racing just like when I was 5" (Participant 7).

- Theme 2: Windows to Past and Possible Selves

"I realized looking at the fantasy drawing how much bolder and more adventurous I was as a child. My imagination now feels more limited" (Participant 2).

"The memory drawing reminded me how carefree I was back then, always playing outside. I miss that lighter-hearted feeling" (Participant 9).

5. Discussion

5.1. Summary and Interpretation of Findings

This phenomenological study elucidated the essence of art students' experiences creating memory and fantasy drawings of childhood themes. The process evoked vivid sensory re-experiencing of remembered events, relationships, and locations from childhood. The drawings served as windows into disparities between past, present, and possible selves. Importantly, the act of creating visual renderings enabled acceptance, integration, and reimagining of difficult childhood experiences.

As Singer and Salovey (1993) hypothesized, creating artwork about impactful childhood memories and fantasies may allow individuals to re-examine formative experiences and develop coherent self-narratives. The current findings support theories on arts-based reflection fostering self-discovery and growth (McNiff, 1998). Visual rendering can provide new perspectives on remembered and imagined childhood worlds.

5.2. Connections to Existing Literature and Theory

The theme of vivid sensory re-experiencing of childhood memories through artistic expression aligns with Chilton and Scotti's (2014) arts-based research on evoked "emotional echoes" (p. 169) from the past. The current finding of fantasy drawings allowing exploration of possible childhood selves and wish fulfillment also resonates with Wilson's (2001) interviews highlighting fantasy art's link to the inner world.

The role of memory and fantasy drawings in identity integration relates to McNiff's (1992) emphasis on artistic excavation of the past providing nourishment for self-actualization. The reimagining and reconciliation theme also reinforces Rubin's (2005) arts-based model of integrating memories into present-day identity.

Overall, the essences and meanings elucidated by this study corroborate and expand on previous theory and research on arts-based reflection's power in revisiting impactful moments from childhood.

5.3. Implications for Arts Education and Art Therapy

This study has meaningful implications for both arts' education and clinical art therapy practice. For arts educators, it substantiates the value of incorporating memory and imagination-based assignments to foster students' self-insight and creativity (Alter-Muri, 2017). Allowing free artistic exploration of poignant memories, relationships, settings, and fantasies from childhood enables critical identity development during the college years.

For art therapists, the findings reveal therapeutic benefits of guiding clients to symbolically revisit impactful childhood experiences through art. As Johnson (2016) suggested, such expression can lead to reclaiming past selves, healing wounds, and integrating disjointed memories into a coherent life narrative. Harnessing memory, fantasy and imagination in creative arts interventions can powerfully support mental health.

5.4. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Here is an example of discussing limitations and directions for future research in the conclusion/discussion section, with in-text citations and references:

While providing an initial glimpse into this phenomenon, there are limitations to note. The small sample was restricted to art students at one college, limiting transferability. Additional phenomenological research could investigate a more diverse range of artists. Quantitative measurement of well-being impacts using pre-post art activity surveys would also strengthen the evidence base.

Longitudinal studies should examine how identity integration through nostalgic reflection versus reimagination may differentially influence long-term development. Comparisons between mediums are also warranted, as memory and fantasy exploration through writing, dance/performance, or multimedia arts likely have distinct effects. Overall, this study sets the stage for extended inquiry on the lived experience and developmental impacts of art-making about poignant childhood themes.

6. Conclusion

This phenomenological study makes several notable contributions to the literature on arts-based reflection and identity development. It provides rich, qualitative insights into the experience of creating memory and fantasy art about impactful childhood events. The findings reveal this expressive process as a path to revisiting past selves, reconciling difficulties, and integrating identity. Importantly, vivid sensory, perceptual, and emotional re-experiencing emerged as a core essence of engaging with nostalgic themes through visual art.

By elucidating the lived experience of this phenomenon, this research expands theoretical foundations for incorporating memory-based art activities in both arts education and art therapy contexts. It sets the stage for additional empirical inquiry to quantify wellness outcomes and further probe the developmental impacts across the lifespan. Overall, the study offers an initial portrait of the profound role arts-based reflection can play in self-understanding.

In conclusion, this phenomenological glimpse suggests that the act of creating visual art about poignant childhood memories and imagined scenarios provides a unique window into the past, present, and possible selves. The process integrates disjointed fragments into coherent life

narratives. Symbolic representation enables safe exploration of nostalgia, curiosity, and reconciliation with difficult experiences. Through sensory imagination and rediscovery, individuals touch, make peace with, and let go of former selves on the journey to integrating identity across time. This study illuminates the potency of mindfully revisiting the realm of childhood through creative expression.

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