

Creating Research- Researching Creations:
Arts Based Research within Bedouin Women's Groups In Israel.
Ephrat Huss: Online Presentation:

“All problem solving has to cope with an overcoming of the fossilized shape ... the discovery that squares are only one kind of shape among infinitely many.”

Arnheim (1996)

While talking with Bedouin women about their drawings, the tin hut in the desert that is the community center that we work in, sometimes reverberates with lively stories and emotional closeness, and sometimes I, as a Jewish Israeli art therapist and researcher, and they as a Bedouin Israeli women's empowerment group, are lost to each other: When I suggest we summarize the meaning of the art therapy sessions for the women themselves, they nod their heads politely and thank me, and ignore my questions.

The status of Arab women in Israel can be defined as doubly oppressed, both by their patriarchal society, and by the Israeli political regime. Paradoxically, Bedouin women's dependence on the males in their family has sometimes increased due to perceptions of women's exposure to work, education, and individualism as a threat to tradition. Indeed, Bedouin women in the Negev were found to be intensely affected by poverty, and the interconnected social and health problems this entails.^{41,42}

This paper aims to examine the combination of arts based research and art therapy within impoverished Bedouin women's empowerment groups. The art fulfills a double role within the group of both helping to understand the women's self defined concerns and goals, and simultaneously enriching and forwarding these goals. This creates a research tool that adheres to the feminist principles of finding new ways to learn from poor women from a different culture, together with creating a research context that is of direct potential benefit and enrichment for the women. The paper, through examples of the use of art within impoverished Bedouin women's groups, examines the theoretical connection between arts based research and art therapy, two areas that often overlap but whose connection has not been theoretically addressed.

How does arts-based research help understand women from a different culture? It seems that classic verbal methods of interviewing or questionnaire answering are not effective forms of inquiry with these women. Bowler describes the difficulties she found in using both questionnaires and interviewing, both of which stress western style verbal articulation, as a research method with poor Asian women. She found that the women try to give the "right" answer, or to be polite. In-depth interviewing was also conceived of as a strange and foreign way of constructing and exploring the world for these women.³⁻⁵ The women are often mistakenly conceived of as 'mute' because they do not verbalize information along Western lines of inquiry.⁶

The search for a methodology that "gives voice" to silenced women is a central concern for feminist methodologies. De-Vault⁷ analyzes Western discourse as constructed along male content areas, and suggests that we "need to interview in ways that allow the exploration of un-articulated aspects of women's experiences...and explore new methodologies...." Using art as a way of initiating self expression can be seen as such a methodological innovation.

The Bedouin women's embroidery, in terms of a 'culturally embedded' message, can be seen as a traditional expression of identity, serving to communicate social information such as social position, marital status, and life transitions, and also to protect against harmful sources (Tal, 1980; Lindsfor-Tapper & Ingham, 1997). This identity is dynamic in that it evolves over one's life span, and it evolves in the context of changes within the group as a whole, such as the inclusion of new designs and colors. It is also a collective identity as against other groups, for example the Muslim movement does not encourage embroidery on dresses, seeing it as a sign of unnecessary "leisure," but the Bedouin women conceive of their embroidered dresses as a sign of Bedouin pride (Tal, 1980). Thus, the dresses can be seen as an expression of female culture and identity that is visual rather than verbal, and thus a silent non-confrontational way of expressing power (that is 'silent' verbally, but 'loud' in terms of color!). This reflects the Bedouin women's indirect use of power. We see that the use of art as communication is in fact a 'traditional' way of self-expression for Bedouin women. Additionally, we see that 'traditional' forms of self-expression are also constantly evolving. Due to increased mobility and greater shades available on the market, strong primary colors are now rendered in varying shades, and there are more types and styles of embroidery (Avruch, 1998).

Within these session, Western oriented art has been used, together with traditional crafts forms, to create a culturally 'hybridized' art situation. Following are examples of woman's interaction with their art from within the groups- that exemplify it's uses and limitations.

The following example illustrates how the dialogue between art and the individual can be transforming in itself. One young third wife whose husband is in jail for violence, said of her picture of a house with flowers, that her father didn't allow her to plant flowers by the house, and didn't allow her to play with other children, and he chose her husband for her. In the picture, she said, "I want a house; I want to build a house of my own. I want to plant a garden by the house." The picture contained past, and future, in a causal narrative, based on a specific instant that gained symbolic meaning. The narrative is poetically organized, with three elements from the past, and three from the future, corresponding to the three pictures. The dialogue was transformative, in that it allowed the drawer "to use imagination to examine how things are, but also how they could be otherwise."¹⁷ This exemplifies the arts-based paradigm that wishes to "go beyond insightful texts, to move ourselves and others into action, with the effect of improving lives."²



Another example was when an older woman, who was silent in all the meetings, made a cow, saying that a women is like a cow, when she has no milk left – she is discarded. A younger woman made a horse, saying that a women is like a horse, strong and able to carry many burdens. Here, the art 'answered' the art.

Another woman made an ashtray, and while describing how tired she was of managing as a single mother with no money, she broke the ashtray into many tiny bits in nervous movements, creating a physical embodiment of her emotional state. When the women talked to her and suggested

solutions, she started sticking all the pieces together again. She looked at her hands and laughed, noticing this. Here, the dialogue is in the art process.

Within the context of the group discussion the picture creates a concrete anchor (to use yet another metaphor!) that can be related to on many different levels of language, with everyone seeing or reacting to the same trigger (the picture being discussed). It becomes a transitional space that is a useful mediator for people from different cultures, who formulate their stories along different types of narrative. The meanings of the picture can be negotiated and clarified, through both people observing the same object. Drawing, and then discussing the drawings, serves as a form of self-interpretation, or validation, of the subject drawn, that is important with intercultural communication.⁵³ In terms of art therapy, it is congruent with the feminist and phenomenological stands that stress the artist's understandings of the art work. Following are examples of such different narratives:

One woman drew a cupful of flowers (a traditional subject in Islamic art) then said that her life is empty and boring, not like the flowers, expressing an opposite relationship to the picture.

Alternatively, another woman drew a fish in a stormy sea, to express her loneliness far away from her maternal family, using a metaphor from the natural world – expressing both silence, loneliness, and the turbulence of her circumstances.



Another woman used a metaphor of a black cloud, stating that that was the feeling of being a Bedouin woman without a husband.

Another woman took this feeling as a confrontation, stating 'why did God give us (women) hands, if he does not allow us to use them?'. She then drew a picture of the modern and the traditional women holding hands, and making a connection, stating that the modern women is pulling the traditional women in her direction., as can be seen in her picture.

Another woman drew a television, and said that all day she sits crying in front of the TV, bored and lonely, thus creating a metonym. ■

One young woman was too shy to talk about her drawing of a black circle. Her friend sitting next to her said that she thought the girl was sad there were so many people in her small house that is like a closed circle that one can't get out of. The woman nodded in agreement.

The interaction between the two friends is similar to Shvadren's analogy of observing an art work as two people, (the creator and the observer) gazing into a lighted window and both seeing new things within the room.⁴⁹ Within Feminist theory, this emphatic understanding of another person has been termed a relational form of interaction that focuses on empathy and is characteristic of female interactions.⁶ Feminist theory suggests that words, as power-structures that define reality, are created by males and thus do not describe women's experiences within this male-dominated world. For example, De-Vault,⁷ a feminist theorist claims that we "need to interview in ways that allow the exploration of unarticulated aspects of woman's experiences." The above described black circle and its ensuing dialogue may be such an 'interview.' In terms of the art product, we see a simple black circle that is not rich in terms of crafts, or in terms of Western art, but is an art form used in art therapy, focusing on "receptive or connective elements that emphasize thoughts, emotions, and relationships"⁵⁰ rather than final products.

An inter-cultural term for this emotional understanding is Steinberg and Bar-On's concept of a "dialogic moment".⁵¹ When observing Arab Jewish conflict resolution groups, they noted that these moments of empathy and understanding between Jewish and Arab students occur when a specific story or personal detail is expressed, rather than when generalized ideologies are expressed. Drawing seems to encourage the description of a 'specific' or personal instant and a specific way of 'telling' or interpreting that instant, creating, in Abu-Lughad's terms, "ethnographies of the particular...[that] capture the cultural and social "forces" that are only embodied in the actions of individuals in time and space."⁵²

One young woman said about the blue and white abstract silk-screen made in the arts and crafts group, that the brooch's colors reminded her of the sea, with a boy standing in the distance. Everyone laughed, and she said that she did want to get married, although marriage is the end of freedom, and then you stay at home and don't go to the sea anymore. Thus, the picture enabled a dialogue of ambivalence. When people live in more than one culture and are undergoing acculturation, the ability to integrate

different cultural or personal understandings, or even opposing feelings as part of a whole, is considered beneficial to the acculturation process.⁵⁵ Talking in a linear sequence seems to invite a more unified dialogue, as each point has to come after the last, rather than being shown simultaneously. The art as a trigger for discussion enabled a complex version of reality that is not reduced to one truth.

Another example is of a young teenage girl from this group with no head cover and jeans wearing a large Magen David (a Jewish and national symbol which is currently part of the teen fashion in necklaces in Israel) who drew a picture of a Bedouin tent, and said that she liked the traditional Bedouin culture best (maybe also expressing a wish for less complicated times in terms of identity). This is similar to Abu-Lughad's suggestion⁵⁶ that specific, individual examples negate cultural stereotypes. For instance, she describes a woman swearing and citing from the Koran in the same sentence, thus refusing to be reduced to one truth. (Ibid).

To summarize, both the reflective dialogue between drawer and drawing, and the interactive elements of the group dynamics combine to create a triangular situation with many different types of interactions, for instance between a drawer and her own drawing, between a drawer and other people's drawing, and between a drawer and other people.^{57,58} The following sketch illustrates the complexity and multiple interactions of this situation.

It seems that art as research can enhance understanding between the Bedouin women and the dominant Israeli culture, by offering a complex multifaceted expression of the Bedouin women's concerns, together with their understanding of these concerns. Feminist research states that "rather than trying to study the 'other' or to give voice to the other, researchers are called to listen, instead, to the plural voices of those 'othered' as constructors and agents of knowledge."⁶³

This does not exclude the need for constant reflexivity in understanding the cultural meanings implied by different art interventions. That are expressed in the paradox built into the method, and mentioned above, of trying to access non-western experience, through western methods.

Additionally, Bedouin women's art, such as crafts, 'relational' art such as in art for communication (rather than art as diagnostics) art as research (rather than words only)—all challenge western classic conceptions of art and its roles (and thus, of Bedouin women, of psychology, and of research).



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