



A narrative inquiry into a mother–child art therapy experience: A self-exploration of the therapist and the mother



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ABSTRACT

The experiences of a mother and her 10-year-old son who experienced a strained relationship were explored through art therapy. The experiences of the parent, her child, and the researcher within art therapy were documented as artworks, interviews, on-site memos, and a verbatim account of the process with interpretation focusing on their social meaning. Over the course of the therapy, the mother realized that she not only physically punished her child unwittingly but also found child-rearing to be difficult, experiencing guilt and anxiety. She could better understand her inner self, her thoughts and her experiences, through art therapy. The child described the mother as scary. The child described wanting to be alone because the mother seemed unable to attempt to understand the child's world. In later sessions, the mother realized that she might benefit from accepting her child as he was rather than changing him. Finally, through self-exploration, the mother realized that that her efforts to understand her child could influence his growth. The art therapy program involved the following aspects: First, the art therapy used a form of expression for exploring feelings. Second, art therapy helped resolve suppressed inner conflicts, providing a form of self-understanding to the client. Third, the fear of exposing oneself was reduced by the process of drawing. Fourth, self-reflection occurred through art engagement. Finally, the researcher explored the participants' experiences through deep self-reflection, which enabled her to provide the participants with opportunities to understand their life experiences in a more integrated way.

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Introduction: a journey in search of myself

My story

I wanted to be a strong mother, unlike mine, for my child to rely on for mental support. I became pregnant three years after marriage. However, I felt more worried than happy, asking myself if I could raise my child well. During my pregnancy, I frequently vouched that “I will never get you into any trouble,” while stroking my swelling belly. I wanted to raise my child better than anyone else had.

As my first child was smaller and had more difficulty talking, he seemed to be less competent than his peers. After taking my child to school, I would usually worry about him at home and become

anxious. What if his peers bullied him and what if his teachers scolded him? I tried to accompany my child everywhere and made him the focus of all my attention due to these worries. I thought that this would make my child happier inside out. By doing so, I could protect him from the dangers of the world.

However, when my child used say, “I don’t want to go to school,” “I don’t want to go to hakwon [Korean private academy],” or “I hate to study,” I realized that he did not want to do so because I made these decisions for him. I was now aware that I was not caring for my child as required. I did not know how to teach and love him. Oftentimes, I felt confused and guilty, without understanding the reasons. I realized that perhaps I was responsible for this strained relationship with my child. I studied psychotherapy in an attempt to understand this puzzling experience. In particular, I wanted further insight into the relationship between a mother and her child.

Research purpose and question

Recently, some quantitative studies have examined methods of improving mother–child interactions and reducing child-rearing stress in mother–child pairs through parental education based

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on art therapy (Hwang, 2006; Jo, 2013; Kim, 2009; Ku, 2008; Song, 2011). However, these studies did not provide an in-depth understanding of the mother–child relationship. The present study explores the experience of art therapy not only with a child but also with a mother. This therapy process enables them to share their opinions for better mutual understanding. This involves exploring feelings at a deeper level, that is, emotional changes during counseling in terms of the child's thoughts and feelings and the mother's attitudes toward child-rearing and her own life. This task required a good understanding of the mother and the child, and in turn their experiences.

Over the course of the mother–child art therapy activities, a narrative inquiry into the relationships of the mother with her family members was made, as well as her understanding of her child. A narrative inquiry allows the participant to relate one's life on a constant basis, which naturally leads one to live, retell, and relive it, therefore creating some meaning out of one's own experiential storytelling. This approach can reveal the totality of life experienced in the continuity of time, including the past, present, and future, and aims to understand one's own experience and create meaning (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In other words, people use stories with a concrete spatial–temporal situation to relate their experiences to others. More specifically, a told story is constructed of elements such as a narrator, characters, time, space, events, and listeners. If an experience fails to shape a story, it remains a piece of memory and cannot be ascribed meaning (Kim, 2006).

This study examines the relationships of self-exploration experiences during the course of the mother–child art therapy program for the mother. In terms of experiential meaning, it illustrates how the mother's self-understanding shapes her perception of appropriate child-rearing behavior. Accordingly, I attempted to answer the following research questions in this study: first, what does the mother narrate concerning her life? Second, how does the mother shape her meaning of child-rearing? Third, what meaning does the mother ascribe to herself? Fourth, what meaning does the researcher (as an art therapist) give to the researcher's own life?

Research methods

Positioning of narrative inquiry

Human beings improve and change their lives based on their own experiences. They integrate their differentiated selves into the narration process in a communicative manner in terms of their selves, worlds, and their past, present, and future (Park, Shin, Shin, Jang, & Park, 2013). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state that individuals live and shape the meaning of their lives through the narratives of telling and living. Through art therapy for treating a child's maladaptive behavior, this study shows how a mother's experiences during childhood shape her present life; how she understood herself to live her present and future lives as she interacted with her child through art therapy activities; how she shaped meanings, values, and purposes for herself in relation to her child over the course of the therapy; how I helped her grow and change to face her past, present, and future, reinterpret herself, and lead a healthy life.

A three-dimensional (3D) narrative inquiry space is adopted for this study. The 3D narrative space refers to personal and social interactions, the continuity of time (which contains the past, the present, and the future), and a concrete situation with experience being related in a life-shaping storyline (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Yeom, 2003). To understand the mother's and the child's experiences, I, as the researcher, considered spatial and temporal interactions through mother–child art therapy sessions to reshape their stories during the data creation process. I helped the mother

narrate her experiences and interactions with family members in a 3D narrative space and establish her self-identity to further understand how she continued to shape her life through narrative inquiry.

Before starting the study, I asked myself certain questions about the participants, including “Did the mother's wrong child-rearing behavior cause her child to engage in a maladaptive behavior?” and “What did the participants experience through art therapy activities and what did those experiences mean to them?” I tried setting aside my prejudices by reviewing my own experiences in light of the participants'. After intensive reflection in a 3D narrative inquiry space, I began the study by narrating my own experiences.

First, I met Seong-min, a 10-year-old boy studying in third grade. He had a younger brother, aged eight. He was an overweight child with firm features and a playful face in glasses. He often described himself as “ugly,” reporting that his mother scolded him often for biting his nails. He was a highly inquisitive boy, who often tried to attract others' attention by picking his nose, farting, or belching. He preferred staying indoors playing games on his mobile phone and personal computer over playing with his peers.

In the middle of the study, Seong-min's mother joined the session. She was 170 cm tall and looked ordinary at first glance. She once suffered a miscarriage and felt anxious about getting married. While pregnant with Seong-min's brother, she became nervous due to morning sickness and sometimes punished Seong-min emotionally. She usually forced her children to give in and asked them, “Why don't you do this?” She was often quick to anger and depression, but she never revealed her disposition or emotions to others.

In this study, the art therapy involved a mother–child pair to counsel the child's maladaptive behavior in order to better understand herself and her child. This enabled them to express themselves positively and discover their true selves.

I documented the participants' perspectives through artwork making, autobiographical writing, journal keeping, interviews, field observation, and conversations. I also recorded my own thoughts, perceptions, and emotions, as well as developed field text through 23 sessions of art therapy activities (90 min a session) over an eight-month period from February to September 2013.

The research text comprised my research journals recording words frequently used by the participants, as well as their conversations, relationships, feelings, facial expressions, and gestures based on the artworks they created, interviews, and conversations. To ensure the credibility of my descriptions, I corresponded with my professors through personal discussions, e-mail messages, and telephone calls to guide and evaluate my qualitative research since February 2013. This ensured the credibility of my field texts, thus eliminating any misinterpretations.

For ethical reasons, I provided participants with information on research goals, methods, and uses in both oral and written forms before in-depth interviews for their informed consent. I asked for their permission to use certain private information for research purposes, and I maintained privacy for those who refused. They used pseudonyms to protect their personal information.

Experiences through mother–child art therapy activities

I focused on the personal psychological dynamics and interactive dynamics of the mother–child interaction experience during the art therapy activities. In rewriting the participants' stories, I attempted to authentically feel their emotions and interpret their art therapy results, their conversation, my observations, my journal, and field photos to help the reader empathize with their stories.

Experience 1: “Physical Punishment, Without Realizing It. . .”

Yes, I was five, very young. . . It was the house of my grandfather's brother (see Fig. 1). Both of my grandparents had passed

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