I followed the butterflies: Poetry of positive emotions in art therapy research

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Abstract: Art therapy is a profession that offers potential avenues to improve mental health by increasing positive emotions and counteracting depression and negativity through art-making processes within a therapeutic relationship. As art therapy research is scant, this study of how positive emotions are expressed through art-making was needed. Pairs of art therapists (N = 5) conducted participatory arts-based research to explore emotional expression through visual art-making and discussion. Results included artwork and illustrated poems that demonstrate the expression of positive and other emotions within an interpersonal relationship. As part of multi-modal aesthetic exploration, poetry was used as a means of data analysis and as a vehicle for conveying findings.

Subjects: Arts & Humanities; Language & Literature; Literature; Literary Genres; Poetry; Social Sciences; Behavioral Sciences; Mental Health; Creative Arts & Expressive Therapies; Art Therapy

Keywords: positive emotions; arts-based research; poetic inquiry; art therapy; artistic inquiry

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Gioia Chilton is an art therapist and arts-based researcher, and graduate of Drexel University’s Creative Arts Therapies Department PhD Program. This article summarizes partial findings from her dissertation, An Arts-Based Study of the Dynamics of Expressing Positive Emotions within the Intersubjective Art Making Process, winner of the 2014 Torrance Research Award from the American Creativity Association.

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT
Art therapy is a profession that may improve mental health by increasing positive emotions and counteracting depression through art-making processes, within a therapeutic relationship. As art therapy research is scant, this study of how positive emotions are expressed through art-making was needed. Pairs of art therapists (N = 5) conducted arts-based research to explore emotional expression through art-making. Results included artwork and poems. Poetry was used as a means of data analysis and for conveying findings.
1. Introduction
Societies throughout history have employed personal expression through the arts as a way of gaining interpersonal and intrapersonal knowledge (Gerber, 2006). The very act of creating artwork aids us in understanding, examining, and transforming human emotion and experience (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Finley, 2003, 2011; Kapitan, 2010; Knowles, 2008a). From this phenomenon, the human service profession of art therapy has developed. Art therapy is a form of psychotherapy in which people express themselves through artistic creation, yet little research has addressed how this process works (Kaiser & Deaver, 2013; Slayton, D’Archer, & Kaplan, 2010). Likewise, positive emotions are a particularly understudied area with significant potential health benefits (Sheldon, Kashdan, & Steger, 2011; Layous, Chancellor, Lyubomirsky, Wang, & Doraismwamy, 2011). While pressing mental health needs require effective strategies be developed to address depression and negativity, little is known about possible beneficial effects of positive emotions (Garland et al., 2010). There is a significant gap in the research literature concerning the question of how positive emotions are expressed through art-making, although researchers have found the experience of art-making itself improves mood (Dalebroux, Goldstein, & Winner, 2008; De Petrillo & Winner, 2005).

1.1. Positive emotions
Positive emotions can be defined as desirable and adaptive response tendencies that subjectively feel good, and both signal and produce optimal functioning, such as joy, gratitude, serenity, interest, hope, pride, amusement, inspiration, or awe (Fredrickson, 1998, 2009). Positive and negative emotions can be deliberately cultivated or dismissed through emotional regulation processes. Basic strategies such as reappraisal, in which a person changes the way a situation is construed so as to soften the emotional impact, or suppression, when the physiological, external expression of inner emotions is dampened, are often used to regulate negative emotions (Gross, 2002). Just as various strategies are used to express, regulate, and cope with negative emotions, so too are various strategies used to cope with, or manage, positive emotions. While little research has been done on the regulation of positive emotions (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2007; Tugade, Fredrickson, & Barrett, 2004), many people do engage in various conscious or unconscious behaviors to maintain, prolong, or increase positive emotions. Such emotional regulation has benefits in that positive emotional experiences can facilitate flexible thinking and behavior (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2007). Positive emotions can be used to recover effectively from daily stress and help individuals become resilient (Ong, Bergeman, & Chow, 2010; Schiffrin & Nelson, 2010). Creative writing and art-making are strategies people use to maintain and maximize positive emotions (Dalebroux et al., 2008; Henderson, 2012; King & Miner, 2000). In the current study, deliberate conscious attention was given to current or past pleasant experiences through art-making practices to explore how this process of emotion expression worked.

2. Research purpose and question
The purpose of this study was to explore the dynamics of expressing positive emotions, within the intersubjective art-making process in an art therapy-like experience for five co-researcher pairs in the Mid-Atlantic United States. The research question asked, what are the dynamics of expressing positive emotions within the intersubjective art-making process? How are positive emotions expressed through art-making? What happens in the process of expressing positive emotions through art-making? What meanings can co-researchers find in the patterns, images, symbols, metaphors, stories, themes, designs, or colors that might emerge from the visual, verbal, and relational expression of positive emotions?

3. Method
The research method was arts-based research, in which art-making is used by the primary researchers to investigate and inquire about the research topic (Leavy, 2009; McNiff, 1998; Sullivan, 2010). In this particular study, art-making was both the means of doing the research and the subject of the research. Arts-based research is known for being able to evoke, explore, and communicate shifting emotional intersubjective experience (Leavy, 2009; Sullivan, 2010), which is why it
was used for this study. McNiff (2011) noted that art-based research is “especially significant” to the arts therapies which use creative expression as a “way of knowing, communicating, and furthering personal and social development” (p. 387). There seems to be a natural fit between the arts therapies and arts-based research, as both use art as the primary action for their respective purposes (Kapitan, 2010).

In arts-based research, poetry has been used to explore and express the ineffable, emotional nuance of lived experience, and felt sense (Faulkner, 2009; Leavy, 2009). Researchers found that poetry was a tool for analysis of raw data as well as a means to communicate the data's import to others (Faulkner, 2009; Lahman et al., 2011). Poetry can move us through the rhythm and placement of well-chosen words, and help us discover and generate sensory, emotional knowledge. For these reasons, poetry was found useful as part of a body of artistic work which was the multi-sensorial research outcome.

4. Research participants/co-researchers
Research subjects were termed co-researchers in this study, which was relational and participatory in nature. Recruitment for this study took place after approval by the Drexel University Institutional Review Board. Purposeful sampling was used to select key informants via a direct email, which asked potential co-researchers to volunteer or to forward the information to other potential participants. Five adult professional art therapists were recruited because this group has a particular expertise in creating artwork for the purpose of self-expression. Through professional training, art therapists are taught how to make art as a pathway to inner experiences, thoughts, and feelings (Hogan & Pink, 2010). In addition, art therapists are generally adept in verbally discussing emotions, as this is a competency required in the profession of art therapy. Those who had a prior professional relationship with the primary researcher were recruited because a collegial relationship was theorized to parallel in some ways an ongoing therapeutic relationship, such as would be found in an art therapy setting. Potential conflicts of interest were avoided by excluding art therapy clients from the study. Purposeful sampling using a snowball process was successful in recruiting all participants, over two months in the spring of 2013.

4.1. Arts-based investigational methods
All participants underwent an extensive informed consent process and signed forms in which they identified levels of confidentiality and the specific use and ownership of their artwork. The primary researcher, Gioia Chilton, met with each of the co-researchers two times in an appropriate private location. These included an art therapy studio, a psychotherapy office, and the kitchen areas of the co-researchers’ homes. Sessions were video recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. At the first meeting, co-researchers were offered art materials and asked, “Please make an artwork about how you are feeling at this time,” after they did so, they discussed if their art-making experience allowed them to express any emotions in general. They then were asked to make a follow-up art piece to further express any “positive” emotions they may have noticed. Together the co-researchers discussed if their artistic process had allowed for emotional expression. Through collaborative discussion about the symbols and metaphors in the art, the participants sought to identify meaning(s) in the art. The purpose of this process was also to examine the process of art creation within the context of a trusting relationship. Subsequently, primary researcher Chilton, created response art, a work of art that aimed to explore the art and interaction experienced during the first art interview. Co-researchers were able to provide feedback regarding their thoughts about this response art during a second meeting. Additional artwork was then created in a joint process. In other words, the primary and co-researcher pair worked together on additional art pieces in order to continue the inquiry in the expression of emotions through art. Initial results were developed through transcription of all recordings and reflexive memos and coding for themes in the art and transcripts using MAXQDA 10 software. Artistic data analysis was completed through artistic processes that included writing poetry, stories, and painting and constructing mixed media artwork. Co-researchers then met as a
larger group to provide a validity check on the initial thematic and artistic findings the first author had developed. Local art therapists not otherwise involved with the study provided feedback as a means of triangulating data, as peer reviewers of the initial findings. Finally, results were developed through a final artistic data analysis process that included revising the poems and stories to incorporate the feedback given.

5. Results

5.1. Lyrical/visual artistic findings

The results of this research project included more artistic and thematic material than can be included here due to space limitations. This article will focus on the use of poetic lyrical/visual artistic findings, which grew from and identified the dynamics of expressing positive emotions within an intersubjective art-making process. Through exploring what happened emotionally, cognitively, artistically, and relationally though art, new discoveries were made which the following poems aim to illuminate.

5.1.1. Amanda B: Happy anxiety

For example, to explore how emotions were made visible through a pattern of first creative meandering and then containment within artistic form, the first author wrote the following poetic inquiry. It is a found poem, which is shaped directly from interview quotes and is used to highlight important aspects of lived experiences, making them directly accessible to the reader (Faulkner, 2009; Furman, 2006). The researcher shapes the interview transcript into lyric form, yet keeps the participant’s words verbatim. This technique, also termed poetic transcription, can closely represent the language and patterns of speech used by participants. Note, however, that the researcher retains interpretive control by the arrangement of the quoted words into verse (Faulkner, 2009; Leavy, 2009). In this poem, the intersubjective nature of emotional expression is highlighted through an exploration of the co-constituted nature of research into shared meanings, interactions, and the discourse surrounding emotional life.

This poem was inspired in response to the clear example of intersubjective meaning-making provided by one of the participants, Amanda B. She described a particular formal quality of her artwork, ribbon-like lines which were an artistic symbol that she said she often drew in her artwork. Amanda B stated she generally identified these lines with the emotion of anxiety, leading to a “love/hate relationship” with the lines. As she looked at the artwork, she stated that the lines looked different to her on this occasion. Together the research pair searched for words that could describe her experience. Amanda B spoke of noticing a shift in her assumptions about the meaning she usually assigned the ribbon lines. What happened in the process of expressing emotions was that this art symbol made visible her a new and different experience of an emotional response tendency via intersubjective transformation.

Happy Anxiety

“I have sort of a, a love–hate relationship
with these ribbony lines,
often appears as sort of, an, an anxiety, but it’s often..
more...
knotted.
and so today—and I think in terms of how this piece today might reflect my—just
feelings of today—
it’s nice to feel, that there’s; I don’t;
    maybe
    maybe

there is still anxiety, in that, there’s still unknowns and shifting and moving
but it doesn’t have that sense of tension
    or
    being—pulled—
that I’ve sometimes seen in my artwork in the past, so it’s kinda like,
‘happy’ anxiety, maybe?”

(She said, laughing.
And, laughing back, I said,
“…would that be called, ‘excitement’?”)

“Yes!—I knew there’s a word for this—Yes!—Excitement—the optimistic side of anxiety.”

This poem was written to explore how the assignment of the emotional meaning to the art object emerged, in an unfolding, meandering way. As the meandering (“maybe, maybe”) came to a close, primary researcher Gioia Chilton offered Amanda B a word, “excitement,” to see if it would help her concretize or make meaning of the new feeling about the lines she had drawn. This is in keeping with the usual activities of a psychotherapist who aims to promote healthy emotional expression. Amanda B adopted this word, reconstructing or shifting the meaning she had assigned to the artistic symbol of the “ribbony” lines to represent her dynamic subjective experience.

5.1.2. Gioia: On the beautiful
A pantoum poem was written to explore a theme in the co-researchers artwork and stories related to the aesthetic emotion of awe or elevation (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). A pantoum is a poetic form with Malaysian/French roots. It uses an interlocking pattern of repetition, and as the lines repeat and reverberate, the effect can become almost haunting (Furman, 2006). Here, the rhythm of the lines repeating aims to capture the emotional impact of appreciating beauty. This poem mixes direct quotes from Gioia Chilton’s reflective memos recalling co-researcher Amanda B’s art process with comments made by co-researcher Monica D about Monica D’s memory of a peak experience. The poem is attempts to express the heightened nature of the aesthetic experience.

    On the Beautiful
—The way she dabbed blues and greens of watercolor!
  When she put that on there, I was like, ohh!
  She placed the hand image over the image of the eggs, so the hands, all of a sudden—held
  the eggs,
  the hands held the eggs!
  oh my god, that’s so—oh—gorgeous. I’m still stunned.

  When she put that on there, I was like, ohh!
  This aesthetic will do all the work for me
  oh my god, that’s so—oh—gorgeous. I’m still stunned.
  Artwork doing its job
  This aesthetic will do all the work for me
But... How does that happen?
Artwork doing its job
We don't have to
But... How does that happen?

When this came out like this—
I was so excited
I was a little stunned that I had made it
—cause I don't think of myself as that kind of artist or whatever—
We don't have to be
We made this amazing artwork and also
we couldn't quite make sense of it all
But it was really beautiful
Unbelievably beautiful
Indescribably kind of perfect

When this came out like this—I was like, 'oh my god, I love this piece!'
I was so excited
I was a little stunned that I had made it
She put the hand image over the picture of the eggs, so the hands, all of a sudden—held the eggs,
the hands held the eggs!
We made this amazing artwork and also
we couldn't quite make sense of it all,
It was really beautiful
Unbelievable beautiful
Indescrabbly kind of perfect
—the way she dabbed blues and greens of watercolor!

5.1.3. Tracy: I followed the butterflies
An additional poem was constructed to shed light on this aspect. The following poem is presented with the representational artwork made at the time by co-researcher Tracy (Figure 1) as well as Gioia Chilton’s subsequent response art (Figure 1). The combination of verse and images together serves to forward a certain interpretation of meaning, yet this meaning is shifting and open to further interpretation (as it is all art). This poem is meant to be performed aloud.

An aspect of the research question asked, what meanings could we find in the stories that emerged from the visual, verbal, and relational expression of positive emotions? In the illustrated poem, Tracy: I Followed the Butterflies, the co-researchers generated data in the form of this story, related artwork, and further discussion. Tracy’s story shifts meaning when it is placed in the braided context of this study. The story can serve as a metaphor for this research study’s focus on the positive, as well as other personal associations. The first person point of view of the narrator draws in the reader as it implies the importance of “tuning in” to the positive. Tracy reported the moral of her story was that one might miss experiencing a powerfully positive event due to being “not really tuned in,” or not psychologically available for such an experience.
Tracy: I Followed the Butterflies

I was walkin’ in the woods near home and, it was the funniest thing.
I think it was like July and it was hot.
and I was just kind of walking up into the woods near where I grew up.
and I started to notice
that there were just an extraordinary amount of butterflies
around,

--so I was like, this is weird, this is like--
 I was just like
 — everywhere!
 so many butterflies,
and I wanted—to see what was going on,
because I’d really never seen that
before! you know?

So anyway, I started following the butterflies, and they went kind of—
it’s a road, it’s on a road, and you
know how when you open up a
road in the words then there’s more
sunlight so then you get more—
flowers, so there’s like a lot of Joe
Pye Weed, which grows up really tall,
and that attracts the swallowtails, and
there was a bunch of that, and you kept
seeing all these kinds of—I don’t know
what kind-- some kind of brown butterflies
...and I started following the butterflies;
and I came up the hill,
and around the bend,
and looked down,
on the bank,
kind of steeply,
and there was this huge field of, --bee balm.

just like, everywhere!—Just so much!—Like it would have filled up—half this clinic! And, and
it was just like, going down the bank, and there was all this bee balm, and there was some Turk’s
cap lilies also that were bloomin’ all among them, really tall and they were like, 6 feet tall— you
know?

--and the bee balm are like 4 or 5 feet tall as just—so beautiful!— It was just extraordinary.
And there were just butterflies everywhere!...it was just like one of those things where
you go in a museum, and you walk in, and there’s
like the butterflies.; it was just like that,
except it was real!
So I went down the bank, and you
couldn’t see a thing, where your
feet were going, and I’m
thinking, I just hopin’
there’s no snakes, so I
just kinda walked down
— it was just amazing,
and I just stood there
for the longest time,
just like, oh my... ...
and I carry that around,
as a moment, you
know, of surprise, and
wonder, and like,...
I was just really... grateful
that I noticed the butterflies!
.....Cause I could have just not
really tuned in, you know?

***
5.1.4. Tracy: Open to butterflies

Spontaneously, co-researcher Tracy referenced a well-known poem by Yeats (1899), titled *Aedh Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven*, as she drew her second image exploring the positive emotions surrounding the butterfly meadow memory. The following poem blends poetic transcription (the use of direct quotations in poetic verse) with the rhythmic play on words of the structured pantoum form for lyric impact.

Open to Butterflies
We figure the Yeats poem’s message is about being open,
But also, when you’re open, you’re vulnerable;
You hope you don’t tread on snakes,
You’re just grateful you tuned in

But also, when you’re open, you’re vulnerable;
Following these little brown butterflies down this path,
Grateful you tuned in
I don’t know what kind of butterflies they are, she says, but I’m going to follow them

Following these little brown butterflies down this path,
Never seen anything like this before
I don’t know what kind of butterflies they are, she says, but I’m going to follow them
Just an extraordinary amount of butterflies
Never seen anything like this before
Come up over the bend and down the bank

Just an extraordinary amount of butterflies
Lilies and bee balm and the joe pye weed that comes up around six feet tall

Come up over the bend and down the bank
You hope you don’t tread on snakes
Sunlight streaming through the darkness of the forest
You’re just grateful you tuned in

***

An aspect of the research question asked, what meanings could we find in the stories that emerge from the visual, verbal, and relational expression of positive emotions? In the illustrated poem, *Tracy: I Followed the Butterflies*, the co-researchers generated data in the form of this story, related artwork, and further discussion. The first person point of view of the narrator draws in the reader as it implies the importance of “tuning in” to the positive. The repeated phase, “you know,” calls for intersubjective agreement and checks for understanding from the reader.

5.1.5. Amanda: The surprise one

In the following poem, titled, *The Surprise One*, attempted to evoke in the reader an empathic emotional response, again using the technique of shaping direct quotations into poetic verse. The goals were to have the reader feel the wonder, awe, and gratitude that co-researcher Amanda B spoke of and made art about (Figure 2). A found poem was developed from interview quotes from Amanda B who also addressed surprises in her artwork.

This poem uses direct quotes from Amanda B’s transcript, in which she describes her artwork (Figure 2), a collage showing hands holding eggs. By constructing the text into poetic form which includes the visual, the words serve to highlight the central importance of surprises as linked to the
mysterious or unknowable in this study. It illustrates the respondent’s desire to communicate central, important aspects, aspects for which verbal description are inadequate.

6. Discussion
In summary, co-researchers created artistic symbols and metaphors involving nature imagery to make visible subjective emotional experience. Co-researchers said that the physical art object became representative of their emotions, through the construction of metaphors and symbolic associations involving nature imagery, such as those that referenced holding, surprise, or gratitude. Co-researchers associated these meanings to the art that contained and expressed shifting interior emotional experience or ideas. Meanings changed over time due to the co-constructed meaning given to the contents. Imagery from the natural world, such as landscapes, butterflies, and bird’s nests, was used by co-researchers to symbolize associated metaphorical and representational meanings of positive and other emotional states such as surprise, wonder, revelation, gratitude, awe, love, peace, wishing, elevation, care, and nurturing within an intersubjective context.

In this research, the results were presented through visual art and lyrical poetry which aims to provide what Tom Barone calls a “delicious dialectic tension between actuality and imagination” (Knowles, 2008b, p. 109). Art and poetry served to translate knowledge of felt experience, mapping though aesthetic expression the forms of life (Innis, 2007; Langer, 1953). We know successful art can bring emotions into consciousness and can encapsulate and transform complex human experience through this dialectic into expressive form (Moon, 2001; Seiden, 2001; Yorks & Kasl, 2006). Thus, just as art therapists help clients to “recognize their emotions, discriminate among them, and express them appropriately” through building an “emotional vocabulary” through artistic creation (Hinz, 2009, p. 110), as research consumers, we can also learn about complex emotional life through artistic encounters.

Initially, co-researchers in this study created symbolic stories and metaphoric stories within the art interviews about their artistic creations. Subsequently, the first author created further symbolic stories and metaphors in different art forms, such as poetry. Each research pair built over time verbal and non-verbal symbolic and metaphorical agreement about emergent meanings. The sudden “revelation” of Tracy’s discovery of the butterfly meadow, which the art imagery “held” for later contemplation, was storied with meaning imbued into the simple art supplies by a process of artistic search and discovery. Stories like these revealed aspects of the lived experience of the researcher pair. The art products, as research outcomes, wove narratives that helped serve as a means of integration and understanding through empathic connections.

The discovery that vivid artistic symbols can make visible to self and other the subjective experience of emotions is not a new idea in the art and art therapy literature (Hinz, 2009; Kramer, 1971; Langer, 1957; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Seiden, 2001). Symbols can prompt powerful emotional connotations related to surrounding cognitive ideas, which may be inaccessible or unconscious (Clore &

**The Surprise One**

the hands are very gentle—the eggs being special—not just fragile—
the hands are not just gentle, because they’re fragile but because
the eggs are special—and, this is the secret, no—
this is the surprise one
...that we don’t know so much about
—all the other ‘treasures’ are visible in some way,
and this one, is still a mystery
...but it’s sort of the center egg.
***

Figure 2. Artwork by Amanda B imbedded in poetic form.
Huntsinger, 2009; Izard, 2009). For example, images of butterflies appeared in all of the co-researchers’ artwork independently. The butterfly as a symbol has been said to represent the psyche, the soul, joy, love, transformation, and rebirth (Cooper, 1978; Walker, 1988), however, in this study, individuals identified personal meaning. For instance, Tracy, who followed the butterflies to discover the revelation of the meadow, also associated following butterflies to “following one’s dreams.” The artful images could connote these personal and perhaps other collective condensed or unconscious ideas, shifting over time, open to reinterpretation and resymbolization.

In this study, appropriate evaluation of research rigor includes qualitative criteria such as authenticity, trustworthiness, and participatory and transformative value (Finley, 2011; Leavy, 2009). Generalizability, a quantitative criterion, is not applicable to arts-based research. Nor are excessive concerns about bias. Of course, bias was present in this study because as professional art therapists studying art therapy, all of the co-researchers—including myself as primary researcher—had pre-existing ideas, suppositions and theories, and significant stake or investment in finding art therapy useful. In arts-based research, personal or cultural bias is viewed not as an assumption of unfair prejudice. Instead, bias is understood as part of the personhood of the researcher, and when attend to, like cutting on the bias in textiles, allows for extra flexibility. In this study, I found that reflexive memoing was very helpful in sorting through my personal biased perspective and emotions. Awareness of bias allows for reflexive practice which can enhance researchers’ critical perspective (Finlay, 2002). As Rolling (2013) states, “whereas the mantra of the scientific method is said to be objectivity and a purported absence of bias, the mantra of arts-based methods may be exemplified as reflexivity and the active negotiation of one’s multiple biases and perspectives in meaning-making endeavors” (p. 133)

In arts-based research, additional criteria such as aesthetic power are also germane (Chilton & Leavy, 2014). Art-based research enhances transparency as research consumers are both welcomed and, in effect, required to view for themselves the empirical facts of artistic products. This transparency was useful for investigator triangulation, as participants—co-researchers and peer reviewers—were both key informants and analysts, which resulted improved credibility and overall quality of the trustworthiness of the findings. Perhaps we can best judge the usefulness of arts-based research such as this study if it, like all art, “wakes us up from amoral sleep by helping us to feel more, see more, imagine more, contemplate more and know more” (Franklin, 2012, p. 89).

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