

Integrating Arts in a Collaborative Research Process: An Arts-Informed Inquiry

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Abstract

The rich learning that accompanies collaborative research practices can go unappreciated without systematic reflection and examination, which is an under-researched area. In this arts-informed inquiry, grounded in the experiences of four scholars, we show how artmaking was integrated into a qualitative research process to represent findings. In the qualitative phase, we analyzed researcher reflections kept throughout the research process to identify themes. Then, we created different art forms to represent the themes. Engaging in artmaking allowed us to be reflexive, strengthened our understanding of collaboration, and how using arts expanded the qualitative findings.

Introduction

We are a group of four scholars at different stages of our careers, from different backgrounds, and fields. Inci is a PhD candidate in education and has experience with using arts-based approaches in her qualitative and participatory research practices. Shaniek is an active-duty social worker with experience in integrating arts in community practice. Caitlin is a practicing social worker with minimal experience in arts-based approaches in her work as a program evaluator and therapist, but has a long-time interest in creative writing. Candace is an Associate Professor of Social Work focused on emancipatory research methodologies, which includes using ABR approaches. This paper is grounded in our experiences with interdisciplinary collaborative research for the past three years. Although our initial intention was to work on publications as a group, the positive experiences led us to continue this interdisciplinary collaboration which, over time, expanded into a learning community.

Collaborative research is highly encouraged among scholars for various purposes including publishing, teaching/learning, and enriching the research process by integrating different perspectives and backgrounds (Burroughs, 2017; Johnston et al., 2020; Kosmützky, 2018; Leibowicz, 2014). While collaborations are emphasized in higher education settings, the “how” of collaborative processes through the lens of collaborators is under-researched, particularly in social sciences (Gast et al., 2017; Kosmützky, 2018). This gap motivated us to evaluate our research collaboration through our personal reflections about the process. Additionally, we concluded that it would be beneficial to integrate an ABR component to work with the data and tap into the emotional aspects of collaboration. Integrating artmaking into the research process creates data that is holistic and transformative (Gerstenblatt, 2013). Artmaking also often includes the body. Creating and witnessing art often moves us into our emotions, by asking, “how does this make you feel?” (Heenan, 2006). Transformation occurs through artmaking, because we are creating something that didn’t

previously exist, which transforms earlier understandings (Leavy, 2017). We situate this study within our research collaboration of three years and explore our experiences using an arts-informed inquiry.

However, creating and sustaining a collaborative environment that respects and cares for individuals, and fosters their growth, can be challenging and require time, which is why it is worth examining the process closely. Reflection and evaluation are critical components of collaborative processes to identify strengths and weaknesses, and to learn from the process (Dusdal & Powell, 2021; Mortari, 2015). In this article, our focus is on integrating an arts-informed inquiry approach within a qualitative study exploring our collaborative research and writing processes. Our research process involved multiple phases that started with writing reflections after each research meeting. Next, we analyzed the reflections and generated themes. In the last phase, we integrated arts to generate artifacts representing the themes we identified. Using our own experiences as a case, we illustrate the benefits of exploring research collaborations through the experiences of members by using different art forms.

Background

Collaborative Research

Research collaborations are defined as “working closely with others to produce new scientific knowledge” (Bozeman & Corley, 2004, p. 609). Collaborative research practices provide opportunities for sharing diverse and collective expertise by bringing researchers together. The purpose and nature of research collaborations vary depending on the goals, collaborators, and research agendas. These collaborations can also serve as a mentoring space between experienced scholars and novice scholars in academic settings to build community while advancing scholarly productivity (Lee & Bozeman, 2005). Collaborative research focuses on learning new skills, which guide considerations when working with diverse groups, strategies, and activities (Flicker & Nixon, 2018; Lingard, 2021; Oliver et al., 2018). Given the diverse goals and agendas, it is not unusual to experience challenges or tensions. Successful research collaborations require more than just diverse skills, knowledge, methodological and personal perspectives (Katz & Martin, 1997). Social presence, trust, and social connections are among the factors that contribute to the effectiveness of collaborations (Schieffer, 2016; Siemens et al., 2014; Woolley et al., 2015).

Arts-Based Research

Art is an imaginative and corporeal way to convey lived experiences, perspectives, and to create meaning. It can stimulate emotional, social, physical, and spiritual engagement with the artifact, between people, or across communities and time (Kaimal et al., 2016; Martin et al., 2018). While art and artmaking are valuable generative processes, they can also act as a portal to enriching scientific research. Scholars have made the argument for using tools that can approach study topics from new viewpoints. The arts provide a mechanism for expanding questions, findings, and research processes we use to understand phenomena at a deeper level (Leavy, 2017). Arts-based research (ABR) has emerged as an increasingly recognized approach to scientific inquiry. Artistic and scientific processes

share similar goals; they seek to understand, illuminate, and express new insights toward advancing human understanding (Leavy, 2020).

The similarities between art and science led to different perspectives on how to situate the arts in research. While ABR is situated under qualitative research by some (Wang et al., 2017), others consider ABR as a separate methodological genre (Leavy, 2020). Building on the work of Barone and Eisner (2011), Leavy (2017) has defined ABR as a distinct research methodology that transcends the art and science binary. ABR involves a vast range of artmaking activities (e.g., visual, performance, literary) and can be introduced at any point in the research process from generating research questions, data collection, to analysis, and presenting findings (Kay, 2013; Leavy, 2017; Yilmazli Trout, 2018; Yilmazli Trout et al., 2019). Researchers (and often participants) engage in artmaking with the purpose of generating knowledge. The philosophical tenets of ABR include a) art can portray truths about the self and others, b) the arts are a powerful tool for self-awareness, c) emphasizes nonverbal ways of knowing, d) involves embodied, holistic, and visionary ways of knowing (Gerber et al., 2020).

Arts-based research (ABR) methods are formed at the intersection of creative arts and traditional qualitative methods, offering a unique blend of attributes that contextualize and unravel complex phenomena (Given et al., 2013). ABR methods including painting, photography, dance, and collage, provide an expansive glimpse into the inner lives and experiences of participants. Further, these methods allow the participants' meaning and perspective to evolve by encouraging reflexivity during the creation and dissemination processes (Rydzik et al., 2013). Reflexivity is a meaning-making process in which researchers examine their personal values, perspectives, and backgrounds in relation to the research process (Finlay, 2002). Through reflexive processes, researchers develop awareness and consistency in their interpersonal engagements and decision making in their research, and find new ways of seeing, thinking, and knowing. Throughout these processes, participants encounter opportunities for self-discovery, self-development, and personal growth (Faulkner et al., 2016; Skukauskaite et al., 2021). By extension, researchers and audiences are similarly able to evolve through reflexivity and investigation of created works.

Methodology

In this study, we used an arts-informed inquiry approach to explore our collaborative research process. With a growing interest in using arts-based practices in research, the definition, terminology, and classification of ABR approaches can be challenging. One of the classifications is by Savin-Baden and Major (2013), which consists of arts-based inquiry, arts-informed inquiry, and arts-informing inquiry. In arts-informed inquiry practices, art is not central to the process; instead, it is used to represent the data. Various forms of art are created by researchers and/or participants to represent findings of a study by taking an insider position. We chose this approach because it is aligned with our personal goals of engaging in ABR practices more; it allowed for a personal and deeper engagement with the process as well as making our findings more accessible. In this section of the article, we provide background on our collaboration, data generation and analysis, and artmaking processes to represent the findings.

Research Team and Setting

Our collaboration started three years ago based on our shared research interests. As each of us were in different geographic locations, we held our meetings virtually on a bimonthly basis. In the beginning, we started working on the analysis of data, which Candace had already collected and we wrote two papers together. During this initial work, we established relationships, learned about each other's work styles and the skills we bring to the collaboration. As we became more familiar and comfortable with our process and working together, we expanded our focus by adding new projects to our agenda that continued concurrently. We each took the lead on a different project and the rest of us provided support in analyzing data, writing a paper, or preparing conference presentations. The lead of the project was responsible for planning and organizing the project and convening conversations on the progress in our meetings. This does not mean that each person was only responsible for one aspect of the project. We all contributed to the whole process from start to end. Since we had multiple projects at hand, we found it beneficial to use the meetings to discuss the projects and progress while working on tasks between meetings. The conversations we had in the meetings allowed us to identify areas for professional development to support our work. By dedicating time for learning/teaching in the collaboration in addition to writing, we expanded our definition of the process from collaboration to learning community. The learning community aspect is what made our collaboration unique and important as it supported our growth as scholars, which was why we wanted to investigate our experiences closely with the purpose of sharing our lessons with a broader audience.

Data Sources and Analysis

Our process in this arts-informed inquiry consisted of multiple phases (Figure 1). We used personal written reflections to evaluate our own experiences in the collaboration as the main data sources. In analyzing the journal entries using a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), we completed the initial coding independently from each other, and then created a Padlet board to post the codes we identified with brief descriptions. Using this board helped us visualize the codes, make connections, and collaborate both synchronously and asynchronously. We reviewed and refined the codes to define categories and engaged in an iterative process to identify the themes. Then, each one of us created an art piece to represent one of the themes. Using arts allowed us to experiment with different arts methods in exploring our subjective and intersubjective experiences in the collaboration at a personal level.

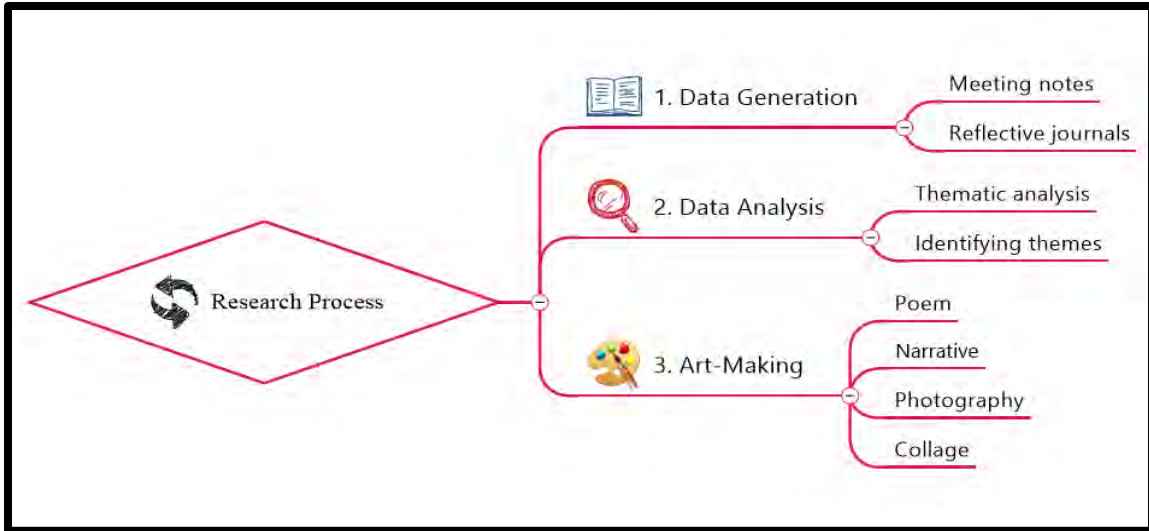


Fig. 1: An overview of our research process.

Integrating Art Into the Process: Working With Findings as a Starting Point

The analysis of personal reflections resulted in four themes that are: i) research process, ii) mentorship, iii) personal growth, and iv) essence of collaboration (Figure 2). We do not focus on discussing the themes and subthemes as it is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, we want to show how we integrated arts into our research process and how this approach allowed us to engage with the data in a deeper way. In this section, we first introduce the theme followed by a brief background on the art form used, then present the artifact, and lastly provide the researcher reflections and interpretations on the artifact and artmaking process.



Fig. 2: Themes identified.

Research Process

The “research process” theme speaks to the multi-faceted and iterative nature of our collaboration from generating data to publishing. A prominent aspect of the process is the iterations that occurred in every stage of the research. Caitlin wrote a poem to represent the iterative nature of the research process. Poetry is an art form that is used to integrate poetry writing skills and interpretation into social science research (Butler-Kisber, 2002). One of the most common approaches is researcher-voiced poems grounded in field notes, journal entries, and reflections of the researcher as data (Prendergast, 2009). Wu (2021) discusses the characterization of poetic inquiry that are: the celebration of individuality, poetic truth-seeking in research, and poetical examination of inner and outer experience. Individuality is emphasized through looking closely at individual researchers’ emotions and experiences. The truth-seeking aspect describes how researchers show their thought processes and ruminations through poetry. Using poetry as a tool to explore the inner dialogues of researchers or how they understand the outer world is another aspect of poetic inquiry.

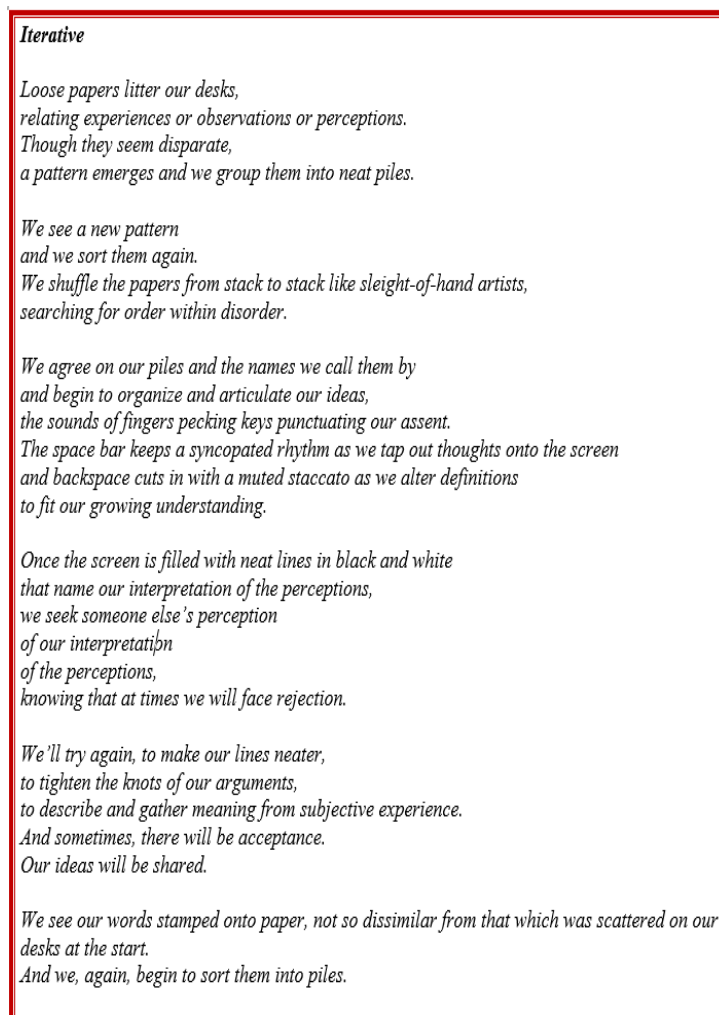


Fig. 3: Poem titled *Iterative*.

Caitlin's Reflections

Throughout my youth I wrote creative essays and short stories, but was especially drawn to poetry. The act of trying to winnow a thought or experience to as few words as possible, to fully capture a moment or idea in succinct, precise language continues to captivate me. This process feels similar to that of qualitative research and academic writing; ideas and subjective experience are examined and expressed in tangible, actionable, specific ways. To draft the poem, I organized the codes to reflect our research process and then began to identify sensory imagery that could accompany and reflect the ideas shared in the codes. It was a challenge to connect the abstract ideas expressed in the “research process” category into experiences that could be touched or felt, and I think the struggle comes through in the final product. The language and imagery in the poem are not as “tight” as I would prefer, and I have consistently felt the desire to go back and edit certain phrases. Interestingly enough, this also reflects how I experience the research process; the process affects the product, which has an impact on the process in such an iterative nature.

A common theme throughout the codes was the iterative nature of the group’s work and the ways we challenge and guide each other to grow, thus continually evolving both our understanding of the data and the papers we cocreate. To express the simultaneously cyclical and scaffolded conceptions of the group research process, the poem describes coding, collaborative categorization, writing, editing, submission, rejection, acceptance, and once again data analysis. The language in the final stanza of the poem echoes and references the first stanza, to illustrate the iterative process described in the codes. Many ideas expressed in the Research Process category were abstractions, such as “learning from our experiences” and “handling rejection.” In this poem, I attempted to describe these abstract concepts through a tactile and tangible lens using visual and auditory imagery and extended metaphor.

Mentorship

Mentorship is another defining aspect of our collaborative research efforts. Participating in this collaboration created spaces for each of us to take on a mentor role when needed. The role of mentorship was not solely on one member, but instead, it was shared among all of us based on our skills, knowledge, and experiences when needed. Sharing this role fostered the sense of collaboration in our research efforts. Candace used photography (Figure 4) to represent the mentorship aspect of our work. Photography consists of using a camera to create lasting images captured through an image sensor that harnesses light and concrete subjects (Hirsch, 2017). Photography is used as both an art form and a mechanism to examine society. The art emerges from the image composition and development process, which involves design and technical skills. Examining society comes from using photographs to document common and extraordinary lived experiences. Photography as an ABR method aims to use the process of composing, taking, and interpreting the photos as an empirical way to “capture essences that can be ‘metaphorically generalizable’” (Langmann & Pick, 2018, p. 34; Szto et al., 2005, p. 138). Images exist as visual data, providing light, color, texture, standpoints, and compositions not possible with words (Holm et al., 2018). Images are socially and culturally constructed, thus “both the producer of an image and the viewer co-produce” new knowledge each time an image is produced and viewed (p. 313).



Fig. 4: Photo by Candace.

Candace's Reflections

As a research method, photography is accessible, engaging, and illuminates phenomena in a way that goes beyond words. Many people have access to cameras and multiple ways to share images, which makes data collection timely and easy. People respond to images through their emotions, lived experiences, and worldviews. Interacting with images as a meaning-making activity brings the whole self to that process. We have the photographer's standpoint and the viewer's worldview, and together, they create something new. For this photograph, I spent time thinking about what symbols or aspects of my life represented the theme of mentorship. I wanted to include items from the natural world, because my daily walks mentored me to be more present, relaxed, and appreciative. Also, mentoring is part of my natural landscape, a relationship I value and a skill I want to develop. Last year, I was walking my dog in the Wasatch Mountain foothills; it was relaxing, immersive, a connective tissue with nature. The foothills were covered with sagebrush; it was fragrant, evergreen, and nourishing. So, one evening, I picked a flourishing bush on the mountainside and located stones of different shapes, sizes, and textures, and placed them in a circle around the plant. I noted a well-trodden pathway to the right of the stone circle. I pressed the camera shutter several times and ended up with a photograph that placed the sagebrush and stone circle in the foreground of the Wasatch mountains, and to the right, was a pathway. The pathway represents the journeys that we have taken with each project. The mountains portray the constant climbing, summiting, and descending we have happily endured.

Personal Growth

The theme of personal growth captures our personal lived experiences in the collaboration. The challenges we experienced at times and the emotional responses we had to challenges and successes shaped us in different ways and at different levels. Shaniek's approach to representing personal growth included a narrative complemented by a drawing (Figure 5).

Drawings are among visual elements that are frequently used in ABR practices to study human experiences. Images are effective tools for communication, which encourage new ways of seeing or doing, help synthesize knowledge, and foster empathic understanding (Holm et al., 2018). Drawings can be used as tools for data collection or representation of findings in research. The process of drawing can facilitate constructing thoughts clearly and expressing understandings in a different and effective way (Mitchell et al., 2017). Drawings can be tools for exploring and synthesizing experiences to deepen interpersonal understandings or conceptualizing them through reflection (Fish, 2018).

Elliot (2005) described narrative analysis as a method by which participants capture and present a particularly meaningful part of their subjective experience in story form. This method may be employed alone or in combination with other arts to externalize and open a participant's autobiographical knowledge for meaning and discussion. Narrative analysis aligns with the notion that the subjective experience is the wellspring from which all other modes of inquiry are generated (Elliott, 2005). Further, this method aligns with the basic principles of participatory action research, as it allows participants to take charge of their particular narrative and perhaps reclaim elements that were lost to the dominant culture or other oppressive forces. Beyond its use in the realm of arts-based research, narrative analysis may have implications for developing introspective and affective skills, aiding participants in reconciling, and making meaning from significant emotional events or experiences (Schwartz & Abbott, 2007).

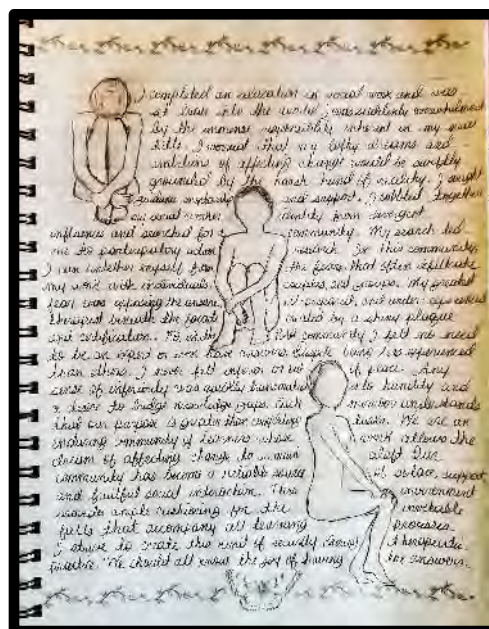


Fig. 5: Drawing by Shaniek.

Shaniek's Reflections

The drawing and writing were done using graphite on paper. I used the simplicity of this medium to counterbalance the complexity of my internal and external experiences. The interplay between the drawing and text symbolizes my changing phenomenological state within the context of a developing PAR community. This artifact portrays my emerging identity within the context of a participatory action research (PAR) community. Many newly minted social workers struggle to quell the inner voice of self-doubt that, if left unchecked, can fuel "imposter syndrome." This phenomenon can occur at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels of social work practice and skew the practitioner's perception of their ability to effectively deliver services. While this phenomenon is not unique to the social work profession, its presence can undermine the values and ethics we seek to uphold. Specifically, imposter syndrome causes the practitioner to lose touch with the authentic self, altering the nature of client interactions and potentially hindering the establishment of rapport. PAR communities support the emerging practitioner and scholar, while softening voices of self-doubt. These communities accomplish the latter by recognizing the intrinsic value of each member's level of experience, encouraging exploration and reflexivity, and building an understanding of the world outside of the self. Often, the preoccupation with the self fuels the self-consciousness and doubt that underlies imposter syndrome. PAR communities encourage members to step into the lives of others—an act which builds trust in the stability and strength of the self.

Essence of Collaboration

Although we worked as colleagues in this collaboration, our approach went beyond focusing only on the outcome, and involved offering support to each other both emotionally and professionally. Built on a solid foundation of understanding and respecting each other, the underpinning aspect is engaging in dialogue and making efforts to connect with each other at a personal level first. Inci created a digital collage (Figure 6) to represent the essence of this collaboration.

Collage is an example of visual arts that can be used for many aspects of research. In collages, disparate elements are brought together to transform into something new, which prompts the audience to see new perspectives and thinking, making new connections, enhancing meanings (Chilton & Scotti, 2014). Collage making "challenges objectivity and a singular reality through fragmenting spaces and repurposing objects to contextualize multiple realities" (Gerstenblatt, 2013, p. 295). Butler-Kisber and Poldma (2010) identified attributes of collage in qualitative research and described it as a "reflexive process, a form of elicitation, and as a way of conceptualizing ideas" (p. 3). Collage-making provides a space for embodied discoveries, and the integration of layers of theoretical, artistic, and intersubjective knowledge (Chilton & Scotti, 2014).



Fig. 6: Digital collage by Inci

inci's Reflections

As four scholars from different fields and parts of the country, we are on the same journey of scholarship. Our collaboration is a safety net providing support when the journey presents its downs. It provides a space for celebration of our accomplishments. The images of four trees represent each one of us and the branches connecting the trees represent the safety net we built together. We're physically distant but intellectually connected. We bring different skill sets, perspectives, and understanding to the collaboration and we find ways to complement each other and work in harmony, which reminds me of the four elements of nature placed in the center of the collage. This is the anchor of our collaboration. In the guilt-free space we created, we value and encourage each other to be balanced, to self-care, and to grow and transform both personally and professionally. Open communication and critical conversations play a key role in developing the level of trust and care we have for each other, and in shaping our work. This collage presents the recipe for the essence of this collaboration.

My initial attempt to create a collage to illustrate the collaboration theme started with reviewing the subthemes identified, thinking of how I could present them visually, and searching for images that would illustrate the ideas as they are. Finding images for each concept was not challenging, which is a reason why I chose collage. But the challenge was how to connect these different images in a way that tells a story in a coherent way. The more I reflected and searched for images, I started thinking more symbolically rather than the literal illustration of ideas. Then, I reflected on our collaboration again, but this time by paying more attention to the emotions, how I felt in our collaboration, how my participation and interactions shaped me and how I contributed to the process. With this approach, I was able to refocus and tell our story through symbols representing what we found in our process. I think what is important in artmaking as part of research is to go through the process despite challenges and not worry so much about the quality of the final art piece created. This is not to say that the quality is not important

because I don't claim to be an artist and I don't have a background in arts. In my case, the process of collage making was a tool to examine and understand deeply the concept I was exploring. I had to learn to let go of my perfectionism tendencies and be more attentive to the emotions involved in the process. It's a meaning-making process and it is important to acknowledge that it is not only the quality of the art piece created that is important, but also the meaning we attribute to it.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper, we demonstrate how integration of artmaking can strengthen research processes while opening new areas for further inquiry. As in our case, using art forms to explore personal experiences allows the participant to be reflexive and learn about themselves. In this study, although our intention was to represent the findings through art, the artmaking process moved us beyond the initial intentions and allowed us to discover new ways of thinking, making connections between our personal and professional identities, and provided new insights regarding research processes. For example, Shaniek revealed how she positioned herself as an emerging PAR researcher and developing clinical social worker connected it to social work practices. She used her art to describe how engagement within and support from the research group fostered self-trust, competence, and the affective skills needed to break free from self-doubt. This creative exploration illuminated parallel processes between the self-knowledge that can come from artmaking and developing a new identity as a researcher and clinician. Inci, on the other hand, focused more on the process of artmaking and revealed how she had to work through the discomfort around engaging in a new art form. She challenged herself to let go of her perfectionist tendencies and in doing so, she realized how her thinking shifted from a linear to a nonlinear mode. With this shift, she was able to see the foundational aspects behind this collaboration, which are as important as the skills needed in a collaboration. Caitlin's focus was on the process of artmaking, but more on the similarities between poem writing and research processes. This strengthened her understanding of the benefits and challenges of qualitative research processes as an emerging researcher. Candace revealed their desire to pursue ABR practices after completing their PhD and the lack of support they experienced. However, through the photograph they composed, they conveyed how they took on the "art" of mentorship role to creative, knowledge generating community. This creativity supported the rest of us in our ABR ventures while experimenting with creative forms of inquiry.

Through this process, we each developed a unique aesthetic identity. These identities formed organically through self-exploration, discussions, and experimentation. They were informed by our subjective personal and professional experiences, artistic strengths, and preferences for self-expression. Finally, our aesthetic identities supplemented our established identities within the research group, unveiling new dimensions of ourselves to each other. This process was extended during conversations in which we sought clarifying information from each other to better understand the art. Our conversations uncovered the interwoven nature of the art pieces and produced new questions about our collaboration. The use of art deepened our connection and showed us new ways of understanding our collaborative processes.

Paying close attention to internal dynamics of and people's experiences in a collaboration is important for sustaining a successful research collaboration. In doing so, adding an ABR component strengthens and benefits both the research process and participants. The process of illustrating the key components through arts created opportunities to engage with the data in a deeper way, encouraged us to leave our comfort zones and be reflexive, and expanded our understanding of what collaboration means. In the process, we revealed unknown sides of ourselves to each other by welcoming vulnerability, which strengthened our group relationship. At the same time, our sense of ownership of the study we undertook increased. We used art forms that were familiar to us, that we felt comfortable with. Although we have varying levels of experience with ABR in our research/teaching practices, we never were the participants using arts to generate data. This flipping of roles provided us with a participant perspective and insights on what we should consider when implementing ABR practices, which included how to approach the process, how to create safe spaces that encourage participants to leave their comfort zones, and actively engage in the process.

This project revealed several implications for our collaborative research processes, goals, and future opportunities. We plan to continue exploring the use of different art forms and evaluating the types of knowledge these art forms generate within specific research topics. Specifically, we are working on a book chapter that elucidates how we coped with the uncertainty and isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic by integrating art making into our research. We are also developing a paper describing how the arts-inquiry experiences have influenced our work beyond the research collaborative. Each of us have incorporated arts-based methods into social work practice, teaching, and other research projects.

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