

'Your mind at your fingertips'

A phenomenological study of the experience of hand-building with
clay.

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Title: ‘Your mind at your fingertips’: A phenomenological study of the experience of hand-building with clay.

Research Question: What are the embodied experiences when creating with clay?

Abstract

An artwork is a collaborative activity between the artist's mind, bodily senses, environment, and an art medium. This qualitative research study used a phenomenological approach to explore the artists' unique and personal experiences during hand-building with clay. The main aim of this study is to respond to the research question: What are the embodied experiences when creating with clay? This study explored connections between the human body and mind with a specific interest in how artists relate to their art medium. The two participants for this study were purposefully selected from ceramic artists who use the hand-building method as their main technique. To explore the lived experience of how it appears to an artist, the semi-structured interview method was used. Interviews were held and recorded at participating artists' ceramic studios. The rationale behind these arrangements was that the environment where artists work with clay will help to relive and recall the experience. Analysis of acquired data revealed reoccurring themes and meanings in both interviews. For example, the agency of clay as a contributor to the creative process. Also, the positive effect on the artist's mental states during the making process. The findings of this study correspond with some of the existing research about tactile art materials and the effect they have on the person who manipulates them (Kemske,2009); (Groth, 2017); (Wong and Au, 2019), (Elbrecht and Antfield, 2014).

Introduction

“What we make either stays or vanishes, but the experience has changed us, maybe in little ways, maybe in great ways.” (Groth, 2017, p.xi)

Clay is arguably one of the oldest and commonly available art mediums. It is one of the most accessible art materials suitable to people of various abilities and ages. With clay, people can create beautiful items and have a great sense of satisfaction when the piece of mud is turned in to a shiny rock-hard piece of art. Yet, clay has a certain uniqueness about it that allows a person holding and manipulating it in its raw state to experience a pleasant tactile feeling. Several research studies reported that the tactile qualities of clay can contribute to the sense of well-being, during, and after handling it.

Clay for mental wellbeing

Clay has very distinct tactile qualities and is compliant in one's hands. It is a material used not just in visual arts but also as a therapeutic tool. The tactile qualities of clay make it a perfect mediator for exploring and expressing feelings Wong and Au (2019).

Groth (2017) in her study engaged deafblind participants in a clay workshop to explore how meaning can be created by experiencing haptic qualities of clay without or partial use of language. When a person holds and manipulates clay the body heat is transferred to the clay adding to the tactile experience, another pleasant dimension that contributes to the sense of emotional well-being (Wong and Au, 2019). An experimental research study with 36 participants, of which half handled clay with their bare hands while others were manipulating clay wearing gloves, confirmed that direct tactile experience with clay significantly improves positive mood while the absence of direct finger contact with clay does not change individuals sense of well-being (Wong and Au, 2019). Their findings resonate with Elbrecht and Antfield (2014) review about the use of the 'clay field' in the treatment of emotional trauma. The clay field is a box filled with smooth textured clay and is used in the presence of a therapist. Hand movement in the clay gives intermediate feedback to the brain and access to haptic perception allowing interaction between human neurobiology and active expression of lived experiences (Elbrecht and Antfield, 2014). Many therapeutic activities involve the use of hands as an active tool for creative expression yet there is not much literature that would describe how tactile experiences contribute to therapeutic effect (Elbrecht and Antfield, 2014). Groth (2019) in her study of embodied knowing and haptic experiences, found that haptic experiences triggered the variety of emotions. Clay as a creative material has a capacity to facilitate new meaning-making in an active way. Even though, Groth (2019) points out the lack of research about embodied knowing within creative practices employing tactile materials.

The tactile component

Artists and crafters who create objects with their hands are engaging with the material through one of the main senses – touch. According to Krueger (2008) cited in Banfield and Burgess (2013) the artists' minds, bodily senses, and environment work together to produce the artists' creation. Consequently, the tactile experience of art material could be a strong contributing factor in overall artmaking experience. This would lead to thinking that different art materials have a different effect on an individual. When the sense of touch is stimulated it can provoke various emotional responses (Groth, 2017).

The feeling of flow

People all over the world engage in art-making activities. Some do it to earn a living, others do it as a hobby. The one thing they all have in common is that they are doing it because through the process they achieve a 'feel good' form of being. This very specific feeling is relevant to the activity of making and not the finished creation.

In the words of Csikszentmihalyi (1997, p. 1):

"These exceptional moments are what I have called "flow" experiences. The metaphor of flow is one that many people have used to describe the sense of effortless action they feel in moments that stand out as the best in their lives. Athletes refer to it as "being in the zone," religious mystics as being in "ecstasy," artists and musicians as "aesthetic rapture."

These moments of complete engagement are the ones that give the feeling of being alive and life is worth living. Artists seem to achieve this feeling of flow effortlessly and naturally in the process of artmaking (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). By understanding how

artists get to the state of flow would be possible to help more people achieve similar enjoyment in their daily life activities. There are many studies examining artists' experiences of flow. Yet very few are looking at flow experience in connection with the art material.

Artists' experience through the tactile nature of the art medium is a way of experiencing the physical body or embodiment. It is a way of experiencing the physical world through touch. Embodiment is one of the lifeworld dimensions at the core of phenomenological research (Kirkbride and Smith, 2016). This research study uses a phenomenological lifeworld centred approach to explore how ceramic artists who use hand-building technique as their primary making with clay method, experience the process of handling and manipulating clay. Through 1:1 semi-structured interview with two ceramicists in their studio environment, we unfolded their experiences as they are felt and experienced by them. The analysis of both interviews not just resonates with findings by other researchers, they also show an intimate insight into an individual's way of being and perceiving him/herself through an art medium. The hope is that the findings from this study could make a however small contribution towards a better understanding of benefits that clay can offer for improving and maintaining mental well-being. The aim of this study was to respond to the research question: What are the embodied experiences when creating with clay?

Method

Methodology

The study is about the lived experience of how it appears to the artist thus qualitative research study was designed. The concern of this study lays with the very subjective and deeply personal nature of how the clay as an art medium is felt. This research does not attempt to validate or pigeonhole this phenomenon to any preconceptions or pre-defined theories (Finlay, 2011). Phenomenological methodology and the lifeworld-centred approach opened the possibility to have a glimpse of how artists experience the world while manipulating clay. This was an opportunity to immerse oneself as close as possible into the artists 'natural attitude' (Finlay, 2011). Meaning that the experience is seen in a holistic manner by exploring together with the artist they embodied experiences as they unfold during semi-structured 1:1 interview.

Ethical considerations

This study was designed in a way that recognizes the duty towards participants. Only adults aged 18 and over were invited to participate. The information sheet clearly states that people from vulnerable groups are ineligible to participate. Participants were asked to sign an informed consent form before commencing the interview. No sensitive or intrusive questions were asked during the interview. The consent form contained information about their right to withdraw from the study and all the necessary contact information. All participants were assigned pseudonyms and their confidentiality respected throughout the research process and after.

Procedure

Two participants were purposefully selected from the artists researcher knows in personal and/or professional capacity. This study explores an artist's experience of

manipulating clay. Thus, the ideal participants were ceramic artists who use the hand-building method as their main technique. The semi-structured 1:1 interview method felt the best-suited for accessing data that is filled with nuances about artists' unique relationship with the art medium. This data collection method allowed the necessary freedom to explore unexpected (not in the interview schedule) elements of the phenomena. Both interviews were held in the artist studios. The rationale behind this arrangement was that the familiar environment where artists work would help to relive and recall the lived experience of manipulating clay. Participants were surrounded by their own work in different stages of progress which was helpful when artists talked about meanings related to their experiences. Pottery studios have a very specific smell of clay and glazes making it an ideal setting to evoke one's sensory awareness (Guillemin & Harris, 2014). Both artists received an information sheet and signed two copies of the consent form. Artist was briefed about the study and explained his/her rights as a participant. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and was recorded on two audio devices. Artists were encouraged to expand on their experiences on what they are feeling while creating with clay. Interview questions were directed to access dimensions of the lifeworld as they are lived and interpreted by the artist.

Pilot:

For the pilot study was recruited a textile artist. This artist uses wool and other natural tactile fibres for weaving. The interview questions were adapted to suit this art material. The interview revealed the shortcomings in the interview schedule. It also helped to correct the timing. The experience of doing this interview was helpful in dealing with researcher's anxiety regards the following two interviews.

Participants

This study has two participants, one female, and one male. Both are over 65 years old. One of the participants identified creating with clay as a hobby. This participant is working with clay once a week as a member of the group facilitated by a ceramic artist in his studio. She has been doing it for over ten years now. The second participant is a professional studio artist with his own art studio. For anonymity purposes, both artists were assigned aliases, Hannah, and Paul. Paul mainly makes sculptural forms.

Paul: "I make vessels and container forms but not necessarily utile forms. But they hold space"
25-26

Reflexivity

The researcher is a ceramicist with an interest in the therapeutic effect making with clay can have. It was the main motivation behind the choice of the research question. However, during this project, the personal experiences were 'bracketed'. It allowed engagement in the research process with a genuine curiosity and openness to Hannah and Paul's way of making meaning of their interactions with clay.

Analytical procedures

The two interview audio recordings were uploaded on the computer and transcribed by typing on the computer in transcription software 'Express Scribe'. The first step was familiarisation with the data by repeatedly reading and listening to interviews and dwelling

for a while with it (Finlay, 2013). Each transcript was explored, and initial notes were made against sentences and/or paragraphs of the transcribed text e.g. '*you can do things in your own way with clay*' as the initial note(code) for

Hannah: "You bash it back together.....its not how you are meant to inverted commas build it but it does not matter"56-59

Initial codes were developed with no theories or approaches in mind except for embracing a phenomenological attitude. Finlay (2013) tells how the starting point of phenomenological research is the researcher's deep interest and excitement about something that emerges as a research question. The researcher for this study is a ceramic artist with a passion for clays' positive impact on people. The following steps in data analysis were guided by Lifeworld – centred approach and four lifeworld dimensions embodiment, sociality, spatiality and temporality and recognizing that all these dimensions are interlinked (Finlay, 2011). The next step was reading over the initial codes and changing them into more developed codes/themes. During this stage, new 'lines would attract attention and they would be noted down. The analysis with quotes from research participants has been organised under subheadings corresponding to lifeworld dimensions. Two additional themes emerged during analysis that required their own subheadings, 'Enjoyment and Flow', and 'Clay as a living material' Throughout the research process epoche was applied (Stenner and Lazard, 2016)

Analysis

Embodiment

A very distinct quality that sets clay apart from all other arts and crafts materials is its tactility and responsiveness to human touch. The consistency and texture of clay can vary greatly depending on the type of clay. The type of clay will inform what will be made, the size and type of the artefact yet to be created. The texture of clay can also make an artist to envision finished object placed in environment.

Hannah: "It depends what sort of clay ... I can use a heavily grogged clay that is going hold its form much easier ... if I am using heavy grogged clay I am probably already thinking about this going to go in my garden ... I think the type of clay you use will inform the viability of what you are going to make to start with. The grogged clay is for the bigger things "pp.141-47

Clay itself is described as changing. The same type of clay may feel different today than it felt day or two before

Hannah: "If I wanted to do something small and simple and you know maybe go for raku later it's going to be the easy squishy clay. And the squishy clay might be mor squishy one day than it is another day and that makes a difference" pp.156-57

When asked to describe the process of handbuilding, both participants tell how they feel clay through their hands and how this tactile feeling can change as clay changes its consistency through the making process. During the process of making clay transitions through several stages from being soft and malleable to dry and fragile. Each stage gives a completely different tactile experience. There might be a conventional term that is used for certain stages of clay in its making process e.g.

leather-hard, bone-dry etc. yet, the subjective experience is described in a unique to the individual way.

Paul: I noticed I enjoyed just direct finger marks you know like sticking your fingers in a mud." Pp. 30-34

"Yes, a tactile quality. It has a flesh like feeling but it has not got bones underneath. It gives and spreads out, sometimes it resists, depending of what stage it's at." Pp. 72-73

"You involve yourself because the tactile quality changes from soft to a no resistance to nearly leather hard but not quite so you can still bend and shape to not being able to bend it but it's not going to if you put too much pressure on its still not going to brake to a stage where if you put pressure on it will crack and break." pp82-85

For Hannah who makes her work in a group, sound is an always present experience. It is described as a *'technical noise'* and accepted as a part of the studio environment. The sound of 'batting' a pot is given a detailed description by Hannah

Hannah: "the batting and then that's quite funny when two or three people doing it's almost like people playing musical instruments isn't it? (...?) the hollow sound of the batting on the pot "171-73

Visionary experience, while clearly present during making does not appear to have a significant impact in the process of making for Hannah. Hannah describes how she notices imperfections of her own fingers when smoothing her clay creations. Nevertheless, creating in clay could be done by just relying on your hands and sense of touch

Hannah: "...you don't have to focus so much on the clay. Which is why partially sighted people can do it as well because you actually can have a form but it's at the end of the day you can actual shut your eyes and think I'll still make something." pp. 86-89

Physical touch of clay can bring to one's awareness sounds, smells and feelings from memory allowing to immerse oneself in the variety of all these previous experiences and directly or indirectly apply them to the object in making. It reveals a fascinating interrelatedness between human body and mind.

Paul: "It's to reference physicality of being in different spaces in different environments so it can be smell sensations of being on a coast with some cliffs behind me, the waves throwing in or it can being in a city with high raised buildings or buildings being knocked down, buildings being rebuilt around me. All sensory experiences all spatial experiences all involving experiences again by not thinking too much about them but just allowing oneself to physically become part of it. And clay allows me to become physically involved with all those things." Pp. 100-106

Enjoyment and Flow

Both artists reveal the pleasantness of just holding clay and joy they felt from the first encounter with this material. Their main enjoyment is in the process of making, not in the finished item. The process is described as so involving that everything what might be going on in one's life outside the studio lo importance.

Hannah: "sometimes you can sit and just have one piece of clay and think 'I'm not really in a mood to make anything today (?) around a bit of clay and then maybe chucking in a reclaim after the end of three hours when you produced nothing! It does not really matter"195-97

This engaged state is described as 'being in a zone' where your hands create apparently of their own accord, the outside world diminishes to a whisper and our perception of time becomes mute. This leaves the artist feeling better after the making session. This fits with the theory about the state of Flow by (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997)

Hannah: "it's because I can come in to this room I mean whatever is going on out there maybe having a bad time and three hours I will spend here will always be ...I will always go out feeling better than I came."191-193

Paul: "The time in terms of when you actually working in the zone or whether its dialog is going on. Time does not exist. Time is a concept"117-118

Words 'joy' and 'I like' are constantly present in conversation. It is a joy experienced when directly interacting with clay.

Paul: ""So, I enjoyed the process of just handling clay basically." 8-9

Hannah: "and because I love it. It's almost like a Fridays I've only come what three hours a week on a Friday morning its almost the (unrecognisable speech) I would not give anything else up." 31-32

Hannah: "because yeah you just enjoy doing it and it does not matter how long it takes you to do" 74

Asked about how does working with clay affects their moods and feelings e.g. when the process is progressing as planned and when there are challenges to be faced. The Handling of clay seems to encourage positive feelings and emotions irrespective of the practical outcome.

Paul: "It just takes over and so I don't have any feelings when working with clay. I have loads of feelings in terms of responses what is there and what is happening. But any external feelings which relate to I am not having a good time somewhere else or I am having a great time somewhere else it is all irrelevant. And they might start off as being relevant because they might start me working in a certain way. But by the time one gets in to working and getting in to zone they become irrelevant." Pp.133-138

Clay as a living material

Clay might be just a lump of mud to many but for these artists clay is so much more. It is a co-creator of their artwork, often attributed with humanlike traits. There is a relationship between the material and the artist.

Paul: And it is a dialog between the material between how the material moves and then I respond to it 54-55

Paul: "it's a give and take. I think it is certainly in that particular piece the part of me imposing on the clay that it will be upright vertical and bottle like form. There I imposed but apart from that what happened then the clay imposed. 160-163

Hannah: ""so if you actually are feeling a little bit lower you can just slow it down a bit. and clay will go with you."212-13

Aktas and Mkela (2013) observed this relationship between the artist and material during wet felting process where artists use wool as a co-creator. "We identify this interaction as a negotiation, a self-explanatory word that refers to a dynamic

relationship in which both parties participate in a discussion and agree on a conclusion.” (Aktas and Mkela, 2013)

A shared experience, Sociality

Hannah's attendance in group sessions and the social element of working with clay has become almost inseparable from the clay itself. The importance of people around her is constantly mentioned throughout the interview with Hannah.

Hannah: I have tried doing stuff at home in isolation and that does not work for me at all. I almost lose interest in actually the whole process if I am doing it solo. 106-110

for me, the whole part of the joy of the pottery is also being within the community of potters 112-113

Hannah refers to herself as an amateur potter and it was intriguing to explore a little more what is the difference from perceiving herself as a professional potter. Hannah's answer to this question felt like it was directed inwards to herself, reinforcing the importance of the shared experience component in her engagement with clay.

Hannah: Friday mornings are my little section in my life I do potterying I love it it's a very important little section of my life and I have got to the stage where cos I've been here in this lovely environment for so long. if environment goes away does pottery stay ? and that is what I cannot answer 272-275

Making and Temporality

Time, a constantly present feature in ceramics e.g. drying time, firing time and temperature per hour and temperature holding time. At the same time while working with clay time is not felt more than a part of technical process.

Paul: “The time in terms of when you actually working in the zone or whether its dialog is going on. Time does not exist. Time is a concept”117-118

Paul: I mean the process of working with clay has a strict time sense because obviously clay dries out and it reaches the stage when you cannot manipulate it anymore. You can still attack it you can hit it with an axe, you can scrape it, you can splash it with glazes and slips you know. There are various stages in which you can still operate, and they take time. you have to wait for clay to take time actual time to reach those stages” pp. 110-14

Paul:” Time is just this construct that we have. How is that affect working with clay? Just a process and just in terms of the process minutes or hours waiting of various things to happen. Time of firing it. If you wanted to do certain firings, then you need several days, or you will need just 12 hours or whatever depends on the sort of firings 126-129

The interpreted data revealed the variety of positive sensory and emotional experiences are received when manipulating clay. With the main sensory input coming through hands it stresses the importance of haptic experiences and demonstrates interrelatedness between haptics and cognition.

Discussion

The completed analysis indicated that the tactile nature of clay may indeed promote a positive state of mind. Clay is an accessible and easily malleable hand material. These qualities make it a great choice for people of varied abilities and ages. It can have an important social engagement element if done in a group with others. Both artist accounts revealed the abundance of sensory inputs they experience when working with clay. They revealed the fascinating interrelatedness between human bodily experiences and mind

Chilton (2013) in her paper about how the feeling of flow could be applied to art therapy tells how one of the reasons to engage in art making is “that of discovering “organized feeling, the rhythms of life, the forms of emotion”” (Chilton, 2013). Paul describes how clay lets him connect with various environments and allows his feelings to become levelled with his interactions with clay.

Paul: All sensory experiences all spatial experiences all involving experiences again by not thinking too much about them but just allowing oneself to physically become part of it. And clay allows me to become physically involved with all those things.104-106

One of the very common ways of describing the feeling of flow is as ‘being in the zone’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). Paul and Hannah do not mention the feeling of flow nevertheless they refer the feeling of full engagement as ‘being in the zone’.

Paul: So, it is about being in that zone where intuition takes over where you not thinking anymore you are responding.45-46

Kemske (2009) discussing the importance of the tactile feedback in arts points out that “The making process as an experience rather than just a way to reach the end point” Kemske (2009) In a quite similar way for Hannah and Paul the experience of making appears to be more important than actual end product.

Hannah: “when you start the end product is more important. But as you do it for longer the process is probably more important than the actual ware ... because yeah you just enjoy doing it 70-74

Groth (2017) in her paper about embodied cognition describes a ceramic workshop she facilitated with partially sighted participants who were successfully able to create things in clay and enjoy the experience. Hannah’s observations and personal experience same as Groth (2017) findings confirm that in pottery making the primary sensory importance is that of the touch.

Hannah: partially sighted people can do it as well because you actually you can form you can have a form but it’s at the end of the day you can actual shut your eyes and think I’ll still make something.87-89

Findings from this study add to the existing knowledge about embodied experiences during claywork. More importantly, this study emphasizes the importance of direct tactile experiences. Since doing this research study, the world suddenly changed because of COVID-19. Many experiences we took for granted became impossible over night. A hug and a kiss from a friend or just a comforting hand on your shoulder are all

experiences which may be just a memory for a while to come. A better understanding of how through engaging with art materials (a soothing activity in its own right) the feeling of giving and receiving touch could be emulated, now has more relevance to 'real' life than ever. Clay surely is a great material for creating beautiful objects, but it also gives an incredible experience of touch. Both artists during their interviews repeatedly stressed the tactile qualities of clay and positive feelings during claywork. It resonates with Elbrecht (2014) paper about "Trauma treatment through haptic perception at the Clay Field" An established type of therapy where no objects are produced and a tray filled with clay is used by a person to experience safe and comforting touch both to give and to receive. Any contribution, however small that generates a better understanding of clay's soothing qualities for both mind and body will help to encourage its use, not just by therapists but also in the variety of settings e.g. educational, recreational.

Many of research participants experiences and feelings resonated with the researcher as a fellow ceramicist. After conducting both interviews, She went to her studio, picked up a lump of clay and stuck her finger in it. A sense that was experienced thousands of times before without paying attention to it just knowing that for some magical reason it made her feel better. Possibly practice led research could reveal more about the embodied experiences we have while manipulating clay. Researching experience 'first-hand' could give access to the tacit knowledge of clay works which forms a basis of how artists 'know' what they are doing without thinking about it (Groth, 2017). It is not unusual today to engage in art-based research the results of which not just provide rich description to analyse but also researcher's direct response to the research topic.

During the interview analysis the researcher stayed true to the data which can be seen by the included quotes from artists. The analysis was done from a stance of scientist not artist, nevertheless the knowledge of pottery 'jargon' was helpful at times giving the researcher an ability to have a full understanding of the conversational meaning, in particular where pottery processes were described. During analysis the researcher could unfold experiences and describe them in an accessible way because of their personal pottery knowledge and curiosity in how others experience clayworks and their quest to know more about what clay can offer.

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