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Narrative Art and Incarcerated Abused Women

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Comments
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Figure 1. Heather’s collage contained words and images that evoked her life before prison, her dreams for the future, and parts of her identity that had not changed since she entered prison.
Approximately 2 to 4.4 million women each year are involved in a relationship that includes domestic violence (Plichta, 1996). Almost half the women in the nation's jails and prisons were physically or sexually abused before their imprisonment (Bureau of Justice Statistics, April 1999). Despite the large numbers of women in jail and prison who have experienced domestic violence, studies of battered women in prison as a distinct and separate population are limited (Richie & Johnsen, 1996). The mental health needs of these women are high, yet few intervention programs have been offered and evaluated for this population.

The arts and narrative intervention program described in this article used visual art, storytelling, music, journaling, and support groups with incarcerated abused women to address the following questions: How can visual art and music empower incarcerated female survivors of domestic violence? Can art, music, storytelling, journaling, and support groups with incarcerated women alter their self-images?

During an 8-week pilot program at the Iowa Correctional Institution for Women (ICIW) the authors, an Assistant Professor of Nursing, and an Assistant Professor of Art Education, gathered qualitative data. The findings were shared with undergraduates and graduates in both the Nursing and Art Education programs. The implications of this research for art education preservice teachers and educators who work in settings outside the public school system can be drawn from the outcomes of this type of intervention. The ideas presented within this article could easily be transferred to any population, especially people in mental health settings, hospitals, shelters, community centers, and support groups. For preservice educators in particular, this research provides a look into the prison system, a place where art education can produce incredible results, but where committed teachers are hard to find. A model for narrative arts-based intervention is also offered. While the focus of this example addresses women, the model can be adapted and used with males as well as females. For example, the intervention topic could be something other than domestic violence, such as substance abuse, self-esteem, divorce, or even issues related to the body.

Participants, Prison Structure, and Group Facilitators

The general population of the ICIW consists of over 600 women who are incarcerated for various crimes and are serving sentences that range from one year to life. The housing and treatment of inmates is structured such that buildings contain units based on special needs and/or programs. Women from the General Population (GP), Therapeutic Community (TC), and After Care Community (ACC) volunteered to participate in this program. The TC unit is for women who have substance abuse problems. The ACC is a complementary program to TC where these women transition back into GP or out of the system. Volunteers for the study reviewed and signed an informed consent document that was approved by the University Institutional Review Board, and we obtained a Certificate of Confidentiality from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The group facilitators—two nurse researchers, a social worker and an art educator—were all associated with the University of Iowa. Because of similar and overlapping interests of the inmates, we decided to engage in an interdisciplinary
project with the women at ICIW. The project brought together our knowledge of women in prison with art, music, storytelling, and domestic violence education.

Blending Art, Music, and Empowerment

Our curriculum objectives were based on an empowerment intervention. Empowerment interventions facilitate the restoration of power, control, and dignity by offering knowledge and skills to better direct people’s lives and develop healthier self-concepts (Dutton, 1992; Schecter & Gary, 1988). Interventions for an individual’s reactions to major loss and steps toward positive recovery must include opportunities for supportive storytelling, private account making, and social interaction (Harvey, Orbuch & Weber, 1999; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999; Taylor, 2000).

Storytelling has both psychological and physical health benefits. The healing psychological process associated with storytelling involves: 1) negative feelings, or a feeling of lack of control/power followed by attention or help seeking behavioral changes 2) an attempt by individuals to make new meaning of the past trauma and their lives in order to regain a sense of control, and 3) an understanding that an individual’s accounts of past events can guide their future expectations for relationships with others and themselves (Banks-Wallace, 1999, 1998; Harvey, Orbuch & Weber, 1990). By sorting through issues and regaining a sense of control, people diminish their levels of anxiety and stress.

Similarly, creating art connected to personal experience within groups improves people’s self-respect, increases self-confidence, brings people together, develops creativity, and changes the way one views their life (Matarasso, 1997; Rossner, 1993). Participating in arts activities helps inmates cope with prison life and manage their high levels of stress and depression by making them feel productive, normal, and human (Cleveland, 1992; Kornfeld, 1997; Williams, 2000, 2003).

Music, like art, has been advocated as a therapeutic mediator that increases social interaction, improves the quality of life, enhances personal growth and increases self-actualization (Gfeller, 1987; Leibmann, 1994; Schelby, 1999; West, 2002; Williams, 2000, 2003). The women at ICIW have opportunities to listen to music, make art, participate in prison theatre, and even sing in a gospel choir. However, few of these activities are tied to helping these women examine or reflect on their life experiences and identities. Our arts and narrative intervention program created a collaborative and supportive environment for women to share their stories, explore images, make art, and listen to music while examining important issues and events in their lives.

A Multi-Modal Educational Curriculum

Our program involved two groups of women volunteers from the prison. In the remainder of this article we present examples from one group of nine women from the General Population (GP) and After Care Community (ACC).

Participants in this group received art, music, storytelling, and a psychosocial educational intervention that included topics related to various health issues and domestic violence.

Each 2-hour session began by emphasizing the importance of confidentiality and respectful interactions. This was necessary so that group members could feel safe sharing stories and images about their lives. Each week different topics were discussed in order to facilitate and focus the storytelling of the women around issues related to domestic violence and health. These themes were discussed through the presentation of different topics such as 1) “What it means to be a woman?” 2) “What do you know and how do you feel about your body?” and 3) “What is domestic violence?”

Power, control and freedom were underlying themes that were addressed during all sessions.

In addition to group discussions, women used their private time to journal responses to questions that arose during group sessions. After some of the women shared their journal entries, they worked on collages or listened to music. We called their attention to themes in the music and their collection of collage materials for further discussion. We selected the blues because we thought the women would enjoy the music and because the blues are laced with themes of empowerment.

“Naming issues that pose a threat to the physical or psychological well being of the individual is a central function of the blues” (Davis, 1998, p. 33). For example, the song There’s Lightning In These Thunder Thighs by Saffire, The Uppity Blues Women, addresses body image and relationships: “After me you won’t criticize ‘cause there’s lightning in these thunder thighs...” (Saffire, The Uppity Blues Women, 1994). Similarly, Koko Taylor’s song, I’m A Woman (2002), was used to generate discussions about inner strength, self-empowerment and respect.

My momma told me the day I was born she said sing the blues child, sing it from now on. I’m a woman... I’m a ball of fire. I’m a woman. I can make love to a crocodile; I can sing the blues... I can cut stone with a pen. I’m a woman. I am a love maker, you know, I’m an earth shaker.

In response to the song by the Uppity Blues Women, one woman wrote, “It just felt like me, how I feel and think. I may not have a perfect body, but I can please, and not, just physically either. I am a good person despite my physical appearance.” Another woman wrote, “Koko just made me think yeah, that’s how I’m going to be. I’m going to be a strong force from now on.” One participant summarized the role of music when she wrote:

Music—in so many ways and in so many forms allows me to feel, allowed me to grow, and allows escape, laughter, tears, exercise, relaxation, stimulation, and dreams. It is a gift however it comes and always makes me feel real. (Which is even better than good!)

In addition to listening to music, the participants collected materials from magazines for use in collages that described their identity, their personal history, and what it means to be a woman. Collage was selected as the art form in order to avoid the anxiety that beginners typically have with drawing or painting.
The women spent approximately 4 weeks collecting materials, discussing images of women in popular culture, and composing their collages.

While working, many of the women talked informally about the text and images they tore and cut from magazines. They explained their rationale for choosing one image over another. These small interactions built group intimacy and gave the women a way to share little bits of themselves before sharing or discussing their histories. It also helped them build a consensus about how images in advertising and the media portray women and how this portrayal affects their identity. Some women made connections between unspoken social roles and rules and linked them with their criminal thinking and behavior. Examples of these types of connections and links are described below.

**An Exemplar of Self-Discovery and Healing**

Heather’s experience is representative of several members’ paths to self-discovery and healing. She is incarcerated for life because of her connection with a murder. Heather is a tall woman who loves to sing and write country music. She is an avid collector of magazine images and regularly makes collages that she sends to friends and relatives on the outside. At the second class of the intervention, Heather arrived with a huge folder of clippings she had collected for almost a year. Over the course of a few classes, she carefully constructed two autobiographical collages.

In her first collage, (see Figure 1) she includes phrases such as “Invest in self-esteem” and “Long-term Blues.” Heather’s collage contained several words and images that evoked her life before prison, her dreams for the future, and parts of her identity that had not changed since she entered prison. Throughout her collages, storytelling, and journals, Heather constructed what Joy (1997) calls a “strategic identity” by reflecting on episodes in her life and how her ideas about those episodes, her identity, and her self-image have changed.

![Figure 1](image1.jpg)

**Figure 2.** Heather’s second collage is about her current perspective on life. She uses text to refer to her dream that there are opportunities for her in the future despite her life sentence.
The construction of any form of identity will always be circumscribed by the specific elements that imbue any event or episode with its distinctive intensity and relevance. Identity is thus understood as a constantly negotiated process, which is never complete. There are multiple possibilities of self-definition, which reflect the diverse influences at work—that range from those that would impose conformity and control to those that can induce disintegration (p. 39).

For Heather, these elements of her identity included a criminal offense, abusive relationships, and views about herself and her body. Before her incarceration, Heather was involved in drugs and had very low self-esteem. She dated people who were abusive and always made her feel ugly. Now she realizes that while she will always want to change certain aspects of her appearance, she is an attractive person inside and out. In her journal, Heather wrote a letter to her body. This letter chronicles the introspective transformative progress that Heather has undergone partly as a result of participation in the intervention program. Following are excerpts from Heather’s letter.

Dear Ms. Body,

I can’t recall a time in my life that I have ever completely loved you. Maybe I did when I was little, before my memories start. I realize that you have brought me a lot of pleasure, but you have also brought me a lot of pain...

I think of all the sexual abuse you have suffered. I know it’s not fair to blame you, but I can’t help how I feel. I don’t hate you all the time. I can see good things about you, but they are also reminders of bad things. Most of the time I can’t bear to look at you...

Your eyes, so beautiful...the same eyes that were witness to so many terrible things and are so sad... Your voice sings so sweetly and says sweet things to others...the same voice that begged for mercy or worse yet, said nothing at all when it needed most to speak up. Your slender, elegant neck was groped and choked. Your full breasts were twisted, pulled, bitten, and bruised...

The same parts of you that brought life into this world were brutally violated. Your body, so long and sexy...those legs wouldn’t, couldn’t walk away or run. Your hips, the way they sway when you walk or dance, drew the attention of all the men who hurt you...

I pick you apart in an attempt to feel good about you... You are still the body that was violated, beaten, and scarred... I feel betrayed by you, even though you aren’t fully to blame. It just seems that every time I have really needed you, you have let me down...you don’t run, you don’t fight back, and you don’t speak up when you should...

Maybe, just, maybe, my telling you all of this will help me get over some of the animosity I feel for you and get me on the path to loving you. Maybe in time, I will love you completely, but right now that’s just asking too much.

I can’t change my past, but I can work right now so we can have a better future. You’re my body and I need you...I want to be together again. I want us to be the strong, powerful, smart, loving woman I know we can be. Please be patient. I’m doing the best I can.

Your heart, soul, and mind.

Heather's second collage (see Figure 2) is about her current perspective on life. Unlike her letter, it is a celebration of her body, motherhood, and her dreams. She uses text to refer to her dream that there are opportunities for her in the future despite her life sentence. The program gave Heather an opportunity to share her story with other women for the first time. She was raped three times before she was 15 years old. At 16, her biological brother almost killed her. She has had two abusive marriages and has never shared these stories with a group of women who had been in similar situations. She said after the intervention program was over that she felt a real boost to her self-esteem.

Discussion and Implications for Art Education

Making collages was a way for Heather and the other participants to combine text with images that related to their lives and current identities. They then organized these bits and pieces into cohesive stories. Merriam (1998) states, "The art image is a personal statement that provides focus...yet it also provides distance from the strong feelings evoked" (p. 158). The collages produced by the women inmates were used as a narrative aid in storytelling. By creating stories, the participants isolated issues and relationships that hindered their personal growth. The act of selecting, composing, and creating collages helped them to see relationship patterns repeated throughout their lives and to visually organize their ideas and memories into symbolic statements.

We asked the women to look at the images they collected as well as the images they rejected and to consider ways these images had influenced their ideas and the perceptions of beauty, their bodies, and relationships. Krug (2003) states, "Critical inquiry of cultural attributes can be helpful for identifying, interpreting, and analyzing contextual complexity. A study of these conditions can reveal how representations (signifying practices and products) ascribe and circulate meanings, values, and pleasures about symbolic culture" (p. 17). Through the act of critical reflection about popular
The act of selecting, composing, and creating collages helped them to see relationship patterns repeated throughout their lives and to visually organize their ideas and memories into symbolic statements.

images of women, and men and women together, the participants deconstructed messages in advertising that propagate cultural stereotypes of beauty, happiness, desire, sex, intimacy, submission, and power. We looked at a variety of men's and women's magazines such as Glamour, Cosmopolitan, and Maxim, and discussed images and articles in these publications related to beauty and sex. The women, after watching Jean Kilbourne's (2000) video, Killing Us Softly, found the photographs of the male and female models in these magazines to be unrealistic and promoting ageism, classism, and some degree of violence in certain advertisements.

Often, artists make work that refers to their experience as a way to record it and reflect on its meaning. Smith-Shank and Schiebert (2000) state, "a basic and significantly human aesthetic act is recalling memorable images of life events, reflecting upon them, and then selecting action based upon reflection" (p. 178). This process of storytelling and reflection facilitated the group's focus on subjects that were significant and needed further exploration. Oral and visual reflection on their experiences helped the women reconstruct their identities as survivors, organize their ideas, and see their lives take shape through images. The aesthetics of their works were guided not only by formal principles related to composition, balance, and color, but also by personal focus, and the visual and psychological importance of each element. In their stories, the women could see their ability—through resilience—to overcome the tragedies and abuses they survived. Their stories and collages mapped their previous experiences and helped them see patterns and milestones that played a role in their current self-concept. These narratives also helped them see some positive aspects related to their incarceration. For the first time many of them were safe, off drugs, healthy, and engaged in productive educational activities. In the context of the group, the positive feedback that each person received after recalling bits of their experience through the discussions and collages reinforced a willingness and guarded enthusiasm to explore the past, and to continue their search for meaning.

Arnheim (1986) writes, "[T]he arts, to sustain their vigor must serve substantial human needs...by demonstrating what it can do for the distressed, art reminds us of what it is meant to do for everybody" (p. 257). Emotional and artistic expression helps survivors of domestic violence to formulate accounts/stories to cope with the psychological effects of severe stress. Interventions such as art, storytelling, music therapy, and group support can foster identity and self-concept change as final outcomes congruent with the goal of empowerment.

For preservice art educators, this arts and narrative empowerment project demonstrates how rich interdisciplinary research and service can be. It also shows the possibilities for education through art outside of the public school classroom.

We have illustrated a model where social issues and the potential for change are addressed through art, music, and storytelling. Issues such as domestic violence must be addressed with careful attention to the mental health needs of participants. The arts can provide ways to reflect, empower, critique, and even transform.

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ENDNOTES

1Harvey, Orbuch and Weber (1990) defined storytelling/account-making as "people's explanations presented in story-like form for past actions and events that include characteristics of self and key others in plots, and thus accounts represent more than simple collections of disparate attributions" (p. 102).
2"Heather" is a pseudonym.

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