A COLLECTIVE CASE STUDY OF VETERANS INSIDE AN ARTS AND CRAFTS ROOM AND THEIR PERCEPTIONS REGARDING EMPOWERMENT

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This dissertation is “A Collective Case Study of Veterans Inside an Arts and Crafts Room and Their Perceptions Regarding Empowerment.” This research examined to what degree art making, and in what ways a community of learning contributed to veterans’ self-worth and empowerment through their creative activities and interactions inside an arts and crafts room at the VA hospital in Dallas, Texas. Furthermore, an essential reason for this study is to examine veterans in the arts and crafts environment to explore whether their experiences were important, meaningful, and empowering, and especially important in this regard are the interactions among veterans.

Empowerment in this context is defined as gaining self-esteem and motivation within oneself. This includes becoming more confident and positive, as well as gaining the ability to learn about one’s own identity. It also described how the interactions between the participants are shaped by the social contexts within which they come together. Using post-modern feminist theory, narrative inquiry and care theory, this dissertation describes the ways that the processes and products of creative activity bring empowerment through dialogue and personal stories while using the component of caring during teaching and learning.
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By

Cindy Lee Hasio
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my beloved cat Theo, who has been with me from the very start through thick and thin.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Painting and drawing have always allowed me to construct personal meaning, contributing to my sense of identity. Creating unusual visual solutions to creative problems is my way of thinking outside of the box. Throughout my life, I have always allowed art to be my outlet for how I felt about myself and my life experiences. That was, however, until I joined the military in order to help pay for art college. The negative experiences that I experienced during my service in the military hindered my arts and crafts production. As a soldier, I was conditioned to lose my individuality, and after a few years, I felt that I had lost my sense of personal identity. Furthermore, I had no one inside or outside the military to support me creatively during this period, and in fact, even after I left the U.S. Army and was a free civilian, I did not create any art at all for the next year.

The only reason I started making art again was that my mother convinced me to go back to college at the Art Institute of Houston. Once I felt supported within a creative environment, I reconnected my identity with art because there were others around me who also loved it. Slowly, I experienced a personal transformation when I interacted with others who shared a passion for art, and as a result, this influenced me to begin making paintings and drawings again. This reconnection to creative activity gave me a renewed sense of empowerment, understanding of my world, and my ability to communicate with others. Creating art became a cathartic purification of the soul as I transformed myself within a creative environment that supported my transition from the military lifestyle, leaving behind a world in which one is barred from thinking for oneself, and expected simply to obey orders.

A watershed moment for the importance of art in both my personal and professional lives
came by accident when I discovered the arts and crafts room during a visit to the Dallas VA Hospital for a doctor’s appointment. There was an art contest in the main area of the hospital, and I learned that I could enter a painting if I went to the arts and crafts room. It was then that I discovered there was a place in the hospital that supported creative activities for the community of veterans. Since that day, I have remained a frequent visitor to the arts and crafts room, where I have been able to connect with others through my artwork, becoming a part of a community supporting creative expression. This connection comes from establishing dialogue, exchanging narratives, and seeing things from others’ perspectives. It has been especially meaningful to me to help other veterans enjoy arts and crafts experiences, since art helped me regain my personal identity after my military experience, and for that reason, I decided to help other veterans by volunteering in arts and crafts rooms at VA Hospitals. I have volunteered at the VA Hospital in Dallas since 2007, and at the recreation room at the VA Center in Fort Worth during 2008-2009. These experiences have been personally fulfilling on many levels, having enabled me to help other veterans as I shared personal experiences. I gained a sense of purpose through my volunteering experiences and a feeling of empowerment as I helped other veterans gain art skills and knowledge.

For me, the word empowerment means to gain a positive purpose in one’s life that builds self-esteem and personal meaning, but this type of empowerment can be hard to attain for veterans who feel isolated and therefore have a limited outlook on life. A few also bear the weight of mental and physical conditions that may hinder their ability to seek the proper help to build self-esteem and sense of self. That is why it is extremely fortunate that veterans who suffer post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other mental and physical problems may find therapeutic opportunities through arts and crafts centers on military bases and hospitals. My own
experiences have shown me that the arts and crafts room at the Veterans Medical Center in Dallas is just such an environment that supports veterans’ efforts to build self-empowerment by nurturing creative recreation.

Since spending time in such an environment has proven so essential to my own process of regaining a strong sense of personal identity, in this study, I am interested in exploring the ways other veterans have experienced self-empowerment in arts and crafts settings in VA hospitals. Being immersed in a community of shared culture is essential for an individual to gain a sense of empowerment (Daniel & Stuhr, 2006). Moreover, as postmodern theory points out, multiple realities show the unique and diverse ways humans learn through social interchanges in situated social environments. Inside the VA hospital arts and crafts room, such learning experiences, based on dialogue among veterans, are essential to fostering individual growth, self-esteem, and empowerment. Therefore, I have chosen as my methodology qualitative research in an arts-related environment, with a special focus on veterans as an underrepresented group. Throughout my study, it has been especially important to gain insights into individuals’ perceptions, since the new knowledge derived from the study of interpersonal experiences can illuminate the unique culture of a particular situated learning environment in ways that enrich the pedagogy of art education research. The three case studies that form the core of this study can, then, be described as a discourse of learning about a distinct sub-culture, the world of veterans. Apropos of the cultural setting of VA hospitals’ arts and crafts rooms, it is important to note that while veterans who spend time in arts and crafts rooms are also often involved in art therapy, the experiences this study examines, while therapeutic, should not be confused with art therapy, and I am not an art therapist. Nevertheless, I have witnessed the power and significance of veterans’ experiences inside the arts and crafts room, as their interactions lead to confidence and
empowerment. As this study will demonstrate, these veterans’ voices are passionate with the
desire to speak for themselves, and my study invites the reader to explore and interpret the ways
in which arts, crafts, and veterans’ communities convey the variety and depth of their
experiences of empowerment. This is evident when one of my participants Marine said “I feel
that coming here makes me feel alive. It’s better than being at home. I can share my work with
others and teach them how to make beads. It helps me not think about the people I killed in Nam
(Vietnam)” (Personal communication, June 12, 2010).

Statement of the Problem

For many veterans, feeling disenfranchised within society and misunderstood is a
common story (Tick, 2005). Similarly, some veterans do not know where to find public forums
that will allow them to transition back to civilian life or express their feelings and experiences as
ex-soldiers (Tick, 2005). Unfortunately, many find little assistance, and they struggle through
these difficult life changes. Consequently, such veterans typically remain secluded, invisible in
general society, struggling to communicate with people in the general population. One veteran
describes such an orientation:

It can be frustrating. It’s why a lot of veterans tend to stick around each other, because
they share the same perspective . . . trying to explain what it’s like being in a war is like
trying to relate a spiritual experience to someone who doesn’t believe in God. (Clinic
Helps Veterans with PTSD, 2009, p. 3)

Difficulty assimilating into general society for many veterans comes from post-traumatic
stress disorder (PTSD). This condition, very difficult to heal, is best understood as an identity
disorder and ‘soul wound’ (Tick, 2005). Tick (2005) describes it as an emotional pain affecting
the personality at the deepest level. In fact, many veterans share the struggle of deep emotional
scars that affect the quality of their everyday lives (Tick, 2005). Post-traumatic memories are
hard to forget, and the effects for veterans who experience PTSD can be triggered by sights,
sounds, or smells that are seemingly innocent to others.

A PTSD trigger is a traumatic memory, causing the individual to feel threatened and unable to control the recurrence of the traumatic recollection (Herman, 1992). Triggers can be brought on by visual images, sounds, memories, scenes in a film or on television, the behavior of others, the environment, or the mere presence of certain individuals (Herman, 1992). This deeply affects the quality of life and potential to socialize for some veterans. Creating arts and crafts based on their painful experiences is an outlet for some veterans to discover meaning in the experience that allows them to work through PTSD issues. Veterans’ needs for creative work during the process of recovery is not commonly understood. I strongly believe that a community like the arts and crafts room at the Dallas VA Medical Center should be recognized and valued because veterans’ voices and personal histories can contribute to learning about art education in diverse settings. It is here that arts and crafts become part of a learning process that can help them heal, and, in some instances, fully overcome personal obstacles.

Through my discussions with veterans at the Veteran’s Centers in Fort Worth and Dallas, I learned that art helps them decrease mental stress and makes them feel better emotionally and physically. In fact, some veterans shared that they felt that they had no purpose or happiness in their lives until they started coming to the recreation room. Importantly, over time, I observed that the veterans who felt this way achieved such results specifically from spending time with other veterans in an arts and crafts environment. I intend to examine how the activities and interactions within that environment instill a sense of purpose, confidence, and empowerment in select veterans. What can we learn from these veterans and how might that knowledge be applied to other art education settings?
The Role of the Arts and Crafts Program in the Veteran Hospitals

In order to analyze the specific ways arts and crafts environments benefit veterans working to overcome personal difficulties, this study explores the details of arts and crafts work veterans engaged in as they forged communities of healing and self-empowerment. Part of those activities include making craft kits that were donated by the non-profit organization, Help Hospitalized Veterans (HHV) (2009). HHV distributes craft kits to veterans, who may choose to complete crafts inside or outside of the hospital. Their website describes a four-year study conducted at thirteen VA hospitals that found that the craft kits enjoy a 98.7% positive response from veterans (Help Hospitalized Veterans, p.1). Inside the arts and crafts room, the main creative production by veterans is studio art, expressive works that experiment with various media such as paint, pastel, and ink to explore individual visions, but many also choose to work with HHV craft kits that include clocks, leather crafts, beadwork, and model airplanes and cars.

While I have personally observed that veterans enjoy creating arts and crafts, this study seeks to examine the deeper benefits of such work. Is art-making simply “fun”, or like myself, are veterans obtaining something more from these activities and interactions? Arts and crafts can play an important role in helping individuals develop psychomotor, artistic, and social skills, allowing an individual to engage in acts of creation by following basic instructions, without training in the arts (Agostinone-Wilson, 2001). In my definition, art can be any creative production expressed in any media that has narrative meaning for the artist. Such elements encompass emotion, style, and subject matter personal to the artist. Clearly, then, the nuts and bolts of craft kits—following instructions, assembling pieces in a sequential order that results in a pre-determined product—is not art, lacking the creative component that releases individual expression necessary for deep therapeutic treatment (Fleshman & Fryrear, 1981). While it is
certainly true that craft kits may be individualized by adding decoration to the final product, generally speaking, craft making functions in therapeutic settings as “busy work” (Fleshman & Fryrear, 1981). Nevertheless, for veterans who lack experience making art, crafts do make possible new avenues to self-expression. My volunteer experiences have shown me that veterans gain a sense of camaraderie by making arts and crafts together and sharing stories of their experiences with each other. Agostinone-Wilson (2001) notes that “the community is both social and isolating at once as crafting is marked by periods of solitude and sharing . . . we can view the sameness of craft items as expressions of . . . community interests and values” (p.90). The power of craft for veterans, then, lies in the social interaction that flows naturally from the arts and crafts process in a community setting.

In almost four years of volunteering, I carefully observed veterans’ interactions and discussions during and after making crafts, and my own collaboration in such processes showed me how veterans learn best amid creative and collaborative processes. Connecting with veterans through conversations as I assisted them, they shared their ideas and stories with me. What is known about veterans and their art depends on the quality of the relationships they create in the community (Cleveland, 2005). I learned that, like me, veterans gained a sense of peace from making arts and crafts, and their crafting associations formed an important community for them. Moreover, arts and crafts in such a community setting sparked dialogue and mutual critique (Agostinone-Wilson, 2001), which opened discussions reflecting the interests and values of the participants, demonstrating the importance of the arts and crafts community as a forum of individual and communal expression.

For example, most veterans expressed their desire to help others make crafts and were empathetic to those who suffered mental stress. A few encouraged veterans who made crafts to
add creative details that were more personal to individuals. These veterans affirmed the value of personal meaning, encouraging others to think more reflectively about what they had made. This is evidenced when one of my participants Alexander told me, “I really feel good when people ask me advice or ask me for help when painting” (Personal communication, July 15, 2010). Some craft kits were easier than others to assemble, allowing more severely disabled veterans access to creating crafts as well. Veterans could bring the crafts home if they chose to, or do them at the hospital where they would have interaction and support from other veterans. I also observed how many of these veterans started as novices and after acquiring the knowledge and productive skills to make arts and crafts, helped newcomers in the arts and craft room. They taught them techniques in art production as part of the socio-cultural practices of this veteran community. This type of situated learning means that veterans participated in frameworks structured by learning art production in a respectful and communicative setting. This was reinforced with rules and regulations posted inside the recreation room (see Appendix A). While arts and crafts may not have been the vehicle for artistic expression in and of themselves, the ways that veterans created communities of learning that specifically addressed the needs of individuals working to overcome mental and emotional challenges established the arts and crafts community as a platform for individual expression and community communication that functioned in a deeply therapeutic manner.

**Research Questions**

It is important to learn how different individuals can construct personal meaning as they learn from others because it can allow those who participate to understand their own histories and conditions in life (McTaggart, 1997). Interacting with others who may share one’s experiences can build relationships and connections. Consequently, it is my hypothesis that veterans perceive
a sense of empowerment when they participate in creative activities and interact with others within a supportive environment. My dissertation focuses on the following research question:

1) Do veterans perceive that they become empowered through their creative activities and interactions inside an arts and crafts room at the VA hospital in Dallas, Texas?

Empowerment in this context is defined as gaining self-esteem and motivation within oneself. This includes becoming more confident and positive, as well as gaining the ability to learn about one’s own identity. Sub-questions for this study are:

a) If so, to what degree does making arts and crafts influence veterans’ perceptions of empowerment?

b) If so, to what degree do interactions among veterans influence their perceptions of empowerment?

The Historical Role of the Arts and Crafts Program in Veterans’ Hospitals

During the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, there emerged new interest in the therapeutic values of art for recreational purposes, especially in hospitals (Fleshman & Fryrear, 1981). Researchers began to study the spontaneous art products of psychotic individuals, along with experimenting with music therapy and psychodrama. Fleshman & Fryrear (1981) describe music therapy as the clinical use of music interventions to accomplish individualized goals with a music therapist. Psychodrama is a method of psychotherapy in which clients are encouraged to continue and complete their actions through dramatization, role playing, and dramatic self-presentation (Fleshman & Fryrear, 1981). In addition, After World War I, occupational therapy was formally introduced as a treatment that included arts and crafts (Fleshman & Fryrear, 1981). The role of the arts and crafts program within VA hospitals across the United States originated through the treatment of veterans returning from World War II. Amid the tremendous demands made upon the therapeutic community by the large number of returning disabled soldiers, new therapeutic techniques were created, including artistic
approaches (Fleshman & Fryrear, 1981). Such efforts formed the groundwork for the use of art therapy during the 1960s, an era in which art therapy grew quickly as a field, and art therapists dispersed widely into hospitals (Fleshman & Fryrear, 1981).

**Arts and Crafts at the Dallas VA Hospital**

The role of the arts and crafts program at the Dallas VA Hospital is to create a comfortable environment for veterans where they can feel safe and which supports therapeutic recreational services, encouraging veterans to make arts and crafts with the support of compassionate and empathetic volunteers. The room generally has walls stacked with craft kits of model cars, airplanes, beadwork, leather wallets, ceramics, wood kits, and painting kits. Not at all like a hospital room, it provides a studio environment that contrasts with the sterile feeling in other areas of the hospital.

For the purposes of this study, “craft” is defined as something that comes from a craft kit, has step-by-step instructions and does not necessarily elicit personal style or expression by the craft maker. Generally speaking, scholars do not consider crafts a creative therapy that releases individual expression or supports deep therapeutic treatment (Fleshman & Fryrear, 1981). The idea of crafts, rather, suggests the simple approach of keeping participants doing “busy work,” which connotes a kind of primitive manual manufacture requiring very simple skills to assemble (Fleshman & Fryrear, 1981). Unsurprisingly, then, in the Dallas VA Hospital arts and crafts program, there are no art therapy practices, although many veterans create arts and crafts as a form of self-initiated therapeutic exercise. According to the VA recreational therapy department, the basic aim of this arts and crafts program is to make available opportunities for personal empowerment and self-growth through creative production.

Despite its distinction from formal therapeutic practices, however, there are many
positive outcomes for veterans doing arts and crafts. Brookhart (2010) describes how soldiers of both recent and older wars have channeled the anguish and frustrations of their experiences into a cathartic and artistic process. Moreover, the arts and crafts program at the Dallas VA Hospital encourages participation by veterans because it also improves their physical health (Marek, 2001). In my three years of experience as a volunteer, I have observed that many veterans have various mental illnesses and a few have difficulty expressing themselves in words. They feel judged by people outside of the veterans’ community of the hospital, but arts and crafts allow them to express their feelings vividly through visual creation. Oftentimes, their efforts to explain the meanings of their art works become the first step in overcoming personal barriers. Beginning to make positive transformations within themselves, the arts and crafts room allows veterans to learn from each other, developing both cognitive and physical skills in a supportive, community environment.

Introduction to the Study

I cannot imagine how I would have survived the atrocities I faced as a soldier without a supportive environment, and, therefore, I sometimes feel emotional when veterans describe their experiences and needs for an understanding community, empathizing with their pain and distress. Such relations of sympathy and empathy are important parts of connected knowing (Stanton, 1996). Connected knowing connotes putting one’s self in another person’s place to understand his or her perspectives and feelings (Clinchy, 1996). Most veterans can remember and describe their military experiences in rich detail, and they also often create art vibrant in color and expression, energized with emotion. Indeed, it was the visual richness of veterans’ art that first drew me to begin volunteering in the arts and crafts room. Viewing veterans’ artworks as a source of connected knowing, this research study aims to illuminate the forms of situated
learning and creative production unique to the arts and craft room, exploring how they underpin veterans’ communal efforts to achieve self-empowerment. In particular, the study explores the diversity of individual perspectives offered by a diversity of veterans amid their interactions around arts and crafts.

A well-established principle in art education research is the need to incorporate the diverse perspectives of those who are disenfranchised in society. Prevalent “ways of knowing” express the world view of the dominant culture, and ways of knowing need to be re-classified, re-conceptualized, and re-categorized to account for the multiple perspectives that can enrich research paradigms. As a researcher, I deem it essential, moreover, not simply to consider the voices and perspectives of individual participants, but also how the interactions between individuals are shaped by the social contexts within which individuals come together. In order to address such elements of social interaction, I developed trust with veterans in order to understand how they think, learn, and feel when they make arts and crafts in a community setting. This interest in knowing how diverse individuals narrated their feelings within an arts and crafts environment led me to use collective case study for my research methodology because it allowed me to grasp the narratives through which veterans expressed themselves, supporting my personal connections to their stories.

Such methods allow my research to carefully distinguish between my interpretations of veterans’ arts and crafts works and their own. I have often noted that my own military experience shapes my view of veterans’ works, which can differ radically from their own views of their meanings. I believe that veterans generally have similar feelings of anger, isolation, depression, and anxiety due to traumatic experiences in the military, but my research approach is designed to guide the reader into the arts and crafts room setting through vivid details of
creation and communal interaction that illuminate the particularities of individual expression and unique experience. In this context, the methodology of collective case study gives me the flexibility to interact with subjects in the role of participant-observer. In addition, this methodology is highly appropriate to research conducted within a U.S. government medical facility, since it allows me to become part of a social institution that meets the basic human needs of health, protection, education, and recreation (Best & Kahn, 1986). These elements, in turn, complement the study’s employment of care theory, in which I anticipate that the veterans will care about others in the room and help teach each other arts and crafts when needed. At the same time, I remain open to the possibility that the veterans may not always care about others and may shrink from teaching others.

**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study is to understand how veterans may or may not perceive a sense of empowerment through various interactions and activities in an arts and crafts environment. The leading reason this study is important is that in the field of art education, there is a lack of literature that attempts to understand the experiences of groups other than students outside of school settings (Posner, 2000). Comparing analyses of the experience of veterans to the well-established literature on more conventional art education subjects offers the opportunity to examine our beliefs on learning and teaching, exploring how our own past experience as learners can open the doors to understanding others. Furthermore, an essential reason for this study is to examine veterans in the arts and crafts environment to explore whether their experiences were important, meaningful, and empowering, and especially important in this regard are the interactions among veterans. Potential benefits from this study are the exploration and enhancement of research in art education that will help educators gain insights into how veterans
use art to empower and teach others what they have learned.

Significance of the Study

Caring and constructing understanding are essential to both discovering similarities and respecting differences in educational self-development settings. Within such frameworks, the research of this study will connect veterans’ art with art education by describing how veterans perceive empowerment through community learning, which, in turn, can raise awareness within the dominant culture of the alternative world views of veterans, especially as they are communicated through creative production. Knowledge of veteran art has its own life within the military community, but in the field of art education generally, there is little recognition and support for understanding how veterans function in creative environments.

As such, this study holds important implications for future research on pre-service art education, illuminating how art educators in the classroom can teach students about diverse and marginal cultural groups in order to foster greater understanding, respect, and awareness (Clark & Zimmerman, 2000). Such an awareness of different perspectives can encourage individuals to find similarities with one another and respect differences in educational processes that serve self-development and connected knowing (Stanton, 1996). Indeed, through connected knowing, individuals come to see the human who made the art as much as the work itself (Brenson, 1995).

In addition, this study’s findings can encourage the study of disenfranchised groups and their modes of participation in art recreation through community-art-based programs, as well as promote volunteer work with veterans’ arts and crafts programs. Although it can be difficult for an outsider to establish herself within veteran communities, collaborating with veterans can give art educators, pre-service students, and others a sense of responsibility and help them construct deeper insights about veterans by listening to their stories and accepting their feelings. Listening
to veterans’ stories through arts and crafts in order to understand their perspectives and experiences can also expand our conceptions of art education while dispelling negative stereotypes. As such, interchanges among interested individuals and the veteran community can promote lifelong learning outside of the classroom through the processes of creating, talking about, and reflecting upon veterans’ arts and crafts.

This study also has the potential to encourage participants to construct new understandings about their lives, themselves, and others (McTaggart, 1997). The multiple realities veterans describe elucidate the unique ways humans can learn and connect through various exchanges and situations. Each veteran’s voice shows a desire to speak and invites the reader to explore and interpret the ways in which arts, crafts, and community convey the variety and depth of veterans’ experiences. Such reciprocity through conversation can help other individuals gain cross-cultural connections and build relationships through the process of creating, talking about, and reflecting upon veterans’ art.

As individuals question themselves about their perspectives, lived experiences, and connections to others through arts and crafts, such self-examination will help facilitate new forms of connected knowledge. Overall, then, this research can be significant for teaching pre-service art education students and educators to learn how different groups of people perceive empowerment, create community, and gain the sense of self-empowerment within creative environments.

Limitations of the Study

There were several limitations on this study. First, some of the veteran participants did not come into the recreation room on a continual basis. Second, I am a younger female researcher, and many veterans might not trust me due to my age and/or gender. Third, due to
limited number of female veterans there were none available in the arts and crafts room in this location to participate in this study. Fourth, I am Asian American, and it is possible that some Caucasian male veterans have preconceived prejudices towards Asians based on their negative experiences during the Vietnam and Korean Wars. There were certainly veterans who had very negative experiences with Asians and glared whenever they saw me. Therefore, due to my appearance, I had to slowly build trust with such individuals, which took months. Having built such trust eventually, however, led veterans revealing more about themselves during interviews. Fifth, as a researcher drawing out interpretations of the participants’ experiences, I had to be cautious of my own proclivities and not project my interpretations on others’ experiences. Furthermore, as a participant observer, if more than one participant from my study were in the room, I missed observing each one individually and missed some conversations. Also, because the arts and crafts room is inside a federal government facility, patient confidentiality is very strict. I had to wait many months to gain approval for my research from various departments and directors within the Veterans Administration. I had to attend a week long training and orientation for volunteers on how to follow policy and regulations. It was mandatory to also get a medical checkup and a tuberculosis test before volunteering. The paperwork to get approval and permission was a lengthy process, and this government facility was very sensitive about what photographs or media recordings could take place with the patients in the hospital.

Due to facility regulations, I encountered limitations on the number of cases I could study. For example, my first IRB application for the Veterans Hospital was denied because I wanted to do one case study with five participants, but the VA allowed me to only study three participants or fewer due to their policies and procedures.

Once I started to do my data collection, I discovered there was another limitation
stemming from that fact that my participants did not consistently come into the arts and crafts room. They were all outpatients and could come whenever they pleased. My past experiences had shown that outpatients may leave and not come back to the recreation room for months. Fortunately, however, this was not the case with my three participants. Nevertheless, there were days when none of my participants would show up. When they did come to the arts and crafts room, it was sometimes difficult to interview or observe them because either they did not stay long or were distracted by other matters. Ultimately, the participants came to the hospital for medical treatment, which typically took precedence over arts and crafts. Moreover, some days the participants did not feel like talking, and I honored their wishes. At other times, I chose to conclude interviews because the participants became agitated, and I immediately referred them to a staff counselor.

Chapter Overviews

Despite the many limitations I experienced, this dissertation presents new understandings of how veterans learn in interpersonal contexts. The socializing that occurred in the situated environment of the VA Hospital arts and crafts room supported in many ways the participants’ sense of empowerment. Here is an example of how one case study gained empowerment in a situated learning environment. Chuck, a participant told me, “I really like being around people who understand my PTSD. I can work better and I like to make crafts around them because I learn from them” (Personal communication, July 15, 2010). I chose that specific learning environment for my dissertation because the arts and crafts room underwrote the creative production that formed the basis of veterans’ self-development. This dissertation describes research observations carried out during February 2011–December 2011.

Chapter 1 presents the statement of the problem, research questions, and the role of arts
and crafts program in VA Hospitals across the United States. It also introduces the topic of the study, its significance, the limitations of the study, and the chapter overviews.

Chapter 2 presents the theoretical framework of this dissertation, which focuses on care theory, post-modern feminist theory, and narrative inquiry. It also includes the literature review, which describes how the author has a connection to the history of art education, community art centers and learning, connected knowing, self-empowerment through art-making, creativity, reflective practices, holistic art education, art therapy, situated learning, adult learning, lifelong learning, self-empowerment through dialogue, multicultural art education, and the inclusion of groups outside mainstream art.

Chapter 3 describes the methodology and purpose of the study, the research design, data collection, the sample selection, data analysis, and validity.

Chapter 4 examines the Dallas VA Hospital arts and crafts room’s social and physical environment. It also describes the arts and crafts program, its mission, statement, rules, and policies, and the activities that take place inside the arts and crafts room.

Chapter 5 describes the research participants, “Chuck,” “Alexander,” and “Marine.” In this chapter I give a brief summary of their backgrounds, descriptions of my observations of them, and a few of their personal communications with me.

Chapter 6 describes analysis and interpretation, documentation of the participants’ work (photographs of the product), a data-analysis of the case studies, a cross-analysis of the case studies, the interpretation of the work from the case studies, and the interpretation of the work by the researcher.

Chapter 7 includes a summary, conclusions, and implications for future research from this dissertation. Following the last chapter are the references and appendices.
CHAPTER 2
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework for this study is drawn from post-modern feminist theory, narrative inquiry, and care theory. These theories come from the idea that nurturing human empathy, compassion, and the need to help others in various learning environments can help individuals gain empowerment.

Post-Modern Feminist Theory

It is through feminist theory that this study’s research is focused on the interactions among members of disenfranchised groups, particularly in the ways that the processes and products of creative activity bring empowerment:

A feminist perspective argues that without empathetic, interpersonal relationships, researchers will be unable to gain insight into the meaning people give to their lives . . . Through collaborative inquiry and reflexive knowledge building, researchers can deconstruct hierarchical relationships and produce research that is useful and meaningful to participants and the larger society. (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007, p.148)

Gaining a sense of purpose in one’s life links the notion of empowerment closely to the notion of community (Yuval-Davis, 1997). The connotation of ‘power of’ rather than ‘power over’ firmly situates the individual inside a homogenous grouping which is the community. In correlation to feminist theories, feminists advocate more participatory, reflexive approaches to constructing knowledge (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007).

The general definition of post-modern feminist theory stems from the fact that postmodernism replaces the holistic world view of any group and emphasizes constructive learning through shifting language and an emphasis on identities (Maher & Tetreault, 1996). In addition, post-modern feminist theory recognizes differences and insists on opportunity for all individuals to contribute their perspectives and insights regardless of race, social status, religion,
orientation, or gender, while resisting any one world view’s claims to hold the one “truth” (Maher & Tetreault, 1996).

Post-modern feminists begin with ideas about language and systems of thought, and that focus is congruent with the pursuit of empowerment for oppressed groups through the pursuit of social justice (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p.11). The post-modern approach shifts away from the individual as the only source of our knowledge, exploring individual’s relationships with others in particular settings (Maher & Tetreault, 1996). Post-modern feminist theory encourages participants to tell and interpret their own lives and stories and use this as the center of narrative inquiry for the process of constructing knowledge (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007).

Consequently, an important imperative of post-modern feminist theory is to promote social change by focusing on the lives and experiences of those who are often disregarded in public discourse such as veterans (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007). A feminist perspective can bring out new ways of knowing that can challenge and shape social policy and individuals’ lives (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007). In such a context, this study employs post-modern feminist theory to chart the process of telling stories by disenfranchised individuals to “reflect and find ways to overcome barriers of differences and oppression in their community” (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007, p.146). As such, it uses post-modern feminist research to focus on power and how knowledge is built through lived experience and communicated through social interactions and visual artifacts (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007). In addition, constructing knowledge is a process of continual change. An example is reflexive knowledge, which occurs through the sharing of dialogue with veterans:

Reflexive knowledge building requires interrogation of social biographies and historical context, examination of the intersection of privilege and power, and the de-centering of knowledge claims around interpretation and representation. Listening, interacting,
sharing, and translating are some of the techniques feminists have developed to foster greater connectedness, understanding, and self-empowerment. (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007, p.148)

Interaction between individuals can shape and structure their daily existence through constructive dialogue, and empowerment of the oppressed is a process that breaks the boundaries between the individual and the communal (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007). Moreover, empowerment through community breaks the boundaries between the public and the private domain, connecting the personal to the social. In addition, empowerment can be transformative when there is a shift in the distribution of social power, since “offering (under-represented) groups new knowledge about their own experiences can be empowering,” but “revealing new ways of knowing that allow (these) groups to define their own reality has, however, far greater implications” (Yuval-Davis, N., 1997, p.78). Empowerment is also a process by which oppressed people can gain control over their lives through increased involvement in the community and can affect them and others directly (Yuval-Davis, 1997). In addition, such forms of conversation and dialogue powerfully support individual learning (Entwistle & Hounsell, 1975).

Narrative Inquiry

The importance of learning from others through dialogue and personal stories is a central tenet of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Stories are rich in historical, psychological, and human perspectives, which are universal, as all humans have stories to share in order to construct knowledge and self-development (Stake, 1995). Nair (2003) describes storytelling as a community bonding that allows the teller to gain control of the moment and ensure understanding of his or her narrative. The reflexive relationship of living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories is, then, at the heart of the construction of narratives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).
It is essential to note that narrative does not reflect “the” reality, but with the help of the reader, narratives can create a version of reality (Ely, 2007). Participants’ realities or life stories examine how people make sense of the world and how they interpret their realities. Narrative inquiries are embodiments of lived stories that the researcher and participant share during conversation (Clandinin, 2000).

The elements of a life story are “told in parts, chronologically or thematically and stand out as key parts to a life but are also able to be seen as parts that fit together as a whole” (Atkinson, 2007, p.238). Personal narratives are constructed and reconstructed through the representation of an entire life, illuminating how divergent experiences ultimately connect one stage of life to another (Atkinson, 2007). Connecting such narratives in a personal framework can bring new perspectives and meanings to one’s life (Dybdahl & Hollingsworth, 2007).

Applying such perspectives to post-modern feminist theories allows us to view research interviews through multiple lenses, comprehending contexts, moments, active listening, and language in a process designed to “highlight both the individuality and complexity of a life” (p.154) in the composition of a personal experience narrative. Within such a framework, this study stresses the importance of studying narratives that come from marginalized groups or individuals such as veterans, who are underrepresented in research studies, in order to “balance out the databases that have been relied on for so long in generating theory”(p.229-230). For example, Pavlish (2007) describes how narrative inquiry gives insight into human experiences, each story revealing important aspects of individual and communal lives. In an article about refugee women and men in a Rwanda camp, her research exposes the identities, memories, and significant events in their past and present lives. Here, “truth” is not truth according to positivist
social science, but the “truth” of the interpretation and meaning derived from lived realities and perceptions.

In a research context, such narrative meanings can develop through voices that arise from both the researcher and participant (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) as the researcher writes the participant’s storied experiences in ways that will speak to, and reflect upon, the audience’s understandings. In consequence, the collection and analysis of stories, along with the interpretation of narrative, communicates divergent experiences and builds relationships between research participants, researchers, and readers (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Such a process is described by Josselson (2007), who notes that the greater degree of rapport and trust established, the more participants reveal personal information. Moreover, such participants have a greater degree of faith in the researcher to treat the information with respect and compassion. Amid the building of such relationships, the foremost ethical imperative of the researcher is to protect the privacy and dignity of the participant. Participants may tell experiences by which they are ashamed or intimidated, and their willingness to share them can depend on their reading of the researcher’s emotional response.

For example, in a previous pilot study, one veteran participant trusted me but did not share much personal information with me. She stated to me that certain incidents were in the past, so there was no need to remember them. In response, I nevertheless tried to connect the parts of her life she did not talk about to those she did. Such a process addresses what Ely (2007) describes as the “unsayable” in narrative psychology and narrative inquiry (p.13). Ely (2007) emphasizes that for researchers, silence is imperative, paradoxically allowing readers to hear peoples’ voices, making sense of narratives rather than being told what the researcher thinks. Such a technique requires listening to what participants say consciously and unconsciously.
(Rogers, 2007). Listening is very important because sometimes during interviews, people can reveal the unconscious in their speech. Listening to the unconscious is an alternative way to explore human subjectivity, language, and the formation of the subject (Rogers, 2007).

On the other hand, participants may need someone to listen to them with sincere interest and will welcome the interview (Atkinson, 2007). A story can be creative or imaginative but that does not make it fictional or untruthful, as long as it retains the voice of the storyteller (Atkinson, 2007). It is the reality of the participant who tells the story and his or her “insider’s viewpoint on the life being lived” (p.239). Participants who invent parts of their stories may feel the need to be creative, but what matters is that the life story is deemed “trustworthy” more than “true” (Atkinson, 2007).

Chronicling the life stories of others can lead to social inquiry (Daniel, 2003). For example, Michel (2004) describes veteran artists as those who convey a sense of history in their art, along with narrative. Veteran artists want others who view their work to see what they saw from their lived experiences along with their emotional reflections through their art (Michel, 2004). Through such a process, veterans can gain a sense of empowerment by sharing their experiences.

Care Theory

In order for a sense of empowerment to emerge, there has to be the component of caring during teaching and learning. Care theory recognizes that individuals have different levels of need for help to achieve adequate levels of functioning in particular circumstances (Engster, 2007). The definition of caring in general means to be involved meeting the basic needs of individuals, developing their capabilities, and helping them to survive and function (Engster, 2007). Noddings (2003) describes caring as an essentially feminine experience that provides a
motivation for humans to be moral, enhancing the ideal of ourselves as the “one-caring” (p.5).

To act as the one-caring is to act for another person (the “cared-for”) and to protect or enhance the welfare of the other (Noddings, 2003). An example is Noddings’ personal account of her caring experience: “My motive energy flows toward the other person . . . I allow my motive energy to be shared; I put it at the service of the other” (p.33).

In addition, the process of providing care and the practice of kindness also helps individuals alleviate pain and suffering (Watson, 2009). The duty to care for others is based on the ethical demand to value human resources and life purposes, and to bring meaning to oneself and others (Watson, 2009). Caring helps others meet their biological needs in an attentive, responsive, and respectful manner that cultivates practices of kindness (Watson, 2007). It does not mean providing goods or services to individuals according to what others think they need, but attending and responding to individual needs in respectful ways. Individuals regularly acknowledge that the caring relationships they develop with others are the most fulfilling aspects of their lives (Engster, 2007). It is empathetic and sympathetic listening towards an individual that will allow someone to feel another can understand him or her without wanting to analyze or make judgments (Rogers, 1975). It is important to listen to someone in order to foster greater connectedness and understanding, and to give another a sense of empowerment.

Service to others through the act of caring is important for influencing positive motivation and encouraging inquisitive behavior in learning art (Phillips, 2003). In an art classroom, when teachers show care and value their students’ learning, the students see how learning within a caring environment can enrich their lives (Phillips, 2003). Caring for others when teaching art allows those who are cared for to realize greater potential inside themselves (Phillips, 2003). Trust is developed when care is shown in a positive learning environment
In these ways, a learner also develops a healthy self-image that can come from the support and care of the teacher (Kelehear & Heid, 2002). Nurturing empathy, compassion, and care within an arts environment may allow learners to gain a sense of power and confidence and develop a generalized feeling of self-efficacy (Kelehear & Heid, 2002).

Additionally, the obligation to care helps develop the sense of sympathy and compassion for others. This, in turn, helps an individual see the suffering of others as a matter of concern affecting his or her sense as a moral person (Watson, 2009). Nevertheless, those who do not care for themselves may in the long term be less able or willing to care for others (Engster, 2007). The social consequences of the lack of caring can result in individuals finding difficulty in producing work, suffering depression and anxiety, and experiencing a number of personal and health problems (Watson, 2009).

Finally, supporting institutions and policies that directly help individuals to meet their needs—providing caregivers resources, for example—is a collective way of caring (Engster, 2007). This form of caring is less personal but still fits the definition of caring because the direct aim of the activity remains meeting the needs and fostering the capabilities of others. This includes providing community-based programs and public educational programs.

**Connection to the History of Art Education**

This study addresses a body of literature about memory and art rooted in the early history of art education. Nineteenth-century art education in England and France brought attention to visual memory and memory drawings and served the purpose of mental concentration through observation and memorization (Swift, 1990). Edward R. Taylor, one of the head teachers of the Birmingham School of Arts and Crafts, “extended the use of memory drawing to all levels and activities in the belief that drawing from memory exercised mental concentration more than
objective drawing alone. He taught many ways of memorizing, including remembering the whole object, parts of objects, the principles of proportion rather than appearance, and the order and direction of lines in the evolution of drawing (Swift, 1990, p.140).

Many years later, art teacher Marion Richardson supported teaching art from memory during 1908-1912 at the Dudley Girls High School in England (Swift, 1990). Richardson practiced the use of visual memory in terms of inner and outward vision (Swift, 1990). Her pedagogy allowed the “inner-vision to surface; not by directing attention to the outside world, but by the reflection (of the vision) within. The results were later called mind pictures, and children 11-16 were producing non-figurative, abstract paintings” (Swift, 1990, p.149). Many of these mind pictures were abstract and intended to be truthful representations of what the student ‘saw’ in their minds when they closed their eyes and concentrated on capturing a mental image (Swift, 1990). Additionally, when students created mind pictures, it stimulated “the growth of personal self-confidence and the sense of uniqueness engendered by the mind-picturing process, coupled with the technical skills necessary to recreate the mental image’s qualities, permeating the pupils’ approach to all other forms of picture and pattern-making” (Swift, 1990, p.149).

In the same manner, many veterans have used their memories and created artwork as representations of how they feel about themselves inside. Art educator and veteran Karl Michel (2001), for example, writes about crystallizing, which is a type of memory process used by veterans who create art. When a veteran remembers a traumatic moment, he or she becomes frozen in that time and place again as if it were the present reality (Michel, 2001). Through crystallizing, a veteran can re-create in his or her mind the vivid details of a particular moment in his or her memory.
Community Art Centers and Learning

Clark and Zimmerman (2000) suggest that building involvement and support from a wide base of community members enriches the understanding of the arts. Community-based arts also enhance the learning of pre-service students by helping them to attain greater awareness of local communities and their resources. Educating students to become actively involved in community arts with veterans brings social awareness for both veterans and students. This social awareness is what Congdon (2006) describes as a representation of the community both innovative and traditional, which binds people together. Agostinone-Wilson (2001) described a postmodern community as one that is both “social and isolating marked by periods of solitude and sharing” (p.90). Moreover, Stout (1999) describes the community as having the capacity to draw people together through art. When individuals understand the interdependence of self and other, then they will begin to see the truth in the assertion that knowledge comes only through community, and they will begin the process of connected knowing. Community can draw the human experience together. Moreover, the exchange between individual learning and the community can promote empowerment and personal growth. Reciprocity through conversations with others outside of the classroom can help individuals gain cross-cultural connections and build relationships through the process of creating, talking about, and reflecting upon art. It also gives a sense of connecting self to others while developing empathy and sympathetic awareness (Stout, 1999).

The arts in community, then, have the capacity to help individuals explore the powerful connections of the human experience. Without diversity, we are restricting our understanding and development as humans. Kakas (2001) describes community arts as the opportunity for the individual to discover himself or herself in the community. She portrays a folk artist named
Hartman who became unemployed and started creating an art garden that brought people from the community together: “visitors hear Mr. Hartman’s stories about Hartman, his intense involvement with his work, the crowds attracted to see the Garden and talk with him, will come to understand the value of this project to his personal identity” (Kakas, 2001, p.61).

Additionally, Keys and Morris (2001) explain that community art has established connections between a new audience where local resources are utilized and partnerships are formed. Resources include students, faculty, arts organizations, and other community members to create ownership, empowerment and responsibility among diverse individuals and can help encourage different groups of people to participate in art education (Keys & Morris, 2001).

The conception of community underpinning this study comes from my belief that people make art to address social needs. I see veteran art as a sub-category of community arts that can be linked to art education in the context of learning. The idea of community outreach comes from the notion that veterans are a disenfranchised group who need recreational activities for social support. Social support in the crafts room enables the energy and depth of veterans’ art work and allows their voices and concerns about feeling uncared for to be felt by others who are not from the veteran community (Yuval-Davis, 1997).

Sickler-Voigt (2010) describes such a process specifically related to veterans who work with pre-service art education majors, elementary students, and university faculty. She notes that at first participants were apprehensive about working with people of different backgrounds, but then such fears dissolved, and the participants developed bonds and greater mutual understanding. Veterans played an important role in educating students about quality life experiences and brought them a more balanced representation of society, including marginalized groups (Sickler-Voigt, 2010). Sickler-Voigt (2010) also argues that society views senior citizens
and people with hardships and/or disabilities as people who need to be served. Utilizing these community members from underserved populations brought valuable insight to educating students about diverse life experiences.

Another community-based art program that serves veterans in Bedford, Texas, helps veterans who suffer PTSD and gives them a sense of belonging within a community (Goodrich, 2008). One veteran noted that, “the unveiling of one’s soul is not required at the two-hour open studio sessions. Neither is artistic expertise or even the desire for formal lessons. They discuss things with fellow veterans if they want; if they don’t, that’s fine” (p. B1).

Similarly, the website Combatpaper describes how veterans made art based on their traumatic experiences from the military by cutting their old uniforms up, making paper pulp out of the scraps, and then creating prints and personal journals on the paper. This transformative process shows the power of art and how it transforms a difficult memory into catharsis:

By working with veterans, survivors, citizens and artists, we turn complex and often violent experiences into a collective memory and cultural response to the things that we have had to bear witness to. Beginning to reconcile and embrace how conflicts have shaped our lives and where our responsibilities lie is a mountainous task enabled by the collaboration of many people. Often our cultural memory of war tells us to keep quiet about the aspects that are most challenging to our ethics, to forget the violations we feel and tremors that keep us distant and numb. If we begin to face and speak and create from these human aftermaths, we begin to learn that we are not alone . . . rather closer to coming home than we ever thought. (Delanty, 2010)

Each of the above examples illustrates the power of arts and crafts making in community settings to build relationships between veterans and other segments of the surrounding community in ways that both build veterans’ powers of communication and self-development and enrich the broader community’s collective self-understanding. Overall, the importance of this research lies in its ability to fill in some gaps in art education which may used to teach about alternative art communities. This is important because pre-service art education students and
educators, and other community members will learn how different groups of people create arts and crafts. This can create community connections and understanding through the process of collaborative arts and crafts production.

**Connected Knowing**

Interaction, production and collaboration all lead to connected knowing (Stanton, 1996). “Connection” in this sense connotes knowledge, experience, intuition, empathy, and feelings (Stanton, 1996). It involves careful listening and collaboration and aims for dialogue where self and other are clearly understood, even when different (Stanton, 1996). Connected knowers are persistent students of life. They emphasize the human relationship as a caring and secure foundation where an individual can experience, explore, and experiment with his or her ways of knowing (Mahoney, 1996). In addition, there is an authentic and compassionate regard from one individual towards another in connected knowing (Mahoney, 1996). In addition, connecting with others also means helping them learn in an encouraging supportive environment (Klassen & Zimmermann, 2006). Rogers (1975) describes connecting with others as recognizing individuals as people with real feelings and needs. In this way, learning can be enhanced through empathetic listening. Rogers (1975) explains that when there is sensitive empathy, the learner feels that someone can understand him or her without wanting to analyze or make judgments.

Additionally, connected knowers act as allies to other individuals and understand why they feel the way they do by putting themselves in the other person’s place or adopting his or her perspectives (Clinchy, 1996). In connected knowing, it is essential to refrain from judgment of the other individual because it is impossible to be accurately perceptive of another person’s inner world if an evaluative opinion of that person is formed (Clinchy, 1996). The connection must be felt deeply between individuals, and while this exchange isn’t meant to fix the other person’s
problems, it does allow the individual to talk to another and have that person listen (Clinchy, 1996). Ultimately, Clinchy (1996) describes connected knowing as the possibility to view the self from the perspective of the other.

Finally, dialogue is the essential method of connected knowing, bringing meaning through conversation (Tarule, 1996). Also, dialogue and relationships build knowledge within the community (Tarule, 1996). Connected dialogue serves the crucial role of communication that values personal experience, interactions, and attentiveness to the needs of others (Schweickart, 1996).

Self-Empowerment through Art-Making

From my past observations, it seems that the veterans I worked with in Fort Worth gained a sense of peace when making arts and crafts. Art-making through craft kits spurred dialogue about learning techniques and promoted discussion and critique among those who made them (Agostinone-Wilson, 2001). McNiff (2004) describes art-making as a healing tool for self-empowerment that includes such forms of inquiry:

The importance of craft and art and healing can be addressed simply by acknowledging its place and how it determines expression . . . Craft will find ways to fulfill itself through individual relations with materials and images…In our field we have forgotten that art carries a commitment to craft and a tendency to achieve the most complete expression possible through its images, materials, gestures, and auras. (McNiff, 2004, p.134)

Creating art leads to making sense of the world by piecing together pictures and stories from a blizzard of memory and sensation (Orland, 2006). Understanding oneself also reminds us that passing through the turbulence of life brings us to the realization that making art does matter, as it is an important way we manifest being human. Creativity helps individuals in general gain insight about how they feel inside, which will help them make positive changes in their lives. For example, Chittenden (1995) documents the work of veteran folk artist Michael
Cousino, who created some diorama scenes based on experiences shared by veterans during hours of sessions he conducted with them. Cousino became confined to a wheelchair from Vietnam War injuries, yet he creates dioramas from scratch that help him gain skills and innovative techniques to achieve the realistic results he aims for in his work (Chittenden, 1995). Making art helped him learn psychomotor skills and the development of his own creative techniques, such as melting down a model tank in the oven and torching it with a cigarette lighter, carving a bar of soap into a water buffalo, combining soil mixed with glue or paint to create the terrain of the diorama, and using straws from a broom to make a bamboo house (Chittenden, 1995). Creating art helped this veteran gain a sense of meaning in his life, transforming his pain into something creative that could connect with others who viewed his work.

Tick (2005) describes how art-making “cleansed” emotional wounds by giving meaning to veterans’ experiences during the process of creation, producing cathartic effects. Catharsis can be a form of empowerment that allows veterans to express themselves and make positive changes in their lives, and even human suffering can become one part of a process of successful self-development. Similarly, Freire (2007) describes failures and suffering as part of the search for efficacy. I define efficacy as the development of fortitude, courage, and motivation to move forward in a positive way. Freire (2007) also believes that one’s capacity to reach out and engage with issues in self and society is the essence of meaningful and liberating pedagogy and personal empowerment. As an example, Congdon (2006) describes an artist who made positive changes in his life through making art. This artist, who was once a depressed, angry, and violent man, now enjoys life and nature through painting (Congdon, 2006). Once called an outsider, this artist later taught workshops locally and showed other people in the community how to use art to empower
themselves (Congdon, 2006). It is evident that creating art helps develop positive changes in one’s life and make choices that empower.

Creativity

As described by psychiatrist Viktor Frankl (2006), changes in one’s life are based on personal choices. Frankl explains that everyone has the freedom to choose how to cope with suffering, find meaning in it, and move forward by having faith in the future. Once an individual’s search for meaning is successful, it not only helps him or her become happy, but gives strength to cope with suffering.

An example is veteran Karl Michel, who describes how art-making became a part of his life after suffering hallucinations:

It struck a chord with me, that what I was experiencing was psychological and trying to visualize that through art was extremely important to me . . . The art was then, and continues to be, the most effective means of reconstructing myself, psychologically. (Michel, May 24, 2009, http://www.onlineathens.com)

McNiff (2004) further defines creativity as an effort to communicate:

The disturbing image is typically the one that delivers the most important messages. It wants to be seen and respected. If I deny its efforts to communicate, it may increase pressure to burst through; or it may wait around for years, appearing in recurring dreams and paintings until I am ready to engage it….Art as a spiritual discipline entails paying attention to images and opening ourselves to their unique expressions rather than trying to fix the problems we think they represent. (McNiff, 2004, p.103)

According to this philosophy, creative skills and talents can be fueled by pain and suffering. McNiff (2004) describes pain through the metaphor of an alchemist’s fire and furnace: “The strongest forms (creativity) are forged in the most intense heat (pain and suffering)” (p. 53). The power of his pain and anger helped the author express himself through art and empowered him to release those negative feelings and to make positive changes in his life.
Such a process is, indeed, similar to the methods of art therapy in which the individual engages in and makes meaning from creative activities in order to enhance physical, mental, and emotional well-being (Lark, 2001). Accordingly, the American Art Therapy Association describes the creative process as a way to develop self-expression and help the individual reduce stress, increase self-esteem and self-awareness, and develop interpersonal skills (2009).

Going more deeply into the impact of art and how it helps the therapeutic progress, Kakas (2001) writes that viewing art can also have a therapeutic healing power. Kakas describes community arts in an urban setting, where crowds of people visit an artist’s rock garden, listening to the artist’s stories while marveling at his creations. Not only is art therapeutic for the artist and the audience, but the artist is motivated to communicate ideas, beliefs, and values to others about his or her work. Neighbors who viewed his rock garden were later inspired to make their own art. This experience suggests that viewing art by others could also have a therapeutic healing power for an entire community (Kakas, 2001).

An example of how art can be therapeutic through the communication of ideas is described through an interview with one veteran, which captures his experience in making art to depict war in order to “force the viewer to walk into the picture and to see the objects only in his way” (Kuh, 1990, p. 25). He describes this experience of creating art as “crystallizing” (Michel, 2001), remembering a traumatic moment as if the individual was there again, frozen in that time and place as if it were the present reality (Michel, 2001). Through crystallizing, a veteran can re-create in his or her mind the vivid details of that particular moment from his or her memory. Michel concludes that this is therapeutic to most veterans because realism conveys a sense of the personal history of the creator, who wants others literally to see what they saw. Michel’s study (2004) examines eighteen veterans who served in the Vietnam War. The central focus of his
research for art education is that it reminds society of the powerful connection between lived experience and the production of art (Michels, 2004). His study serves to underscore the importance to veteran artists of creative forms that convey the veteran’s “real world” and “how things really are” for the artist.

For Spradley (1979), creativity consists of creating symbols of any object or event that refer to something meaningful. It is through the use of symbols that emotions, feelings, and thoughts are revealed, enabling others to understand rich meanings (Spradley, 1979). He contends that symbols can have never-ending meaning (Spradley, 1979). Moreover, the concept of meaning through creative activities is described by Collier (2010) as the nature of reflection. She writes that the creative quality of reflective practice is crucial to learning because it encouraged learners to deal with changes (Collier, 2010). The valuing of creativity and the imagination in the reflective process allows the learner to understand aesthetics and examine ideas in more detail (Collier, 2010).

In a similar way, Blandy (1983) describes creativity as a self-expression that can be reinforced through any present creativity that can promote socialization, communication, and good work habits. Blandy examines four case studies of special needs individuals, describing how this under-represented group was labeled and associated with negative behaviors and stereotypes. He argues that in education, educators may expect physically disabled individuals to have limited intelligence or no capacity to create art. He wrote that creating art gave them a sense of “self-concept and healthy self attitudes” (Blandy, 1983, p.18). When I observed veterans who participated in creative arts activities, I noticed that they became reflective about what they worked on and a few liked to discuss what they created with others.
Reflective Practices and Holistic Art Education

In contrast to situated learning, which focuses on teaching and learning within a set environment, the development of reflective thinking and practice in art education can expand to a more spiritual approach of holistic art education (Campbell, 2005). Holistic art education supports the development of wisdom that can be cultivated through spirituality and narrative that reflects upon new human experiences (Klein, 2000). Such reflective practices can expand to spiritual experience through the transformation of art. Campbell (2005) adds that through new experiences in learning, people have gained insights that allowed them to open and change their ways of thinking. Miller (2000) describes a “soulful approach” to bring a deeper sense of purpose and meaning in learning through the use of art.

Sharing and allowing veterans to learn with supportive individuals teaches the veterans to help others, bringing insights about how to improve the veterans’ community through medical benefits, education, and recreational activities. Understanding also boosts personal empowerment because this allows veterans to take ownership and responsibility of how they choose to live their lives and deal with their problems. These ideas relate to the explanation of the spiritual and the holistic concepts mentioned earlier because the process of creating arts and crafts may bring a sense of purpose and fulfillment. When this occurs, an individual may feel that he or she may experience a sense of enlightenment spiritually.

Art Therapy

Veterans’ participation in making arts and crafts may or may not be therapeutic to them, but art therapy techniques will not be used in this research. This study is based on art education and not art therapy. I am addressing art therapy though because it is similar in the sense of helping veterans through their issues through the creative production and processes. Although
my past research shows that the creative production of arts and crafts has allowed veterans to achieve self-empowerment, none of the techniques described in this study derive from art therapy. Nevertheless, art therapy research suggests that creative production may be used to express traumatic memories to help people work through emotional conflicts and problems (Malchiodi, 1998). In art therapy, the individual can engage in and make meaning from creative activities in order to enhance physical, mental and emotional well-being (American Art Therapy Association, 2009).

The notion of using art therapy in a clinical setting grew from the psychoanalytic movement and beliefs that the symbolic content of images derived from patients’ art expression had therapeutic value (Malchiodi, 1998). Psychologists use art therapy to understand patients’ personalities, behaviors, and development and help make connections between patients’ feelings and perceptions. Malchiodi (1998) notes that art therapists use the drawings of patients for the purpose of diagnosis and evaluation of mental disorders and emotional problems.

Furthermore, art therapy uses projective techniques that involve drawing and answering questions after completing drawings. For example, in art therapy patients are given the House-Tree-Person (HTP) test, which assesses personality by asking the patient about various elements in the drawing such as (a) What is the age of this person in the drawing? (b) Is this a man or a woman or a child? (c) What is she or he doing? (d) What is the weather in this picture? (Malchiodi, 1998). Then the art therapist evaluates the drawings to reveal areas of conflict or concerns in the patient’s life:

The result of drawing a freehand house figure reflects the patient’s home life and relationships with the family, the result of drawing a freehand tree reveals the experiences of the patient, and the result of drawing a person figure describes the patient’s relationships with other people, aside from his or her family. (www.healthster.co.uk, August 15, 2010).
Another projective drawing test within the field of art therapy that will not be used in my research is the Diagnostic Drawing Series (DDS), which is given to patients to provide information on personality, psychiatric disorders, trauma, and other conditions (Malchiodi, 1998). The DDS requires three drawings on an 18-by-24 inch paper with chalk pastels and asks the participant to (a) make a picture using these materials (flat sided chalk pastels), (b) draw a tree, and (c) make a picture of how you are feeling using lines, shapes and colors (Malchiodi, 1998).

In addition to those tests, the art therapist uses techniques such as *free association* and *interpretation* to allow the patient to explore and work through the patient’s transference of any unsettled conflicts or feelings (Malchiodi, 1998). The technique of free association is to say whatever comes to the patient’s mind as a form of spontaneous expression about the images created (Malchiodi, 1998). By listening to the patient’s free associations, the therapist may hear hidden meanings and recognize unconscious images that arise from the patient’s art expressions (Malchiodi, 1998). Others may be inspired to learn from their observations.

**Situated Learning**

Learning from observations is one example of constructing knowledge from other people through modeling human behavior. *Situated learning* is described as learning embedded in the work setting, culture, or situation in which it is applied (Rothwell, 2008). How people interact during learning is crucial to the process of learning. A student must be motivated to learn and see a reason for doing so. This can be achieved in a social setting (Bandura, 1977). *Social learning* takes place where learners participate as practitioners in a community, learning knowledge, skills, and behaviors from others so that they can be successful and learn to solve problems in their lives or work (Rothwell, 2008). The theory of social learning influences the treatment of
situated learning in this study because, for example, veterans inside the room learn how to create arts and crafts from observing how others do arts and crafts inside the room.

**Adult Learning**

An adult learner is defined as someone who participates in learning beyond the traditional age of school attendance (Rothwell, 2008). The term also connotes that changes that occur in adulthood must be understood as being an outcome of the process of development, which affect the learning process (Mackeracher, 2004). Adult learners generally prefer learning activities that typify their learning styles, and it is the facilitator that helps design activities that represent their preferred learning styles (Mackeracher, 2004).

Rothwell (2008) describes culture and its definition of the right and wrong way to do things. Where did these assumptions come from? The answer is usually “from experience,” and that experience is registered in the memories of individuals and organizations that have policies and procedures (Rothwell, 2008). The experience of learning also comes from **informal learning**, where learning occurs through interacting with others, observation, and “hands-on” experience (Rothwell, 2008). Interaction includes **conversation theory** learning in which people are asked to teach what they have learned back to others (Rothwell, 2008). This can expand the growth and achievement of one’s own potential. **Experiential learning** gives adult learners the psychologically supportive climate in which to learn and the explanation of why learning is important (Rothwell, 2008).

**Lifelong Learning**

Wain (2004) describes lifelong learning as a practice that encourages people to participate more actively in their communities, learning throughout their lives through planning to combine learning, working, and family life. Tummons (2009) describes lifelong learning as a
form of social interaction in which individuals grow by looking at the world in different ways through learning new attitudes and aptitudes to critique what they see or hear or read (Tummons 2009). What individuals learn amid such forms of critical reflection in both the formal and informal sense is described by Frost (2010):

As the world changes so rapidly thus professionals have to challenge and renew their expertise. A failure to do so will mean that professional knowledge and expertise will soon be out of date. Thus contemporary professionalism is necessarily a process of continuous change and reflection. (Frost, 2010, p.23)

Lifelong learning also comes from telling stories because of the learning potential of narrative (Tedder & Biesta, 2009). Narrative learning contributes to the dimensions of lifelong learning because life itself becomes an ‘object’ of learning (Tedder & Biesta, 2009). The reflexive learning process depends on the communication and interaction with others:

Although the stories people tell about their lives can be taken simply as accounts or descriptions of these lives, we start from the assumption that such stories may already reflect aspects of what people have learned from their lives, either in a more self-aware or in a more tacit and implicit manner. Moreover, rather than only looking at life-stories as the outcome of biographical learning, it seems reasonable to assume that the construction and narration of such stories itself forms an important part of such learning processes. (Tedder & Biesta, 2009, pp.77-78)

Lifelong learners gain knowledge through all forms of sense experience and information that also contain values, attitudes, opinions, beliefs, false data, and unproven claims (Jarvis, 2008). Jarvis (2008) argues that lifelong learning is influenced by consumer culture such as television, the internet, and various media:

The whole person is the recipient of these external stimuli, body and mind, whether they come through interpersonal interaction or via the media. The person receives these, has an experience, which may be in the form of pictures or other sense data as well as knowledge, values, beliefs or attitudes, and they may be transformed into new knowledge, beliefs, emotions, values, attitudes, identity and even desire. We then usually act as a result of our internalized understanding of the external world rather than as a direct response to an external stimulus. (Jarvis, 2008, pp.104-105)
Media includes computer technology, and lifelong learning can be extended to become more personalized for the learner. Dinevski (2009) argues that learning processes are optimized in the online environment because the computer represents a major form of learning media (Dinevski, 2009). The adult learner who is using technology as the means of interaction with faculty, teachers, and fellow students will help in the development of information and communication technologies to form new pedagogical practices for lifelong learning (Dinevski, 2009).

The effectiveness of pedagogical practices is influenced by the instructor or facilitator through motivation and inspiration that is meaningful and relevant and encourages lifelong learning (Gravells, 2009). If an instructor is enthusiastic and passionate about the subject, this will help stimulate and challenge learners (Gravells, 2009). Adapting teaching methods to ensure the learning environment fits the learners helps them become more involved and self-directed in their learning processes (Gravells & Simpson, 2009).

Self-Empowerment through Dialogue

Self-empowerment and voice echo throughout bell hooks’ Teaching to Transgress (1994). She radiates a sense of hope and encouragement to all those who may feel subjugated by social and political oppression. hooks (1994) describes her own personal hardships and pain as she blossoms into a professor. As she faced self-doubt and discrimination, she overcame them with the kinds of hope, self-determination, and love that can help individuals reach self-actualization. In her writings she reflects how discouraged she was by her professors and peers who expressed hostile, apathetic, and biased attitudes towards her:

I have felt the bitterness most keenly in relation to academic colleagues. It emerged from my sense that so many of them willingly betrayed the promise of intellectual fellowship and radical openness that I believe is the heart and soul of learning. When I moved beyond those feelings to focus my attention on the classroom, the one place in the
academy where I could have the most impact, they became less intense. I became more passionate in my commitment to the art of teaching. (hooks, 1994, p.205)

Through her love of teaching and learning, hooks used education and teaching for empowerment. She describes teachers as healers who help ‘heal’ with learning so that the student can discover his or her potential for transformation and empowerment. This can begin with dialogue among learners anywhere; in a house, at a community setting, in a hospital, and even in a university, where transformative learning is most deeply challenged (hooks, 1994).

Dialogue, moreover, is what Paulo Freire (2007) emphasizes to elicit the individual voice and achieve creative freedom in education. Freire argues that education valuing students’ dialogue is the instrument for social and personal transformation. Freire (2007) uses the term “unfinished” to describe men and women of education who are also beings of transformation, of re-creation, and of reinvention (p.17). Freire (2007) also uses the term “unfinished” to describe individuals in the process of constructing and reconstructing what they experienced in the past. Many veterans could be thought of as “unfinished” because they are in the process of constructing and reconstructing their past experiences. Through the creation of art, individuals can narrate, discuss, and interpret their stories and understand new interpretations from the listener’s point-of-view (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Historically, people in some traditional cultures told stories with forms of artistic expression through dance, art, and role-playing that have similarities with other cultures (Tick, 2005). Sharing dialogue allows individuals to share their realities and helps them discover new hopes and possibilities. According to McNiff (2004), there is a language that is indeed invented through sharing dialogue:

People respond to one another, and to the images, from the heart. One person’s artistic expression stimulates an equally soulful response from another. There is a creative flow in the group, an ongoing stream of creative emanations wherein one artistic expression follows another. Verbal explanations have their place in the studio, but they do not dominate the atmosphere. In a therapeutic studio the overall sense of presence of the soul of the place, grows from the people and images while simultaneously acting upon them. (McNiff, 2004, pp. 23-24)
An example of the function of dialogue around art creation in the life of veterans is Chittenden’s (1995) documentation of veteran folk artist Michael Cousino’s work with other veterans. Cousino creates “specific and detailed scenes of experiences that [other veterans] have described to him. Conversations with them move him visibly, and he feels that it is an act of friendship . . . to build for them the stories that they’ve been willing to share with him” (Chittenden, 1995, p.16).

Empowerment can also come from being influenced and inspired by other peoples’ stories. Stake (1995) avers that all humans have stories to share in order to construct knowledge and self-development. The stories and dialogue of a shared experience can also bring insight and knowledge for those who may not understand other groups of individuals outside the mainstream art world.

*Multicultural Art Education and the Inclusion of Groups Outside Mainstream Art*

The inclusion of all people leads to the pedagogy of multicultural art education which teaches students to become more sensitive to other groups that have faced social oppression and inequity (Efland, Freedman, & Stuhr, 1996). Serving isolated populations who have not been integrated enough into mainstream art can influence art education and practice to formulate new constituencies for the inclusion of all people (Pujol, 2009). In art education, the term “outsider art” is a term generally meant to describe artists who have no formal training and function outside the mainstream art world (Congdon & Bucuvalas, 2006). This term subjugates artists as being “the other” outside of the art world and segregates them. In art education there is a general lack of understanding of “outsider art,” and therefore, art educators, art historians, and artists have to fill in the gap to understand art from the perspective of other groups. Congdon and Bucuvalas (2006) argue that the perspectives of “outsider” artists illuminate their lives and
culture at the center of their creative expression. The term “outsider” distorts the meaning of the artwork by relegating the artist to the margins of standards and practices of the mainstream art world, which he or she may not care about (Congdon & Bucuvalas, 2006). Veteran art is considered “outsider art,” and therefore, not integrated enough in the teaching of art education.

For example, Janson (1998) claims that hardly anything has been written about the art of Vietnam veterans, or veterans in general, so there is no significant body of critical work on which to build. Therefore, it is “impossible to know how long veterans have been making art . . . While most of these are hardly masterpieces, it is striking that so little significance has been attached to them. It seems that act of making them that was important” (Janson, 1998, p. 200). Art from “outsider groups” have not usually been considered legitimate art forms because of its supposed lower status (McFee, 1998). This effect alone should motivate art educators to teach art so that it is culturally relevant to all populations. Teaching art to become open to and knowledgeable of other cultures is to learn “sensitive awareness of qualities and diversities in both art and culture can increase inter-cultural communication and respect, and can possibly reduce stereotyping” (McFee, 1998, p.65). Ignoring the meaning in other people’s art can also lead to “distrust, divisiveness, and reinforce[d] prejudice” (McFee, 1998, p.64).

Using terms such as “we” and “they” separate the mainstream art world from the marginalized (Efland, Freedman, & Stuhr, 1996). This may have come from the fact that each culture, sub-culture, and social and economic class has symbols, art, artifacts, and environments that identify its social standing in the arts (McFee, 1998). Consequently, disregarding groups of artists based on their lower social status leads to a lack of understanding and interdisciplinary study in art education and keeps the socio-cultural and behavioral foundation of art education stagnant for classroom practice and curriculum development (McFee, 1998).
It is important that art educators continue to expand and contribute their research on different groups of cultures so that it can be referenced within other disciplines. This relates to the ideal purposes of including culturally diverse art in curriculum to “promote an understanding of the richness of visual culture, [and] increase acceptance of disenfranchised groups” (Freedman, 2003, p.125). McFee (1998) describes the concept of culture as the values, attitudes, and belief systems of a group of people that embody their behavior patterns and the structure of their environment. The concept of culture in art can also influence the way people think, feel, and act and how society determines its aesthetic, ethical, moral, spiritual, cultural, and environmental values (Gaudelius, 1997).

Teaching about various cultures in art (including veteran art), can also contribute to the understanding of social and cultural realities seldom represented in the mainstream art world (Efland, 2002). Efland (2002) writes that the purpose of teaching different cultures in art is to contribute to the “social and cultural landscape that each individual inhabits” (p.171). Efland, Freedman, and Stuhr (1996) describe higher level thinking as a development of analytical skills that come from the awareness of the relevance of culture to artistic production and appreciation. Creating a greater body of literature on how different cultures contribute to the art experience may facilitate higher level learning that can help students synthesize connections among other cultures and their own.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this study is rooted in observations and interviews of veterans with physical, cognitive, and/or emotional disabilities, all of which occurred in the arts and crafts room at the Dallas Veterans Medical Center. Specifically, my methodology focuses on the collective case study (Stake, 1995), which Creswell (2007) describes as multiple cases focused on one issue. Collective case study is appropriate for my research because I collected data from multiple sources that gave me insight into veterans’ interactions and creative activities inside the arts and crafts room. Moreover, collective case study analyzes data through the description of cases, outlining common themes (Stake, 1995). The advantages of a collective case study are that it compares the similarities and differences of each participant’s experience and evaluates results across multiple cases (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Such a method was particularly appropriate for my study as I collected data from multiple cases amid the process of observing participants’ creative production inside the arts and crafts room, interacting with each participant as a volunteer assistant. The presentation of this study’s research is designed to allow the reader into this setting with vivid details illustrating veterans’ interactions. Collective case study methodology also offers the advantages of a systematic approach to recording important events, collecting data, analyzing information, and reporting the results of an investigation of real-life phenomena (Yin, 1994). This orientation aligns well with my research because, following Marshall and Rossman (1999), my data collection process relied on document analysis, interviewing, and various forms of observation such as photography and recordings. As Bassey (1999) notes, case study research has “no specific methods of data collection or of analysis which are unique to it as a method of inquiry, but the major methods of collecting data are asking
questions, observing events and reading documents” (p.81). Finally, collecting sufficient data for my research took approximately eight months, a period of time appropriate to the collective case study methodology (Creswell, 2007).

For this dissertation, I chose to undertake three case studies to investigate the general phenomenon of veterans who participated in creative activities because it that made a manageable number to observe within the setting of the Dallas Veterans Medical Center arts and crafts room. Creswell (2007) recommends having no more than four or five cases in a single study. Due to limitations imposed at the Dallas Veterans Medical Center, however, I was only allowed to study three or fewer cases.

Equally important, Stake (1995) emphasizes that the number and type of case studies one chooses must depend upon the purpose of the inquiry. Since I used narrative inquiry to gain a deeper understanding of each case through details and descriptions, I wanted a smaller number of participants. Stake (1995) also suggests that when choosing participants for case study research, it is important to attain variety but not necessarily representativeness. Sample size has a direct relationship with variability, and a “smaller sample size has more variability, as opposed to a larger sample size with less variability” (Mertens, 2005, p.329). Additionally, Cohen and Manion (1994) note that the larger the sample, the more representative it is, and the more likely that the observer’s role becomes participatory in nature. Consequently, a small sample size suited well my emphasis on the particular details of individual experience.

Similarly, the collective case study methodology supported my efforts to pursue thick description in the data recording process. At the outset, I aimed to investigate whether participants experienced a sense of empowerment of fulfillment through arts and crafts, knowing that two participants had previous arts and crafts experience, and one did not. I was particularly
interested in whether the arts and crafts room at the Dallas Veterans Medical Center was a particular site of empowerment and fulfillment. Focusing individuals and their own descriptions of experience can provide in-depth understanding of cases (Creswell, 2007), and collective case study as a methodology enables thick descriptions that relate the details of time, place, context, and culture conveyed by the participant (Mertens, 2005). Thick descriptions allowed me to see the veterans’ world and analyze the ways they described it to me. Indeed, collective case study gave me great insight into veterans’ realities. Especially advantageous in this regard was the ability to compare similarities and differences of each participant’s experiences as I examined the results from multiple cases (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Yin (1994) recommends that when using multiple case studies, it is helpful to use cross-case synthesis as an analytical technique. I documented the data for different veterans that I observed at various times and compared their actions and interactions inside the arts and crafts room for each session, noting that not every participant was present at every session. It is important to note, however, that I certainly missed some details as, for example, I helped one participant while another person in the room did something else.

Inside the arts and crafts room there was a recreational specialist that supervised veterans in the room and made sure they followed the rules. Sometimes the veterans taught each other what they learned. I have taught painting classes in the past, but this time I only taught one veteran how to paint during my dissertation data collection. The participants and recreational specialist were aware that they were part of my observations in the arts and crafts room. I took on the role of an observer much more than the role of participant. Participant observation involves “observers who engage in the very activities they set out to observe” (Cohen & Manion, 1994, p. 107). The advantages of participant observation are:
(a) Observation studies are experiments and surveys when data are being collected on non-verbal behavior, (b) investigators are able to discern ongoing behavior as it occurs and are able to make appropriate notes, (c) because case study observations take place over an extended period of time, researchers can develop more intimate and informal relationships with those they are observing, generally in more naturalistic environments than those in which experiments and surveys are conducted, and (d) case study observation depends upon verbal responses to structured or semi-structured questions. (Cohen & Manion, 1994, p.110)

The above criteria suited best my methodology of collective case study because it gave me flexibility to interact with subjects as a participant observer. Finally, my role of participant observer was beneficial for me because it also allowed me to engage in reflection on my practice of teaching art (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000).

Research Design

The research paradigm for this study originates from an interpretivist perspective (Bassey, 1999). The interpretive perspective entails that the concepts of reality can vary from one person to another. Social meanings and the interpretation of these meanings influence human actions when they are shared with others (Bassey, 1999). I believe that reality is a construct of the human mind, and there are multiple truths (Gaudelius, 1997). The stories and art that the veterans share may have different interpretations, since people perceive the world in diverse ways that are often similar but by no means identical. As an artist and a veteran, I understand how creative production helped me cope during my time in the service. My perspective on ontology stems from my belief that the creative process of learning is reflective and continuous, synthesized from different perspectives on reality. Creative processes have been important for my individual growth, and I have learned from every experience, positive or negative. It is a continual process to reach one’s full potential as a human being. In this context, connecting with other veterans built a bridge to my own self-development as I gained a sense of their world, which, in the end, had the effect of empowering my own focus for self-improvement.
My hope throughout this study has been that collaborating with veterans in the research process gave them a sense of responsibility and helped them construct deeper insights about themselves (McTaggart, 1997). As I listened to their stories and accepted their feelings, the veterans felt that they were supported, and as a result, the participants felt free to provide many details about themselves to me during the interviews. Charles and Mertler (2006) noted that feeling supported and accepted is important to the participant’s ability to develop trust and an open relationship with the researcher. In my previous pilot study interviews with veterans, each individual recalled traumatic experiences realistically as part of their creative production. Many veterans have a shared culture shaped by being marginalized by society, and many have experienced similar emotions, anxiety, stress, and numbness, affecting their daily quality of life. As a researcher, I have listened to their stories in order to understand their perspectives and experience their realities, a process which, I believe, has also contributed to participants’ self-development through deeper self-knowledge.

**Data Collection**

My practices for collecting data led me to use a *descriptive* case study (Yin, 1994), which best suited my research question, “Do veterans perceive that they become empowered during and after their creative activities and interactions inside a recreation center in a Veterans hospital in Dallas, Texas?” An example of descriptive style report writing would be like “drawing a picture in words of something tangible: a classroom, a school, a system as a form of case study reporting it is based on careful probing and thoughtful analysis” (Bassey, 1999, p.87). To support such an inquiry, essential facets of my data collection process were making observations, interviewing participants, gathering documents, and selecting testimonies and photographic evidence of arts and crafts room work. The sub-questions I developed for the study—(a) “If so, to what degree
does making arts and crafts influence the veterans’ perception of empowerment?”, and (b) “If so, to what degree do the interactions influence the veterans’ perception of empowerment?”—also were well-suited to descriptive data collecting.

Additionally, this collective case study involved empirical research, which focused primarily on data collection (Bassey, 1999). Empirical research is a way of gaining knowledge by means of direct observation or experience (Bassey, 1999). Because interpretation is a major part of this research, I used narrative inquiry in order to capture human experience in order to allow the reader to enter the world of another through the description of experience (Stake, 1995). The study of experience as story in this way constructs a new way of thinking and facilitates the communication of diverse views of experience. Understanding another individual’s experience can generate a new relationship between an individual and his or her environment (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007), and I used narrative inquiry to approach human lives as sources of important knowledge and shared understandings of life experiences. Narrative inquiry helped make sense of how participants perceived empowerment as I observed and documented the data for analysis.

Data collection happened during the interview process, and the participants had the choice of being interviewed with a tape recorder, or to write about their experiences and stories using the questions I gave them in a handout (See appendices B and C). All three participants chose to be interviewed with a tape recorder, and one admitted that he was “real nervous” about it but chose that format because he did not want to write. Each participant took part in a semi-structured interview guided by two sets of questions, one during the first meeting, and one at the end of creative production. Opie (2004) describes semi-structured interviews as a more flexible version of a structured interview. Semi-structured interviews allowed me to gain more depth of
feeling as I probed and expanded the interviewee’s responses (Opie, 2004). It also allowed me as the researcher to change the wording of questions or the order in which I asked them (Opie, 2004). The wording of semi-structured interviews also provided more probing to responses rather than a structured interview.

In this process, open-ended interviewing (Stake, 1995) was appropriate because it allowed each participant to give answers in his or her own words, which elicited detailed thoughts and insights. It also gave me the chance as an interviewer to develop more questions based on the participant’s answers during the interview so I could gain more detail and clarification. By conducting interviews, I gathered, analyzed, and interpreted stories and shared them with people in the arts and crafts room to discover how such exchanges helped them in their creative activities. Marshall and Rossman (1999) write that it is advantageous when participants choose to be interviewed in person because they have the opportunity to expand on their answers, and the researcher is able to observe how they respond to each question by body language and facial expressions. Observing body language allows me to see if the participant feels comfortable disclosing information.

The benefits of a tape recorded interview, described by Bassey (1999), stem from the fact that the researcher can pay attention to the general direction of the interview rather than the details, and then listen intently afterwards. If the interviewee interrupts him or herself, resulting in an incomplete thought, the researcher can ask for a completion of that line of thought by summarizing or repeating part of the last sentence (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). I used tape-recording in my interviews with the participants. For example, when I interviewed the veterans, two did not know what the word “empowerment” meant. When this happened, I explained what my definition of empowerment was and from there requested that the participant describe in his own
words or phrases a similar idea. One veteran said, “feeling good.” Another said, “feeling of accomplishment,” and the third one said, “being happy.” I also asked them, “How do you define empowerment?” so I could get a longer and more thoughtful explanation (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Coming up with clear definitions could be challenging because the participants saw some of the concepts and themes of the study in different ways (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Interviewing them helped me clarify and elaborate many of their responses as I probed and asked for explanations. Using tape-recorded interviews in this way, however, also presented a problem with consistency because two participants may have given interviews of greater length than the others. This is because I probed further to clarify a question or re-direct an answer if a participant went off-topic.

Another benefit of the tape-recorded interview was that the participants felt relaxed because it was like a normal conversation. One participant told me that he was nervous but he “liked all the attention.” Recordings of the interviews helped me remember the interview better when I transcribed the recordings, and I did not miss anything important because I rewound the answers that were obscured by background noise during the interviews. Recording was also good for picking up details such as stuttering in the voice of one participant. During the transcription process, I took out numerous pauses and repetitions. Ely (2007) notes that when she wrote down transcriptions, she “deleted most pauses and repetitions, and markers like ‘um, mmm, yah…’” (p.574) to convey an effect of articulateness to the participants’ words. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) aver that the tape recorder “frees the researcher to participate in the conversation” (p.109). Having such latitude was especially helpful in situations where the participants talked off topic. Free to redirect the conversation quickly, I changed tactics and posed new questions
that re-focused the topic. Furthermore, I was prepared to change my tactics in case the participants said little or nothing at all.

In addition to being recorded, one participant wrote down a short biography of his life and gave it to me for my data collection. Some participants who write their own experiences and stories may feel more comfortable thinking about their answers when they write them down rather than feeling pressured in a verbal interview. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state that biographical writing is a “reconstruction of an individual’s narrative, and there could be other reconstructions” (p. 101). I chose to include this element in order to give every respondent the right forum for relating his biography. When two of the participants chose biographical writing, they could take more time to think about their history without feeling rushed from a tape-recorded interview. These participants felt comfortable expressing themselves on paper in their homes where they could think without distraction.

Bassey (1999) recommends that the researcher decide ahead of time whether the respondent is to see the researcher’s notes during the interview. Doing so allows participants to change answers once they are written down, but this may be distracting to the researcher. I decided not to show my notes unless participants asked. Regardless, it is often possible to “interview a respondent a second time and this may enable refocused questions after the first analysis” (Bassey, 1999, p. 82). For example, one participant wanted to see my transcription of the interview afterwards to make sure that there was nothing embellished or misunderstood from the interview. He also wanted to read what I transcribed later in order to add further details.

During one-on-one interviewing “the researcher needs individuals who are not hesitant to speak and share ideas (Creswell, 2007, p. 133).” A shy person being interviewed may pose a challenge in interviewing because he or she may be less articulate and give incomplete and
insufficient data. Creswell (2007) also adds that when collecting data, researchers “may hear or see something uncomfortable to them during the interview (139).” Subsequently, the participants may feel afraid and uncomfortable that their personal issues may be revealed to the public, thus making the participants feel reluctant to accept the researcher’s interpretation of the situation (Creswell, 2007). The participants may be unwilling to share all that the researcher hopes to explore because they may fear that the observers’ judgment will be affected by their close involvement in the group (Cohen & Manion, 1994). This fear can be alleviated by having the participants write down their stories. It can also help the researcher who may not comprehend responses to the questions or the various elements of the conversation because of a lack of familiarity with the local language, or the lack of interviewing skills (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). All three participants shared their answers with me, and I did not sense they were afraid of being judged by me. Also, when one participant wrote his story, it gave me the chance to pose new questions for my next observation with him. When I needed clarification on what he wrote, I asked him, “Did you have a different take on that?,” in order to probe the topic further. Additionally, when I allowed some time to pass before analyzing his experience, I started to see things more from his perspective. Posner (2000) notes that by allowing time to pass before analyzing the experience, one may gain insight by writing a more thoughtful analysis. Moreover, having a participant write down his story saved me from spending time to decipher an additional transcription from a second recording, and it also gave him a chance to reflect on what he was thinking about while he wrote. After I made the transcriptions from each interview, I showed them to the participants so they could read what they originally told me. A couple of them changed, modified, and elaborated on some answers in further detail.
Through participant observation, I became more intuitive as I began to experience each veteran’s reality. Lovelace (2002) explains that it is very important to listen and learn and allow participants to draw from their life experiences so that they can relate their stories meaningfully. I documented what I observed and experienced using field notes and used a tape recorder when I interviewed the participants about how they felt about themselves before and after their creative activities. This gave me insight into their characteristics, attitudes, beliefs and experiences. I also documented each participant during the process of creative activities and their interactions with digital photography. This included taking pictures of their arts and crafts before and after creative production. The purpose of these photos was reference and data documentation, and I showed them to participants who wanted to see their progress and reflect upon them.

As I encountered their insights, I realized that as a researcher who used narrative inquiry it was necessary to have a trusting and open relationship with my participants (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Narrative inquiry is about collaboration and caring, and the participants needed this so they could share their memories and stories. When the participants started to describe what their arts and crafts were, I began to elicit their “voices” as I asked them what the images, media, or colors they used meant to them. A collective case study examines the construction of participants’ realities through the narration of their stories (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Freeman (2007) argues that, first and foremost, the narrative researcher must try to interpret the data that the participant wrote so that others can read and learn from it. In this spirit, my research has been collected and interpreted in ways that facilitate others’ ability to experience the participants’ realities and, in turn, connect them with their own.
Sample Selection

This collective case study involved a group of male veterans. Each participant was assigned an anonymous name of his choice. There are more men than women receiving care and participating in programs at the Dallas VA Hospital, which is why all three of my participants are males ranging from age 50–60. To select my participants, I used purposeful sampling or criterion sampling because such methods supported my determination to choose participants who had previously participated in creative activities and socializing inside the arts and crafts room. The criteria that I used for these participants were: (a) one veteran participant who preferred to make crafts only, (b) one veteran participant who preferred to make expressive and creative art from any media of his choice not from a craft kit, (c) one veteran participant who preferred to interact inside the room most of the time that did not participate in creative activities, (d) participants who came back to the room on a consistent basis and, (e) participants who were out-patients. I preferred out-patients because in-patients have stricter confidentiality rules, and I was not allowed to record them while they were being treated. Also, some in-patients may be heavily medicated and may not have sufficient cognition to be interviewed. This study took eight months.

Data Analysis

I used content analysis to analyze my data (See Table 1) because I used field notes, interview transcriptions, photography to collect the data, and then drew interpretations and conclusions about the patterns and themes within the data collection. It is more inductive because potential themes and other questions may arise from the close scrutiny of the data (White & Marsh, 2006). Content analysis allowed me to code and create categories so that I could increase and generate knowledge that helped me with my interpretations. Within this
study, there was a lot of interpretation of art and craftwork from the participants. Markoff, Shapiro, & Weitman (1975) described that within content analysis coding is not just from words or text but also from symbols. This includes the visual arts and looking at paintings to make an interpretation.

Table 1

*Content Analysis Chart Showing Data Collection*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Collection</th>
<th>Content Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Digital photography</td>
<td>The purposes of taking photos are for reference and data documentation, and also to show the veterans who may want to see their progress and reflect upon them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual interviewing with audio recordings and semi-structured interviewing</td>
<td>Individual interviewing with audio can help me probe answers to clarify and further gain insight into the participants’ attitudes, beliefs, and experiences. Audio recordings will allow me the opportunity to transcribe what occurs in a setting and play it over as much as necessary. The semi-structured interviewing allows me to organize questions and answers that are similar for each respondent’s answer to the same question.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant observation and field note documentation</td>
<td>Participant observation fosters an in-depth understanding of a social setting and situation and the behavior of the participants in that setting. It can help me gain an understanding of situated learning and the participants’ ways of interacting and participating in creative activities. Field note documentation allows me to observe patterns of interaction with the participants. Concepts can be constructed from documenting the data collection.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Additionally, content analysis was used commonly within the social sciences, and because the data collected was within a situated learning environment, it was the best choice in regards for the flexibility of this environment because of the social learning aspects (Markoff, Shapiro, & Weitman, 1975).
Overall, this data collection was flexible in the sense that I listened to the recordings and reviewed the field notes and text and then selected what was relevant and unitized the text in the sense of using quotes or examples, contextualized the meaning of the text and the circumstances surrounding the text (White & Marsh, 2006). Content analysis allowed me to code and formulate my findings so that they are applicable to my research questions and also helped me identify patterns and relationships so I could answer my research questions and put them in perspective (White & Marsh, 2006).

I used digital photography to take pictures of the veterans’ arts and crafts. This method of data collection supported content analysis because visual pictures showed the product of the participant’s work, which could then be interpreted by the participant who made the artwork to communicate his or her thoughts and symbolic representations, and it could also can be interpreted by others (Stake, 1995). In addition to using digital photography, I was a participant observer most of the time to help me understand the social setting, situation, and behavior of the participants in the arts and crafts environment. This approach also helped me gain an understanding of situated learning and how the participants interacted and participated in creative activities. I took field notes during my participant observation (see Table 2). The field notes were used when I observed patterns of interaction with the participants. By this method, concepts were constructed from the data collection (Stake, 1995).

I collected data through audio recording interviews which later helped me probe the participants’ answers for clarification. Audio recordings allowed me to transcribe what occurred in the arts and crafts room as I played the recordings over numerous times. During the interviews, when participants were reluctant to give details in response to specific questions about personal experiences that occurred in the arts and crafts room, I used observation and
personalized my interpretation adding such phrases as, “This is what I think as a researcher…” (Creswell, 2007). Then, I synthesized connections among the military and personal experiences veterans described. Lastly, in order to make sense of semi-structured interviews, I compared and organized differences and similarities in each respondent’s answer to the same question (Stake, 1995).

Table 2

Field Notes from One Session at the Dallas VA Arts and Crafts Room

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observation</th>
<th>My comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monday, February 7, 2011 11 am</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Observation</strong></td>
<td><strong>My comments</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Today when I came into the arts and crafts room the place looked bare. There were hardly any arts or crafts in the room. Inside there was the recreational specialist, Kevin, and four other male veterans. When I came inside there was a younger male veteran with tattoos all over his body. He greeted me and he was working on a craft where he was in the process of making a cross. He was asking me a lot of personal questions such as “are you married?” He told me that he was a sniper in the Army and he killed a lot of people so that is why he was messed up in the head. I asked him why he wanted to do a cross. He said he was not religious but wanted to give the cross to someone in the hospital. He told me that he didn’t believe in God and that he was a patient there. Then another veteran in a wheelchair approached me. I just won first place for digital art at the Veteran’s Art competition. His name was Chuck. Chuck was wearing a Satanic pentagram on his neck and he told me that he was a Satan worshipper. I did not judge him but listened to why he would want to choose that religion. Chuck told me that he came into the art room to socialize. He does not do any arts or crafts inside the room. He likes to just hang out although he told me that some people “scoff” and shun him for being a Satan worshipper. I told him that I would not do that. From the beginning, I immediately felt that he would be one of my case studies. I didn’t ask him yet, though, because I wanted to know him better and build trust with him. Chuck for some reason immediately trusted me and he told me about his abusive past and how he suffers bipolar and depression. During his story, the young male who was a military sniper completed his craft kit of the cross. I told him that it looked good. He said he was going back to his therapy session. Before he left he told me that he would make me a cross.</td>
<td>There needs to be more craft kits in this room. They just changed administration and the new person needs to be told to order more craft kits. The walls look bare and I have never seen this place without crafts stacked high to the ceiling. It is starting to look like an ordinary hospital room because I can see the white of the walls now. Every time I come into this room, I rarely see any female veterans. I feel like there needs to be more women in here. People in this room already know me and accept who I am but I can only imagine that a female veteran may feel alone if she came into this room alone without knowing anybody and it’s full of males. Why does this person ask me if I am married? That bothered me and I don’t like these questions. I feel this guy has mental issues because he just told me that he killed people as a sniper and he had a smirk on his face. He told me that he was a “killing machine”. I have never met a Satan worshipper before. If he feels judged by other veterans, why does he come into this arts and crafts room? Is there something about this place that makes people feel comfortable? Could this be one of my potential case studies? I like him already because of his honesty. How interesting that he does not do any arts or crafts yet he likes to come into this room to socialize or watch people. I sympathized with this veteran. His story about his past almost made me angry about how he was treated. I feel flattered that he trusted me immediately felt that he could disclose his past to me.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I think that this veteran felt good about giving his craft away and I thought he was thoughtful to offer to make me one of the crosses.

From data, field notes, observations, and photography I drew inferences to provide structure for my interpretations. One way I categorized the data was through transcribing the information from my notes and voice recordings and organizing it based on patterns and behaviors expressed by each participant.

Figure 1. Triangulation chart showing the different categories that support and strengthen various modes of data collection.

To make sure that the data I had collected was accurate, I used the method of triangulation (Figure 1). Triangulation is a process of repetitious data collecting that confirms the significance of the data by identifying its meanings from multiple perspectives (Stake, 2006). In my data collection, triangulation and member checking validated key observations that were
important to construct validity (Stake, 1995). Yin (1994) describes 6 sources of evidence: (a) documents (b) archival records, (c) interviews (typically open-ended, but also focused, structured, and survey interviews are possible), (d) direct observations, (e) participant observation (assuming a role in the situation and getting an inside view of the events), and (f) arts, crafts, or photos.

For example, when I interviewed a veteran, I trusted that the participant was telling me the truth. In this case, I used an observational method to gage the truth of the participant’s behavior. When I observed them in the recreation room, for example, I was able to check what they actually did instead of what they told me they did. When I used a combination of different data collection methods it allowed me to see a more accurate analysis of what the participant experienced in the recreation room, and I was able to question him about why he did those particular things rather than another.

Stake (1995) describes direct interpretation as a way to look at a single instance to draw meaning from it and to analyze the data through a synthesis that breaks down the data and puts it back together in more meaningful ways. I created a table to show how I documented the data and searched for patterns (see Table 3). Yin (1994) suggests that when using multiple case studies, it is helpful to use cross-case synthesis as an analytical technique. Creswell (2007) demonstrates that searching for patterns and charting them in a table can show the relationship between two categories.

After all the triangulation was completed, I categorized the data from my notes and the voice recordings and organized the data based on patterns and behaviors expressed by each participant. I went through all the data and transcripts and placed a label or code next to each data unit where the matching concept, theme, or event appeared (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). An
example of coding is shown in Table 4. Coding the data allowed me to locate excerpts, observations, and documents that referred to the same concepts, themes, and events, and then examine those together (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Table 3

*Multi-Session Analysis of One Case Study*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Interactions</th>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
<th>Attitudes/Reactions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>February 7, 2011</td>
<td>Interaction</td>
<td>He was very talkative to me. At times, he would stop talking and observe other veterans in the room. He liked to talk to me about his past because I listened. He sometimes spoke to the recreational specialist to ask him questions.</td>
<td>Chuck was generally friendly yet only spoke to those who were willing to listen to him. When I first met him he was looking at my digital art and slowly going around the arts and crafts room in his wheelchair.</td>
<td>He became less depressed once I listened to him and his stories of abuse. I think during times he felt “triggered” because his face would turn red because he was angry. He also gave me a hug when he left so I thought he felt a little better.</td>
<td>He seemed to lack self-confidence in making crafts because he told me that he preferred watching others. He generally does not speak about his emotions, and it was hard to tell exactly how he was feeling because he was on heavy medication. Overall, he seemed like he wanted to be in the arts and crafts room and be around people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 10, 2011</td>
<td>Creative Production (art or craft-making)</td>
<td>He did not participate in making arts and crafts. He preferred to watch others do arts and crafts or talk to them.</td>
<td>It seemed that just by being inside the room and around others, he felt more comfortable and calm sitting in his wheelchair.</td>
<td>I think that Chuck learned from watching others, although he did not make anything. He looked interested in what others were doing.</td>
<td>He sat in his wheelchair and talked to me most of the time. He looked content. His attitude towards others making crafts was positive. He actually enjoyed watching them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Activities</td>
<td>Interactions</td>
<td>Behavior</td>
<td>Outcomes</td>
<td>Attitudes/Reactions</td>
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<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>February 14, 2011</strong></td>
<td>Interaction</td>
<td>Chuck was quiet today. He told me that he was depressed and had an episode earlier. He didn’t speak very much but just sat in the room with minimal interaction.</td>
<td>He seemed very depressed and would stay quiet in his wheelchair. When I tried to talk to him, he had very little to say other than that he felt “very depressed.”</td>
<td>I think that towards the end of the session Chuck started feeling a little better just because I showed him that I cared. I felt that he needed a friend to listen to him or just sit next to him.</td>
<td>Chuck gave me a hug before he left and told me that he was glad that he met me. I think that coming into the room and interacting with others helped his attitude change mildly. When I showed him that I cared about him, his attitude towards me changed, and he told me he felt “a little better.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative Production (art or craft-making)</td>
<td>Interaction</td>
<td>He preferred to watch others in the room and listen to them talk, but he didn’t talk much because he told me that he was depressed.</td>
<td>He watched people come in and out of the arts and crafts room. Nobody did crafts this session. They just came in to pick up crafts.</td>
<td>I think Chuck remained depressed because nobody was doing arts and crafts, and he could not watch or learn from them.</td>
<td>His attitude was still in the depressed mode, but he came into the room nevertheless to be around me and others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction</td>
<td>Chuck did a lot of talking today. He was telling me about how he was in group therapy and did most of the talking in the room. In addition to greeting me, he wheeled himself around the room.</td>
<td>He seemed to be in a good mood today. His behavior was a more positive one and he felt more comfortable talking to me. He was more groomed today than the previous week.</td>
<td>Chuck looked happy, and he was less depressed than last week. He also stopped wearing his Satanic pentagram and showed me the new things he bought from the store. I think</td>
<td>His attitude was more positive, and he liked to talk more this session. He seemed to have a positive reaction when I took the time to ask him how he was doing, and as he showed me the new things he bought from the store, his attitude seemed more energetic. People also responded</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Activities</td>
<td>Interactions</td>
<td>Behavior</td>
<td>Outcomes</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>room to say hello to others and liked to listen to what was going on with others in the room.</td>
<td>sessions. He seemed very happy to receive compliments from me about how well he looked.</td>
<td>that he liked being in the arts and crafts room and hanging out.</td>
<td>positively to him, which made his attitude more positive because of the attention he was getting. He also gave me a hug at the end of the session.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Creative Production (art or craft-making)</td>
<td>I was painting a canvas for a brief moment during the session. At one point, he asked me if I could teach him to do art. I told him that I could teach him if he really wanted to learn.</td>
<td>He seemed eager to learn something new. He liked to watch one veteran sew leather crafts. I think that it gave him a sense of peace to watch the other veteran weave a wallet.</td>
<td>Chuck seemed to be learning a lot from watching the guy in the room make a leather wallet. The outcome of this session was positive for Chuck because he needed to be around people so he would not feel alone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>He seemed eager to learn something new. He liked to watch one veteran sew leather crafts. I think that it gave him a sense of peace to watch the other veteran weave a wallet.</td>
<td>Chuck seemed to be learning a lot from watching the guy in the room make a leather wallet. The outcome of this session was positive for Chuck because he needed to be around people so he would not feel alone.</td>
<td>His attitude generally positive and he seemed to be content and happy watching others come in and out of the room and watching that one veteran make a leather wallet. He showed an interest in what others were talking about in the room and had a supportive attitude.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4

**Coding From Case Study Notes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Words</th>
<th>Transcriptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Empowerment| - If someone tells “Alexander” that his art is good then he feels good, but if someone tells him that his paintings needs work, he will feel good about the feedback only if he believes it. He says if enough people say it, he could believe it. He will make another painting if someone says his painting is good.  

- I do not know what “empowerment” means. That word don’t even click in my mind. How do I feel!? I feel good. I feel that I accomplished something to myself and the biggest thrill is once I completed the craft, I give it away. Me, sometimes it feels like maybe somebody enjoys it |
better than myself. So if they enjoy it more by looking at it or doing something with it, then that’s more power to them. To me, if they enjoy looking at it then I just give it to them. I feel like Santa Claus. Sometimes it’s like some of the vets come in and they are in a bad, bad mood and I make them laugh, or if I have a completed craft and I give it to them, they laugh or smile. It’s like the old saying “It’s better to give than receive.”

- I feel good afterwards when I finish the crafts because I give them away. I can go from a good guy to a bad guy in a matter of minutes. Basically everyone that comes here is positive because they want to do something to help their mind to help them forget what’s going on and do arts and crafts for therapeutic reasons.

Frustration

- He has tried to help others in the arts and crafts room but complains that sometimes they do not listen. When this happens he tells me “Oh well, their loss.” One female veteran in the arts and crafts room he tried to teach who has some kind of anxiety and bipolar disorder will not listen to him. He calls her “flighty.” Sometimes he tries to show someone how to paint a tree with darkness and lightness for the shades of green and the next thing you know the tree is all one green. He is irritated and annoyed when they don’t listen to him and they are not attentive sometimes. When he felt unsuccessful is when he didn’t want to come in there because he was “forced to” from his wife. He told me his wife is a control freak and makes him do things he doesn’t want to do. If he is in the room and he doesn’t want to be inside he sulks and he is depressed. Sometimes he feels “really bad and really low” when he is forced to go.

- I do leather work, I do woodwork, I don’t do many model cars because they got so many parts. When I start it, I get frustrated and then I get my hammer in my hand and bash them.

Teaching / Learning

- One of the meaningful and best experiences I had in here was when we had these students that come into this high school to learn how to work with veterans while they are in therapy. For example, one young lady that I helped do a pair of moccasins. I did one and she did the other one. But the thrill of seeing her actually accomplish finish her moccasins and her facial expressions just made me feel good. Her face showed a joy of completing something that she has not done before. It’s like a little kid opening a gift that she always wanted. She had a look of accomplishment that she did something by herself. And it made me feel good because I taught her how to do something.

- The beadwork that I do, I do at home. But the leather crafts I do here and a lot of vets ask me how to do it or how to get them started. I tell them that I won’t do the craft for them. I’ll start it for them and let them
Finish. If they mess up and I will help them correct it and tell them what was wrong so they could start from the beginning. I want them to finish it because if I do it, then they won’t how to work on the crafts hands-on. I have them do it so that next time so they can do it by themselves so they won’t need some help or ask themselves, “where did I mess up?” I am the type of guy that don’t really talk a whole lot.

Interaction

• Everybody knows me here. Coming in here is like the Marines. We are a tight unit and we always stay together. In here, it’s like a small brotherhood. Everyone just sits around and talk about what’s going on. Sometimes we get personal but for me personal life should be kept to yourself and not shared with anyone else.

• I learned that listening from other vets about what’s going on for when they need help and when they don’t need help. Listening is probably the best thing because I can just sit back and just see what’s going on with these vets.

• Generally people in the room are encouraging. Pretty much it is positive by complimenting his work saying “it’s good”. His self esteem goes up because it feels that he is teaching them something. Sometimes it’s nice to be there and interact.

• Some of the stories that we hear, are really stories that some of the vets would only talk to another vet and not share any of their stories to the civilian or somebody who has not been in the military because people tend not to understand how the vets feel. They take us for granted and they feel like we just want to start a war or some military conflict but they don’t understand what we have seen what we have done and they think we are lunatics.

• Here’s a story. I was stationed at Pearl Harbor in the Navy. I was at Waikiki. Waikiki is beautiful; nice beach, beautiful sunsets, palm trees, ocean but when I was alone it was boring. Then I met two other guys who were stationed there. We ended up doing stuff together and exploring the area. Then Waikiki turned out to be the paradise that it should be. When you are alone it’s not so meaningful and it’s boring. When you have others to share the experience with it is more meaningful. That’s how it is in the arts and crafts room. I go there to share my experiences in making arts and crafts with others and people go there to be around people to make arts and crafts. It’s like Six Flags. If you go alone then it’s boring but if you with someone then it’s fun.

Mental Illness

• “Marine” told me he saw ghosts in the arts and crafts room. He starts to tell me what he sees: “The ghosts are my friends. Here in the arts and crafts room, this used to be the morgue. And sometimes, I think that there are ghosts in here and I tell some of the fellow vets that we need to
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Words</th>
<th>Transcriptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>do a séance so we can call them back out but they don’t want to. But I keep telling them that they need to do that so we can have a Casper come out. Some of them are pretty cool. They have like a human image to them. But I also see the ugly ones that tend to come after me. They wanna do some harm to me. I am not making this up this is a for real thing. These little black ghosts. They say that they are supposed to come and get you. They are by the window and they come and look around and go around the windows. At times they look into the window and say “come on out and play” and telling me sometimes, these black ghosts telling me they will “come to get you.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sometimes I feel that I just want to die. I am very depressed. The lithium made me sicker than a dog.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• There are ghosts over there by the window . . . now they are behind you. I think that these are the people that I killed in Vietnam. They follow me. I don’t feel sorry for what I did but I regret doing what I did. I don’t think that the black ghosts are demons. Demons have horns on them. These ones don’t.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Validity of Study**

Member checking can be both formal and informal during the normal course of observation and conversation with veterans in the arts and crafts room who have known and worked with the participant being interviewed (Creswell, 1998). Other veterans that came inside the arts and crafts room that had observed the participants regularly in the room, confirmed particular aspects of the data to establish credibility (Creswell, 1998). This procedure is essential for the participants to know how I interpreted their stories and also to clarify any misunderstandings on my part that may have occurred.

Additionally, to validate the factual accuracy of what I observed, I used descriptive validity (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Reporting descriptive information about events, objects, behaviors, people, environment, times, places, and interactions was also used to establish validity. Cross-checking (Johnson & Christensen, 2008) through photographs and field notes
helped me validate my observations. The answers that I received from the research questions were also checked as I discussed the questions from my semi-structured interviews with the participants, who gave me their opinions about whether the questions made sense or not. I also validated the meanings of the participants’ viewpoints, thoughts, feelings, and experiences, evaluating how accurately my data portrayed their ‘inner worlds’ by showing them the transcriptions I typed from their audio recordings, the meanings of which they confirmed.

In addition, I compared what participants said with their actions and confirmed their concordance. For example, if I observed a veteran that appeared to be angry in his behavior, I confirmed that this veteran acted angry by asking other veterans in the arts and crafts room. I used triangulation through other observers inside the arts and crafts room to strengthen my validity (Creswell, 2007). I used the triangulation approach as I re-listened to the recordings and collected data from my observations to confirm accurate interpretations of the participants’ meanings. I also allowed the participants to review my notes and transcriptions from the interviews to see if there were any discrepancies between my documentation and what they told me. Finally, I asked the recreational specialist and other people inside the room if they could describe what they observed from each participant in question to validate the participant’s process inside the arts and crafts room.

Marshall and Rossman (1999) argue that by having participants give accurate and credible information requires patience that is established over time during the process of storytelling, re-telling, and reliving personal experiences. Since I used case studies that privileged the stories of the participants, I was careful to honor their stories and voices. Interpretive validity (Johnson & Christensen, 2008) was a way to verify the meanings of the stories the veterans told me. Maxwell (1992) notes that interpretive validity is accuracy in
interpreting what is going in the minds of participants, ensuring that participant’s views, thoughts, feelings, intentions, and experiences are accurately understood by the researcher. Through “hearing each other’s voices, individual thoughts, and sometimes associating these voices with personal experience makes us more acutely aware of each other” (hooks, 1994, p.186). Interpretive validity (Johnson & Christensen, 2008) gave me the opportunity to understand things from the participants’ perspectives and then provide a valid account of these perspectives.
CHAPTER 4
THE ARTS AND CRAFTS ROOM ENVIRONMENT

Description of the Physical Environment

The arts and crafts room is located on the first floor of the Veteran’s Hospital in a long hallway that connects the main building to the hospital’s retirement housing. It is located very close to the inpatient mental ward unit and is unlike other areas of the hospital, which are typically white and undecorated. Upon first entering, one sees a large wall where veteran-created crafts are displayed. That area is well decorated with painted bird houses and model cars, wooden sculptures and clocks, and paintings that convey a feeling of artistic creation. On different parts of the wall hang sun catchers, paint-by-number glass portraits, beadwork, and wooden military decorations. There are stacks of larger craft kit boxes against the wall all the way up to the ceiling. There are shelves and plastic drawers filled with smaller craft kits such as leather wallets, moccasins, leather key chains and belt kits, and sun catchers. Three long tables with ten chairs around them are placed in the middle of the room where patients work on arts and crafts. There are also donated items in the room such as a VHS player, a television, and a whole shelving unit filled with VHS tapes so veterans can choose to watch videos while they make art. On one side of the room is the desk space of the recreational specialist who is in charge of the room. There is another desk on the opposite end of the room where a volunteer works to sign people in and assist them. The room’s physical environment gives a distinctive impression of color, creativity, and productivity, which contrasts strongly with the many rooms throughout the VA Hospital that are white and unadorned. This is the one environment in the VA Hospital conducive to learning, and it makes a unique space for creativity and recreation. One veteran
patient described the room as one that “makes me feel happy to learn in” (Personal communication, April 7, 2011).

Description of the Program

The arts and crafts room is an environment that supports and nurtures creative recreation. It is run by the organization Help Hospitalized Veterans (HHV) to provide veterans the opportunity to participate in making craft kits inside or outside of the hospital (See Figure 2, 3, and 4).

Figure 2. Stacked crafts kits inside the arts and crafts room.1

1 Figures 2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9, and 1 were photographed by Cindy Hasio.
Figure 3. Veteran volunteer checking inventory inside the arts and crafts room.

Figure 4. Some completed crafts created by veterans adorn the shelves inside the room.
This non-profit organization distributes crafts kits to VA Hospitals all over the United States based on donations it receives from individuals. Because the private donations of individuals help maintain and purchase craft kits for the program, several “thank you” cards are included in each craft kit so that the veterans can write to the donors to thank them personally. HHV mandates that veterans write thank you cards as they receive craft kits, and each day thousands of cards are mailed out. HHV receives donations primarily through direct mail campaigns to the American public (http://www.hhv.org), which ask for financial support for arts and crafts and other programs, as well as sponsorships provided to hospitalized veterans, and HHV encourages donors to become pen pals with veterans writing thank you cards, ensuring that the thank you notes identify donors by name. New rules for this program as of January 2011 require that a veteran may only receive a new craft kit once he or she can show their previous kit or a picture of it completed. The Help Hospitalized Veterans website (http://www.hhv.org/programs/craftkits.asp) describes how craft kits help veterans:

By enabling patients to become involved in a satisfying, creative activity, the kits greatly improve patient morale, making them more responsive to treatment and easier to care for. The challenge of completing the kits helps the patients to discover that they can again be useful, productive human beings. Through the kits they regain a new sense of accomplishment and self-worth, which in many cases brings about a remarkable change in their whole state of mind. By introducing veteran patients to arts and crafts, the program has given many of them, particularly the disabled, a meaningful hobby that they can continue to pursue and derive pleasure from for years to come. In 1999 HHV expanded its operation and began production of many of the most popular kits, such as leather items, sun-catchers and wood kits. By producing craft kits in-house, the organization saves thousands of dollars, enabling more kits to reach more hospitalized veterans.

Mission Statement, Rules, and Policies

The mission statement for the arts and crafts room, posted on the wall, notes that the arts and crafts are:
To provide patients receiving care at Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) medical centers, military hospitals and state veterans homes with therapeutic arts & crafts activities. With over 300 different kits available, a patient is able to select one suited to his or her personal needs. The kits help in keeping hands active and minds alert during days and sometimes even weeks of recuperation after surgery or rehabilitation. Arts and crafts kits along with other therapeutic products and services HHV provides and sponsors, come as a very welcome assurance to veteran patients that they have not been forgotten - that “someone out there really does care.” With increased demand for services placed upon the VA and military hospital systems, HHV continues to focus on its delivery of product and support to the veterans of past and present wars.

Because the VA Hospital is a federal medical facility, there are rules inside the arts and crafts room that are enforced by the recreational specialist and the volunteers (see Appendix A). First, anyone receiving a craft kit must be a veteran. This means showing an official veteran government identification card and giving the last four numbers of one’s social security number. Each recipient must also state what branch of service he or she served in on a sign-in sheet. The veterans who come inside the arts and craft room must also abide by the rules of the room. There is no smoking, no loud music, or weapons allowed on the property. A veteran using the room must clean up afterwards and be respectful to other veterans inside the room. Employees or volunteers are not allowed to talk about other patients in the hospital because of strict patient confidentiality rules, and those who work inside the arts and crafts room are expected to be respectful and courteous to veterans who visit.

Activities

In the VA Dallas arts and crafts room, veterans choose to work with craft kits much more frequently than they make their own paintings or drawings. According to my months of observation, the most popular craft is paint-by-number window decorations, apparently because they are small, easy to make, and quickly drying. Since there is a higher percentage of male veterans, more than half the crafts are model cars or helicopters, which are judged to be of greater interest to men, and I have seen a few male veterans work on model car craft kits. Other
Craft kits include clocks (See Figure 5), leather crafts clocks (See Figure 6), paint-by-numbers (See Figure 7), ceramic crafts (See Figure 8), wood craft kits (See Figure 9), and painting craft kits (See Figure 10).

Figure 5. Wood clock craft kit.

Figure 6. Leather craft kit.
Figure 7. Paint-by-number craft kit.

Figure 8. Ceramic craft kit.
Currently, there remains debate within art education about what it means to be creative. Most art educators argue that creativity lies in process, while others maintain that product is
essential. For example, Zimmerman (2009) describes that the process of creativity helps a student formulate attitudes and beliefs that progresses into self-expression and problem solving. On the other hand, the product is important to some teachers because it is evidence that the students have satisfied the learning outcomes based on the rubrics and the teacher’s expectations that the student learned the skills for the lesson (Zimmerman, 2009).

I have heard comments like: “He is very creative; he made a model car and mantled it on a piece of wood that he varnished.” This view stems from confusion between being creative and creating an artistic product. From this perspective, the art or craft product and the capacity for creativity are used synonymously, collapsing the distinction between being and doing. Just assembling a craft kit has been called “creative,” even if the result were the same as ten other veterans making the same craft. Within the arts and crafts room, the emphasis is not placed on determining whether an individual has creative skill.

In fact, when a veteran produces a finished craft in order to request a new one, this proof of completing a craft is sufficient evidence for the supervisor to write in his government report that the veteran became “involved in a satisfying, creative activity” (“Therapeutic Arts and Crafts,” http://www.hhv.org).

In art education, the debate of the definition of “creative activity” is argued between the distinction between the process and product of making art. From a “postmodern perspective the use of distinct categories such as ‘outsider art’ marginalizes less dominant groups such as veterans and enables them to be seen as part of a hierarchy culminating with Western “fine art” (Efland, Freedman, & Stuhr, 1996). Such works are not always made “as art” in the Western sense and do not necessarily ask to be judged aesthetically “as art” (Efland, Freedman, & Stuhr, 1996). This is true for defining veterans’ art because in this culture, veterans’ art does not have to
be aesthetic or expressive. It could just be craft kits such as the ones my participants worked on. According to my participants Chuck and Marine, they felt that crafts were art, although they are not considered that in the mainstream art world. This is important to my analysis because arts and crafts serve as a means of self-development and self-empowerment during the learning and social process.

I and other volunteers have taught art classes to veterans at the VA Hospital arts and crafts room in the past, but such classes have not been offered in the last year because most veterans prefer to make crafts that they can take home with them, preferring to avoid extended periods in the arts and crafts room. When veterans are in the room, most of the activities include socializing, especially talking and sharing stories. When and if veterans worked on arts and crafts, there were always a few people who liked to sit and watch them. Sometimes, the veterans came inside to watch movies. At other times, they came in make something simple before a doctor’s appointment. Overall, the activities inside the arts and crafts room are very diverse. Since people are constantly coming and going, different activities take place simultaneously, and various functions start and end at staggered times.
CHAPTER 5

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

“Chuck”

In this chapter I will describe three participants in this case study. All three are male ranging between these ages 53-64. Two are Caucasian and one is Native American, and all three are disabled veterans who either use a wheelchair or a cane to move around. Two are married and one is a homosexual and all participants used pseudonyms that they chose so I could protect their identities.

“Chuck” is a Caucasian male in his late 50s who served in the Army during 1973-1975 as a machine gun personnel carrier. When I first met him, he was looking at some digital art that I brought into the arts and crafts room. At first he did not say anything, and he just grabbed my matted work and stared at it. I then came up to him and introduced myself. Chuck is in a wheelchair and cannot walk. He can only use his hands, and he suffers from major depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. He is single and was divorced three times. When I first met him he was proud to tell people that his religion was Satanism. He wore a satanic pentagram to the arts and crafts room. Most visitors to the arts and crafts room stay away from him, and he told me that most of them “scoff at me when they see the upside down cross.” Chuck always sat alone and did not do any arts or crafts as he observed people come in and make them. A few times I have tried to teach him how to paint, but he prefers to watch me and others. Chuck comes into the arts and crafts room to feel like he is part of a social group. He has never done art or crafts before or after the military. When Chuck described his experiences sitting inside the arts and crafts room he told me that, “It made me feel really good. I don’t know, it just kinda calms me down and I’m just focused in on what I am doing and nothing else matters.”
Chuck shared with me over the course of our visits that he was diagnosed with major depression and bi-polar disorder and from my observations of him inside the arts and crafts room, it appeared that he enjoyed being there and felt happy. He told me several times that he was a “little depressed and I don’t know why but I took medicine,” yet he felt comfortable talking to people and being part of the group of people inside the arts and crafts room because they accepted him. He explained:

In general people in the arts and crafts room are nice to me and treat me with respect. When you come inside the room and teach painting, I feel really good. Yeah, actually I didn’t think I would like painting but I’m really into it (watching me paint). Back there when you were in there painting, I focused solely on that painting. I would like to learn how to paint rocks, landscapes and snowy wintery scenes. I’ve been looking at different mountain paintings on TV. I haven’t been feeling well. You know that I got these two aneurisms, one on my right leg and one on my stomach. I like coming into the arts and crafts room because it’s like my safe haven. It’s just so—it’s just a normal-like room it’s got no medical stuff in it . . . I come into the arts and crafts room because just telling people stuff and they don’t judge me and they don’t jump to any conclusions. (Personal communication, April 12, 2011)

Chuck liked to listen to other peoples’ stories. He mentioned to me that sometimes he thought many of the veterans inside the arts and crafts room were worse in their mental conditions than he was. When Chuck came into the arts and crafts room, people he did not know immediately trusted him and told him their hardships and stories. For Chuck, the feeling of others trusting him was empowering. Chuck commented that the other veterans told him stories that they would never tell a civilian and that they accepted him as a friend. Yet, there are things he will not tell them. Each time I observed Chuck inside the room, he would stay there for hours until he left for his doctor’s appointments. The feeling of empowerment for him was temporary, lasting only for the time he spent inside the arts and crafts room. Chuck told me that:

I come in down and depressed but I feel good about myself when I am in there but it only lasts a few minutes after I leave because I don’t have the people to talk to when I leave the room. (Personal communication, April 12, 2011)
Chuck trusted me over the months I came into the arts and crafts room and interestingly enough, my interactions with Chuck influenced his choice of religion in some way. He asked me what my religion was and I told him that I was a Christian. During the time I observed him, he changed his religion from Satanism to Christianity. He said that I influenced him because he knew that I followed the Christian religion and I showed him consistent care, understanding and patience in our meetings. He explained that the shift in his perspective was that he saw my positive attitude teaching art and he wanted to be more positive because his life was full of negativity.

“Alexander”

“Alexander” is a Caucasian male in his early 50s. He served in the Navy during January 1971–November 1978 as a radar man, now presently called an operations specialist. His experience making arts and crafts included woodworking and painting kits since he had a stroke which affected his lower limbs and left him paralyzed. With the aid of a walker, he walks very slowly. He started doing arts and crafts after the military during the 1980s. Prior to his service, he had no experience making arts or crafts. It was until he was in the military that he went to the Navy store and bought instructional videos on how painting and considers himself self–taught. During his time in the service he began making paintings in oil and acrylic, which is his preferred media. He had his first art show in January 2011 and displayed it on YouTube.

He told me that he sold about a dozen paintings, which he felt was not bad for his first show. He prefers to do his own paintings, which consist of landscapes and animals, and he does not like to do the painting kits in the arts and crafts room because he claims that it “gets old.” Alexander told me that he came into the arts and crafts room because he is supported by other veterans, commenting that generally people in the room are encouraging and compliment his
work, saying “it’s good.” To Alexander, the word “good” means that he came a long way in learning skills and techniques that made his paintings pleasing to others. These compliments raise his self-esteem because he feels that he is also teaching the other veterans something, and he would, he says, rather teach them then just sit there. Although he consistently interacts with others inside the arts and crafts room, he doesn’t care about their war stories. Like most veterans, he does not like the military anymore, and he grew his hair out as a symbol of his anti-military feelings. When Alexander experimented with acrylics he told me that he learned how to mix colors: “ultramarine blue and burnt sienna make black. Thalo green and alizarin crimson make an excellent black,” he said proudly.

Alexander started painting 25 years ago when he saw an artist on television paint. He watched him for a while and said, “Hey, I can do that,” so Alexander bought a kit and started painting. He began copying the style of the artist on TV, but after a while Alexander tired of copying, feeling he lacked his own style, identity, or expression in art. Alexander does not like abstract art and has adopted wildlife and landscape as his own personal subject matter because he loves animals, especially cats. To learn techniques, Alexander watched DVDs, read books, and looked at photographs to make his wildlife paintings. When he finished a painting, he told me, he felt satisfied and contented because he was able to produce an art work. Alexander aspires to paint realistically. The more realistic a painting looks, the more it builds his self-esteem, but if it fails his expectations, he throws it away or re-paints it.

On one occasion, Alexander sold a painting for fifty cents to another veteran in the room. He told me that she offered to pay him, but he said that he would have given it to her. It wasn’t about the price, but rather that someone appreciated and respected his work, which made him feel good. He has tried to help others in the arts and crafts room but complained that sometimes
they do not listen. When this happened, he told me “Oh well, their loss.” He complained to me of one female veteran who had some kind of anxiety and bi-polar disorder that she did not listen to him, calling her “flighty.” On another occasion, he tried to show someone how to paint a tree with shades of dark and light green. When this person did not paint up to Alexander’s expectations, he became irritated because he felt that this person did not listen and was not attentive.

He also told me that he became depressed when he did not want to come to the arts and crafts room but was “forced to” by his wife. He asserted that his wife is a “control freak” and made him do things he did not want to do. When he did not want to be in the arts and crafts room he sulked and was visibly depressed. Sometimes, he said, he felt “really bad and really low” when he was forced to go. However, despite his good or bad mental states, when the mood hits he does art. He described “the mood” as a feeling that he just gets. He does not know how to describe the “feeling.”

Sometimes, when someone tells Alexander that his art is good then he feels good, but if someone tells him that his painting needs work, he will feel good about the feedback only if he believes it. He says that if enough people make a certain comment, he could believe it. He will make another painting if someone says a painting is good. He does art both for others’ approval and for himself. He painted a unicorn for someone in Australia he knew from Facebook. If someone requests a painting online, he tells me he will do it because he thinks it is a challenge that will let him grow as an artist. He has done a total of one hundred paintings since June 2008. For him, that represented a giant leap from his earlier years when he began painting.

Alexander related that his first painting in the craft room was a craft kit, and then he went outside the boundaries of the kit and started doing his own work. He told me that years ago a
friend to whom he gave a painting brought it back to him years later because he wanted to show his wife that Alexander could paint. Alexander’s wife never knew he could paint and told him that he should continue painting once she saw it. She motivated him to continue because he was sitting around the house doing nothing. His friend brought it back as a reminder of Alexander’s art skills because Alexander hadn’t painted for a long time after he gave his friend the painting. He told me that he gave up painting for a while because when he watched people on TV paint he felt that, “there was nothing for myself, so I just kinda quit.”

Currently, Alexander is consistent in creating paintings, and he makes one or two paintings a month, and it takes him about three-to-four hours to complete one. Favoring realism over abstraction, he told me that he did not like what he saw in art museums. He continues instead to go to the arts and crafts room because his motivation to go to there is the interaction and support he experiences with other veterans.

“Marine”

During my sessions observing “Marine,” he stuttered every time he spoke. Sometimes it was hard to understand what he said, but I could understand clearly when he proudly stated, “I’m a Marine and served in 1969 and ended my 6-year tour in 1976. I am a Vietnam Veteran.” He is in his 60s and he told me that he did a great deal of crafts before and after the military because his heritage of Native American made him familiar with many of his culture’s art traditions. He recalls watching his grandfather and grandmother on the Apache reservation in New Mexico making various arts forms. The crafts he preferred to make were all beadwork. Marine told me that he starting doing beadwork when he was a young child around age four and made Indian headdresses, dream catchers, and portraits of lions, wolves, and “Our Lady of Guadalupe” because this was a family tradition. Marine also does bead portraits of his grandchildren. He told
me that he chose this medium because beads relax his mind and keep him from having relapses, and beadwork also keeps him from thinking about what he did in Vietnam. He told me that he killed people in Vietnam and was haunted by that. He said that making craft beadwork, 

relaxes me, keeps me sane, keeps me from doing things that I don’t wanna do. Here at the arts and crafts room I met a lot of good friends. They are all positive and they are never negative in what they do except when you get some crazy guy that think that they know everything but they don’t know what is going on. If some of these veterans would walk as many miles as I have walked, they would understand where a lot of things been coming from. (Personal communication, March 2, 2011)

He told me that he preferred crafts over paintings because he felt that there was no imagination or concentration in painting like there is in beads. He explained to me that:

With beads, you have to have more patience because you have to know where those colors go. It’s like painting, but with painting it doesn’t really relax me because I have no sense of combining colors. (Personal communication, March 2, 2011)

In February 2011, Marine won first place for the crafts category at the Veteran’s Arts and Crafts Show in Dallas, Texas. He entered a tiger and a wolf made from over three thousand beads. He told me that if he cannot sleep it will take him a week and a half to make a craft from beads, but sometimes it will take him two months. From my months of observing Marine, he was very relaxed when he made craft kits. Although he was generally very quiet in the room, he told me several times that saw “ghosts” in the arts and crafts room. He told me that he thought that these ghosts were the people that he killed in Vietnam. Marine described his experience:

Some have faces and some don’t. Some are black shadows. Others have the faces of those people I killed, men and women. One was a male who looked angry at me. I see them by the window, sometimes by the table. I see them at home. I remember being inside a tunnel and shooting at them. They scurry like ants through the holes of the tunnel. (Personal communication, March 2, 2011)

His “ghosts” however, never told Marine to do arts and crafts. When Marine was in the arts and crafts room, he felt the need to do crafts when he got mad and depressed. Marine tried all the crafts kits except the painting craft kits and the model cars because, he explained that he does not
care to work with them. In addition to beadwork, he has created leather crafts and woodwork such as birdhouses. Marine told me that after he finished the crafts he felt good because he gave them away to other people:

I feel that I accomplished something to myself and the biggest thrill is once I completed the craft, I give it away. Me, sometimes it feels like maybe somebody enjoys it better than myself. So if they enjoy it more by looking at it or doing something with it, then that’s more power to them. To me, if they enjoy looking at it then I just give it to them. I feel like Santa Claus. Sometimes it’s like some of the vets come in and they are in a bad, bad mood and I make them laugh, or if I have a completed craft and I give it to them, they laugh or smile. It’s like the old saying” It’s better to give than receive.” To me, receiving is very minimal. I like to give my stuff away. I’ve been coming here for almost three years and volunteering for about a year. Everybody knows me here. Coming in here is like the Marines. We are a tight unit and we always stay together. In here, it’s like a small brotherhood. Everyone just sits around and talk about what’s going on. Sometimes we get personal but for me personal life should be kept to yourself and not shared with anyone else. I can go from a good guy to bad guy in a matter of minutes. Basically everyone that comes here is positive because they want to do something to help their mind to help them forget what’s going on and do arts and crafts for therapeutic reasons. I am the type of guy that don’t really talk a whole lot. I tell him to look and listen. I learned that listening from other vets about what’s going on for when they need help and when they don’t need help. Listening is probably the best thing because I can just sit back and just see what’s going on with these vets. (Personal communication, March 2, 2011)

Marine also taught other veterans how to do beadwork and leather crafts during the months that I observed him. Most veterans asked him how to make the craft or how to get started because they saw him making beadwork in the craft room all the time. However, Marine will not do the craft for them if they ask him. He will only help them start and let them finish. If the person learning does the craft incorrectly, Marine will help them correct it and tell them what was wrong so they can start from the beginning. Marine preferred to teach hands-on because he wanted the other veterans to learn so that the next time so they could do it by themselves and not need to ask for help.
Marine made approximately one hundred leather and wood works in three years inside the arts and crafts room. During this time, Marine has made many friends and interacted with many people:

Sometimes they come in here in a bad mood and they walk out of here in a good mood. Maybe it’s the way that I talk to them or the way I help them out. I also keep coming back to the arts and crafts room to get away from my wife. Some of the stories that we hear are really stories that some of the vets would only talk to another vet and not share any of their stories to the civilian or somebody who has not been in the military because people tend not to understand how the vets feel. They take us for granted and they feel like we just want to start a war or some military conflict but they don’t understand what we have seen what we have done and they think we are lunatics. One of the meaningful and best experiences I had in here was when we had these students that come into this high school to learn how to work with veterans while they are in therapy. For example, one young lady that I helped do a pair of moccasins. I did one and she did the other one. But the thrill of seeing her actually accomplish finish her moccasins and her facial expressions just made me feel good. Her face showed a joy of completing something that she has not done before. It’s like a little kid opening a gift that she always wanted. She had a look of accomplishment that she did something by herself. And it made me feel good because I taught her how to do something. (Personal communication, March 2, 2011)

To summarize, this chapter was an description of these three participants’ work during the one year period that I observed them. There was Chuck, who expressed in symbolic images intimate emotional conditions with his work. His work also reflected his internal struggles and had a spiritual overtone as he began to retreat from Satanism and move toward Christianity. His progression from a negative to a positive outlook in life was represented from his darker paintings in contrast to his lighter ones.

With Alexander, mastering technical skills to paint realistically was his motivation to paint and continue painting in the beginning of my observations. His realistic paintings of landscapes and animals to more creative surreal landscapes showed a significant growth of him as an artist. His expansion of creative faculties indicated that he had more self-esteem to paint outside of looking at pictures, and more inside from his imagination.
Finally, Marine preferred beads as his medium because he thought it was a higher form of art compared to painting or drawing. Plus, he liked following the instructions. He made small bead crafts such as fish, stars, planes and geckos that he gave to patients at the VA hospital and his grandchildren. Later on though, he experimented with leftover loose beads, creating his own imaginative compositions and designs that thoroughly broke the boundaries of the instruction manuals.
CHAPTER 6
DATA ANALYSIS

This chapter analyzes the data drawn from photographs of participants’ works, semi-structured interviews, observation and field note documentation, and interpretations of each participant’s perceived empowerment. I feel it is important to note that all three participants were in counseling during my observations. Counseling may have played a role in their improvements, but this research examines their perceptions pertaining to how art provided a concrete form to their expression and how they perceived the role that art played in their lives. In addition, I have concluded the chapter with a cross-analysis of all three case studies based on the most common themes from the coding.

The three main themes that emerged in my data for each participant were personal transformation, empowerment through learning, and creation as a tool for self-esteem. They relate to the overall argument of this dissertation that creative activities and interactions within an arts environment instill a sense of purpose, confidence, and empowerment. As I mentioned earlier in Chapter 1, veterans’ voices are passionate with the desire to speak for themselves, and the themes involved in these case studies demonstrate and interpret the ways in which arts and crafts convey the variety and depth of each veteran’s experiences of empowerment.

Before talking about the three main themes mentioned above, the following section described the progression of my three participants’ work over the course of my observations.

Documentation of Participants’ Work

Chuck’s Work

After several months of observing Chuck, I learned that he perceived empowerment through his contacts with people inside the VA arts and crafts room, especially since he generally
got along well with all of the male veterans in the room. Chuck felt that he belonged to this
group and visited the craft room three times a week, despite several occasions when he argued
with and cussed at a female veteran who disliked him. These incidents were, however, not
disruptive to Chuck in the long term because the VA hospital generally expects routine conflicts
among veterans because a majority of them have post-traumatic stress disorder. Indeed, Chuck
reported that he felt “uplifted” by his experiences because he felt a sense of belonging to a
community of veterans who forgave him and accepted his outbursts. He used the words “pride”
and “accomplishment” to describe the sense of empowerment he felt when he learned to make
paintings on his own. Although his paintings are in an abstract style, there is much personal
meaning in his work that represents the fears and frustrations of his life. In addition, they were a
great source of pride for him, as he often showed them off to others in the arts and crafts room,
and he told me, “I am proud that I finished these because it gave me a sense of accomplishment
(Personal communication, June 10, 2010).

In Chapter 5, Chuck asserted that he struggled with his sense of religion, having made the
choice of identifying himself as a worshipper of Satan, which, he explained related to his feeling
of abandonment by God. After a couple of months of observing him, Chuck finally confessed to
me that he had “raped and murdered [both] boys and women in the Vietnam War” (Personal
communication, June 10, 2010). At that time, he hated Asians and considered them to be less
than human. I am Asian American and although the stories sometimes angered me personally, as
a researcher I listened to him to try and understand his perspective. Subsequently struggling with
multiple mental illnesses diagnosed by the VA psyschitrists, Chuck was angry at God for
“abandoning him and never intervening” (Personal communication, June 10, 2010). He also
suffered nightmares and thoughts of suicide on a daily basis, revisiting the crimes he had
committed in Vietnam. Overwhelmed with guilt, Chuck turned to Satanism because of his anger towards God. Nevertheless, Chuck told me that when he started painting and talking with me, he began to retreat from Satanism and move toward Christianity. In our conversations over several months, he asked about my religion and I told him that I was a Christian. Later, he explained his shift from Satanism to Christianity because he said that I did not judge him the time he wore a Satanic pentagram when I met him and I showed consistent cared towards him as a participant and as a person.

Consequently, Chuck’s artworks reflect his internal struggles, and he explained that some may have a spiritual overtone. His first painting he ever created represents the demons that he saw as a practicing Satan worshipper. Chuck told me that when he participated in a Satanic church that placed curses on people, he would see black, red-eyed beings in his room that floated in and out of his walls, which “creeped him out” (Personal communication, June 10, 2010).

Figure 11. The Haunting, by Chuck, 2011. Acrylic on canvas.
He reported that when he created a painting related to his personal experiences, he felt empowered because it allowed him to express the feeling that demons haunted him (see Figure 15). This is demonstrated by when Chuck said “I feel empowered when I see this because it’s been in me for so long and I can finally get it out. I don’t tell a lot of people about my demons because they think I am crazy. When I paint these things I can show you what they really are” (Personal communication, June 10, 2010).

Although the shapes in Figure 11 do not directly present the black, red-eyed demons of Chuck’s imagination, the abstract figures in the painting could be interpreted as corporeal beings. As Chuck explained to me, he painted the figures as light-colored, rock-like objects in order to reimagine his demons as natural structures, transforming a deeply negative life experience into an expression of positivity. This was positive for him because Chuck told me that as the product of his first time painting in over fifty years, he felt “really good and proud” that he was able to create something on his own that reflected his improved outlook on life (Personal communication, June 10, 2010).
His second painting, titled *In and Out* (see Figure 12), directly depicts his struggle between Satanism and Christianity. In the early stages of my observations, Chuck reported that he wavered between Satanism and Christianity, and when something would happen to make him feel angry and abandoned by God, he would be propelled back to his Satanic church. In one such situation, he told me about fears that satanic demons would reenter his life. At the time of my last visit with him, Chuck had painted *In and Out*, which he described as representing his feelings that “when I was indoors I was in hell; and then I feel that I am in the out door which is getting out of hell” (Personal communication, June 10, 2010). He further noted that “hell” represented the nightmares, memories, and guilt of his sadistic and cruel crimes in Vietnam, as well as depression and suicidal feelings. He declared that he had wasted his life and wished he could...
work instead of sit in a wheelchair all day and watch television. Chuck wanted to go out of “hell” through the out door, which represented his determination to give “God another chance” (Personal communication, June 10, 2010).

Moving towards a spiritual journey toward God, another 6 paintings represent a series that expressed his transformation from depression, loneliness, and suicidal feelings to a new sense of empowerment through both spirituality and the creation of art. Through his own explanation his paintings convey this spiritual movement in his life is through his use of color since the first three are dark, filled with black and red, while the remaining works open into lighter tones. This explains his outlook on life because he reported to me that the “darker colors mean depression, rage, hate and evil and the lighter colors mean peace” (Personal communication, June 10, 2010).
Figure 13. *House of Evil Spirits*, by Chuck, 2011. Acrylic on canvas.
In the first, titled *The House of Evil Spirits* (Figure 13), Chuck paints a very abstract black and gray field, but he explained that it represents his relationship to the home he shared in a previous time with his mother, which is the house where he grew up in. This is where he reports that he suffered verbal, physical, and sexual abuse by family members. While I do not know the details of Chuck’s abuse, when I look at this image, it is easy for me to interpret it as a place of unhappiness because of the emphasis of the dark colors and the hard sharp-edged shapes.

At the time of our interviews, Chuck reported that he felt trapped because he could not move out of his mother’s house and was reminded daily of his abuse. Since he is wheelchair bound, he has very limited capabilities to move about on his own, and the painting captures his sense of immobility in the face of evil forces in his life. He explained:

> That’s the house of evil spirits and you better thank God that you are not in there. This house of evil spirits is where I have been all my life and my nightmares have been encased in there. It’s the house I live in now.  
> (Personal communication, November 12, 2011)

He further noted that the distorted and bleak appearance of the house represents his painful childhood, and he especially emphasized that the warped appearance of the walls expresses his feelings that the house itself had seen all his abuse and absorbed its essence.
In his second work of this series, Chuck paints a hole in a wall (See Figure 14) that he explains symbolizes a real hole created when he alleged that his grandfather raped him in his room at age 6, pushing his head so hard into the wall that it created a hole. Having childhood experiences characterized by rape by his grandfather, constant beatings by his father, and denial by his mother—who knew about the abuse but did nothing to stop it—the hole also symbolizes the emptiness he felt because of the abuse he suffered. Chuck explained that the actual hole in the wall of his room still existed, covered by a dresser, and the emotional hole in his life was still with him. Moreover, the hole further symbolized the spiritual void in his life. In addition, however, the hole appears almost like a rectangle, which conveys its alternate, positive meaning.
as a “door” out of Chuck’s own personal hell. As part of a series depicting a journey from an emotional and spiritual hell to self-empowerment, the painting symbolizes the importance of art in Chuck’s ability to physically represent and articulate his own self-liberation.

**Figure 15. Nightmare**, by Chuck, 2011. Acrylic on canvas.

The third painting in the series (Figure 15), depicts an obscured human face. Chuck described the entity as neither a male or a female but both combined. Chuck noted that the figure
could possibly be his mother, although he does not know who it is. According to Chuck, the painting could express his feelings of neglect and abandonment by his mother, both in his childhood and as an adult.

Also, when I look at this painting, I wonder if he is combining feelings of neglect from his mother with his unconscious experiences with Asians from the Vietnam War. I could also interpret this figure as the people that he harmed in Vietnam. Like the obscured mouth in this figure, it could represent those who had no voice and were silenced by death and rape.

Chuck told me that he did not talk to his mother, although she lives with him. Indeed, at the time of our interviews he had been recently hospitalized for a heart attack, and his mother never visited him over the four days of his admittance or picked him up when he was discharged. He asserted that she was “cold, distant, and did not care if [he] was dead or not” (Personal communication, November 12, 2011). This painting elicited for Chuck the deeply rooted pain he associated with the coldness of his mother, especially her failure to stop or ever acknowledge his alleged abuse. During my observations and interviews, Chuck brought up the fact that he “wished [his] mother would apologize but she never will” (Personal communication, November 12, 2011). Indeed, the most telling detail of the painting is the entity’s partially covered face, which he said symbolized the failure to speak. I interpret this painting as a testament to the anger he feels towards his mother, not only for allowing the abuse, but also for staying with abusive family members herself.

Chuck told me that the painting in Figure 15, is what he kept seeing in his dreams. He described the entity as neither a male nor a female but both combined.
In the fourth painting in the series (Figure 16), Chuck addresses the abuse he suffered from age 5 to 12 at the hands of male relatives, presenting a black, faceless, demonic figure as a nightmarish representation of his stepfather or grandfather. He reported that he continuously saw three of these entities in his room floating and speeding around his walls in his room for the past several months during the day and night:

They just go and then they are gone then they are back. They come in and out of my walls as if they go into another room. I see these entities every night. They scare me. When I get scared, I take my blanket and put it over my face. They come into my room
According to Chuck, the figure also doubles as a haunting presence pursuing Chuck in his dreams to kill him in retribution for his actions during the Vietnam War. Moreover, the figure is a symbol of Chuck’s actual nightmares, which do not allow him to sleep well. He reported that his “house is full of demons….my grandfather, stepfather, mother; they all represent the demon” (Personal communication, November 12, 2011). Although Chuck takes over a dozen medications daily, he told me that he always wakes up terrified, shaking and screaming. The black figure, which Chuck also associated with a shadow figure in his occult beliefs, also depicts Chuck’s actual experience of seeing multiple evil spirits in his room at night. As a whole, the painting captures powerfully Chuck’s nightly experience of haunting fear.

At this point in my interviews with Chuck, he expressed to me that he was in the process of leaving Satanism and adopting Christianity; he began to make paintings with brighter colors. He envisioned his perceived feelings of empowerment as “light green” because the color made him happy (See Figure 17). Chuck’s experience of being part of the arts and crafts community at the Dallas VA Hospital seems to have shaped his change in outlook. During that time, he became part of a veteran’s support group where he was well liked by his peers and hospital staff. In fact, Chuck made new friends, and he felt like he was valued in this group. Chuck reported that mental health therapy made him less depressed and gave him more hope, and, he noted, the brighter colors he began to use also represented the differing personalities of the people that helped him at the VA, including his counselor. Amid these positive experiences, Chuck looked forward to leaving his “hell” and going to “heaven.” Significant in this regard is the coloration of Chuck’s painting, “The Jungle,” in which he chose a light green to represent his hope of
overcoming the legacy of his Vietnam experiences. He chose a light green rather than a dark green, which, he told me, he would associate with being mired in his war experience, the “jungle of Vietnam that you can’t get out of.” Chuck’s figuration of a new relationship to his experiences as a veteran in *The Jungle* demonstrates how his new sense of perceived empowerment that represented his new positive outlook on life, which he integrated into his efforts in mental health counseling and his immersion in the veterans community at the VA hospital.

In his last painting of the series (Figure 18), Chuck represents his new mode of positive thinking and the beginnings of a personal transformation as bright, golden-yellow light, communicating peace in the place of chaos. Chuck noted that the gold color suggests heaven, but that the black blotches in the painting are the remaining indications of his internal struggles and pain. Nevertheless, the painting’s emphasis on gold and light illustrates Chuck’s desire to break
free from his darkness, celebrating his empowerment and the growing transformation of his feelings about his own life.

*Figure 18. Heaven,* by Chuck, 2011. Acrylic on canvas.

Over my months of observation in the arts and crafts room, Chuck made a remarkable change in his life, which was expressed through his artworks. While his physical and mental condition were quite variable, at times leaving him depressed and uncommunicative, in his wheelchair, more often than not Chuck was open to the welcoming camaraderie of the other veterans in the arts and crafts room. He felt valued among them, in contrast to his experiences at home, where he felt ignored by his mother. Moreover, as he found a way to communicate his growing sense of empowerment and positive outlook in his artworks, the arts and crafts room became a place for him both to find community support and concretely express his progress in
improving his mental and spiritual health. He noted to me that his frustration about being in a wheelchair decreased significantly when he learned that he could use his hand to paint, breaking through his physical constraints with his art. In the end, the most important thing to Chuck about his experiences in the arts and crafts room was the way that creating something of his own through his painting helped him gain the independence of spirit to improve his mental health and enrich his social experiences.

**Alexander’s Work**

In contrast to Chuck, for whom painting expressed intimate emotional conditions, Alexander perceived empowerment by mastering the art of painting realistically. In fact, Alexander explicitly told me that he felt no emotional attachment to any of the art work he created from looking at photos and assigned no particular meanings to his works. For him, the technical success of making a painting look as realistic as possible gave him a sense of accomplishment and self-esteem. He said, “Learning to paint realistically like a photo really helps give me confidence as an artist” (Personal communication, June 20, 2010).

He did not like crafts from a craft kit because he told me that it was repetitive and boring. He preferred to experiment with pigments and use pictures from magazines because “it’s fun.” Fun for Alexander meant engaging and interesting; something he could really get involved in that would enlighten him.

In my observations of Alexander, it also became clear that his own confidence about painting made him feel empowered to help others learn how to paint. He always appeared happy to help his peers, and he described his sense of “self-esteem” build up when he gave his artwork to others, including people he did not know. He gave his artwork to people in the hospital and
even Internet acquaintances, including an Australian woman who had seen his work online and liked it.

Interested at first solely in realistic representations, Alexander told me that he did not understand abstract art and did not like it. A visit to the Dallas Museum of Art on his own left him unimpressed by anything other than realistically rendered painting, a feeling in accord with his belief that being a master painter meant painting as realistically as possible. Understandably, then, as Alexander made progress in realistic painting skills, he felt a growing sense of accomplishment and pride. His training in realism came from watching Bob Ross videos and studying DVDs on painting landscapes, as well as reading instruction books on how to paint animals. He had also participated in painting workshops outside of the VA Hospital that taught landscape painting techniques. Working carefully to overcome his own sense of frustration at the shortcomings of his realist techniques, his perceived sense of empowerment came from the mastery of such skills.

A series of twelve paintings in oils and acrylics, completed over one year in chronological order, both illuminates a progressive expansion of Alexander’s choice of subject matter and expresses his growing artistic confidence, marked by an improvement in realistic technique with each painting. Consistently completing one painting per month, Alexander’s subject matter included landscapes and animals, but surprisingly, he also created two surreal works with a strong imaginative character. Emerging at the end of his year-long series, these two surrealistic works indicate a significant transformation and growth in Alexander’s work as an artist, allowing an expansion of his creative faculties.
Figure 19. *Seascape*, by Alexander, 2010. Oil on canvas.

Figure 20. *Ocean Rain Landscape*, by Alexander, 2010. Oil on canvas.
Alexander’s early paintings clearly show his efforts to reproduce techniques learned in workshops and instructional materials; Figure 19 demonstrates the way that he learned to paint movement in water. He was particularly proud of this piece because he was able to use his knowledge of how to use tints and shades to color the water in ways that suggest movement. Further employing such techniques, in Figure 20, Alexander paints a partial landscape on the left side, with the rest of the painting depicting a movement of falling rain, using dark and light tones.

![Image](figure21.png)

*Figure 21. Solitude*, by Alexander, 2010. Oil on canvas.

In Figure 21, he shows how he learned to blend colors for the sky, with the purple and yellow background contrasts against the dark silhouette of the house. Even though Alexander noted that his paintings were not meant to reveal his own emotions, he told me that he liked tranquil scenes of solitude. Furthermore, he enjoyed being alone, an orientation powerfully
suggested by this painting. Despite his assertions to the contrary, then, some of his works seemed to be a direct expression of his personality.

Figure 22. Colorful Clouds, by Alexander, 2010. Oil on canvas.

Alexander perceived a special sense of empowerment through his growing skills and accomplishments when he painted scenes that allowed him to build on techniques he learned by completing an earlier painting. For example, in Figure 22, a silhouetted dark landscape lies against a multicolored sky in which Alexander blended colors but painted them in a composition with various colors and values. The emphasis is now on clouds in the sky, painted in a form that curves upward in an arresting composition.
In Figure 23, the blending of the sky is soft and subtle, and the painting’s waterfall in the foreground also shows the improvement of his ability to render moving water compared to Figure 20, *Ocean Rain Landscape*. Alexander’s progressive, cumulative attainment of confidence as an artist is quite evident in this, his last landscape in the series, in which the blending of the colors of the sky, mountain, and lake are more refined compared to earlier works and show a strong mastery of blending techniques. Having mastered landscape composition to his satisfaction, Alexander began to paint birds, carrying over a sense of solitude from his landscape paintings.
In Figure 24, for example, a lone woodpecker is shown against a stark blue background. Alexander noted that in this painting, his success in learning values in art for painting light and dark tones enabled him to use various tones for form and cast shadows of the tree trunk and bird. Throughout the entire year long series, he added composition techniques to new canvases as his confidence in his painting abilities grew, demonstrating how his perceived empowerment stemmed from a step-by-step engagement with a set of technical skills.
Figure 25. The Chickadee, by Alexander, 2010. Oil on canvas.

Figure 26. The Bluejay, by Alexander, 2010. Oil on canvas.
Figure 25 and 26 demonstrate how Alexander’s growing abilities to depict movement allowed him to attempt more complex effects. The paintings depict a chickadee and a blue jay, both with backgrounds featuring movement. Notable is the contrast between the still birds and the surrounding motion, which shows how Alexander’s new understanding of the importance of brush stroke variation enabled the depiction of more diverse subject matter.

Indeed, throughout the observation period, Alexander was quick to integrate new skills and knowledge in ways that expanded his artistic purview. On one occasion in the arts and crafts room, for example, I mentioned to Alexander that the leaves in his paintings were always the same size and pointing in one direction, in a neat row, and I suggested that his composition would be more interesting with greater variations on the leaves’ positions. After Alexander painted Figure 27 and showed it to me and others in the arts and crafts room, his smile showed how proud he was of his work, having gained both a new understanding of perspective and a new ability to move forward in his drive for skill in realistic depiction.

*Figure 27. Peaceful Place,* by Alexander, 2010. Acrylic on canvas.
Moreover, having digested this lesson, Alexander went on in Figure 28 to enlarge his abilities, combining the depiction of water, mountains, rocks, and a tree in a sublime landscape thoroughly informed by his new skill in painting with greater variation of small details. Most significantly, this painting was different from Alexander’s previous work because it was the first to come from his imagination, the subject matter of his earlier paintings having been drawn from pictures and other resources. Alexander’s breakthrough to composing by imagination showed me that he had gained a new sense of confidence in his skills, rooted in his capacity to synthesize painting techniques, having cultivated his abilities as a painter to the point that he felt able to depict imaginative subject matter symbolic of his feelings. Although he did not specify this, I interpret
the waves of the sea as representing his anxiety. The ship represented his feelings of moving forward in life, and the book was a symbol of closing one chapter of his life to move on to a new chapter in his life. He incorporated the book in his painting because it represented him learning to become more creative; by starting a new chapter in his life and expanding his artistic skills.

In addition, his new sense of self as an artist and the evident success of his commitment to being a lifelong learner enabled him to exude a sense of empowerment that inspired other veterans. They loved Alexander and highly valued his efforts to teach them, his status materially confirmed when other people in the arts and crafts room, including myself, offered to buy his painting, *Story of the Sea* (see Figure 29).
Alexander told me that he was inspired to create a new style because he felt “more confident to do something outside of the box once he learned more realistic painting techniques” (Personal communication, June 20, 2010).

Marine’s Work

Like Alexander, Marine liked to make realistic-looking images, and his preferred works were bead crafts, which come in craft kits stocked with small plastic beads (see Figure 30).

Figure 30. Beads taken from craft kits and organized in a plastic container. 

Marine did not like painting, and he felt that making something out of beads was a higher form of art making since it involved very tedious work, which he believed made it more difficult than painting: “Anyone can paint; just take a paintbrush and put the paint on the canvas… but beads are different. It takes time and skill to put the beads to form a color and a shade” (Personal communication, February 20, 2011).

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2 Figures 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, and 47 were photographed by Cindy Hasio.
Indeed, Marine liked to spend hours, days and weeks on making bead pictures in the arts and crafts room, and he preferred following the instructions of bead craft kits as opposed to developing his own images because he liked following the rules. For Marine, the therapeutic value of art was closely connected to its capacity to provide a sustained experience of order and incremental accomplishment.

As a former “tunnel rat” in the Vietnam War, Marine had many psychological problems, including hallucinations involving seeing drainages on the street and holes in the ground. The term “tunnel rat” was coined for smaller framed soldiers who could crawl in the tunnels and holes to kill the enemy. For Marine, the legacy of this experience remained terrifying, and he suffered from nightmares. Like Chuck, Marine reported that he saw figures he referred to as “ghosts” of the people he killed in Vietnam, which haunted him on a daily basis. In order to distract himself from such apparitions, Marine liked to immerse himself in long and tedious bead crafts.

*Figure 31. Tiger*, by Marine, 2011. Beads from a craft kit.
Figure 32. Tiger II, by Marine, 2011. Beads from a craft kit.

For example, one of his favorite works, a set of beaded tiles titled Tiger and Tiger II, took over four months each to complete (see Figures 31 and 32). He chose these particular bead craft kits because he loves animals, but also because he identifies personally with the tiger, seeing himself as an outsider misunderstood by general society, who, despite his small stature, has great physical and inner strengths. Through his art making, then, Marine arrived at a perceived sense of empowerment through both the mentally therapeutic effects of painstaking craft work and a personal identification with subject matter that validated his self-image.
One of his beadworks, titled *Rosary*, took him a few months to complete, (see Figure 33), Marine reported that this type of work functioned therapeutically for him on a spiritual level. He explained, “I feel that this beadwork has a spiritual connection with me. It gives me comfort to make the Virgin Mary because this image gives me peace” (Personal communication, February 20, 2011).

Suffering from leukemia and terminal cancer, he thought about the spiritual world often. As a Catholic, he told me that the image of the Virgin Mary in Figure 37 represents his faith in
the afterlife. While he did not like to think about his death, he faced treatment for his terminal illness daily at the VA Hospital and in doing so, was forced to face thinking about his mortality. Depicting his faith through his bead crafts, Marine told me that he was able to ward off depression and sadness both through the subject matter of his crafts and the focus required to complete the bead work. It gave him solace because he felt that when he created the image of the Virgin Mary in Figure 33, he came closer to that spiritual entity.

In addition, Marine’s confidence also came from interactions with the other veterans and staff in the arts and crafts room, who understood and accepted his mental illness. He told me that “most civilians do not understand what veterans go through. I can trust others in this room and tell them how I feel without them judging me. I makes me want to help others because it helps me. I really feel good about helping others but they have to be able to help themselves too” (Personal communication, February 20, 2011).

Marine gained self-esteem by coming to the arts and crafts room because he felt that people appreciated his work, and he especially noted that crafting was gratifying to him because it gave him the sense that he was good at making something from his hands. He described what other people said about his work: “Other veterans tell me that I do good work. It makes me feel good when they say that because it’s hung on the walls and I feel proud” (Personal communication, February 20, 2011). Therefore, I would describe this sense of pride as a way that he became empowered.
When he won first place for the beads category at the VA hospital arts and crafts show in 2011, it gave him a deep sense of personal achievement. The importance for Marine of connecting with other members of the VA hospital community through his artworks was typified by two works he created from plastic tiles and glue, a departure from his usual bead work. *Liberty* pairs the Statue of Liberty on the left side, and the American flag and the Twin Towers on the right (see Figure 34).
Figure 35. *Freedom*, by Marine, 2011. Plastic tiles from a craft kit.

Marine describes himself as very patriotic, and he wanted to create a piece that marked the events of September 11, 2001. Marine was very proud that this piece was put on the wall of the arts and crafts room for others to enjoy seeing. His other work made from tiles, titled *Freedom*, features a boat and a multi-colored ribbon (see Figure 35), a tribute to all those who served in the military and gave their lives during war. He told me that he chose the boat because he associated being on the water with a sense of tranquility, and the ribbon represents a common symbol of peace, a reminder that to honor the war dead, we should commit ourselves to peace among all people.
Marine’s sense of crafting as a community endeavor is illustrated by the way he often focused on creating bead crafts specifically as gifts for others in the hospital. For example, in Figure 36, Marine made a variation of beaded flowers that he gave to people in the psychiatric ward of the VA Hospital. Figure 37 shows two colorful stars, a tropical fish, and a dolphin that he gave to random patients waiting for doctor’s appointments at the hospital.
Figure 37. A variety of small beaded stars, a tropical fish, and a dolphin created by Marine, 2011. Beads from a craft kit.
He also extended his gift works to a larger community, making for his grandsons three beaded airplanes in different colors (see Figure 38) and for his grand-daughters two colorful
geckos (Figure 39). Although Marine avowed his dedication to executing the instructions of craft kits precisely and expressed that he found the most therapeutic value and meaning from the steady application of workman-like craft skills, once he had gained confidence and skill with beadwork towards the end of the period that I observed him, he also experimented with leftover loose beads, creating his own imaginative compositions and designs that thoroughly broke the boundaries of the instruction books.

Figure 40. *Circle*, by Marine, 2011. Beads from a craft kit.

His willingness to experiment and improvise in this way suggested to me that Marine’s experience as a crafter valued for his work in the VA hospital community had empowered him to engender a more creative and experimental relationship to his art making. Such qualities are well illustrated by a bead work titled *Circle*, which depicts an ambiguous design with bright colors (see Figure 40). My first impression of this work was of a Native American character, although the center of the image is difficult to decipher. Marine could not say how this image came to him, remarking that it might have been based on a Native American design because of his
Apache heritage, but he remained unsure of its meaning. Working with a craft based on a Marine Corps logo, Marine put beads together spontaneously, creating an abstract image in the center of the beadwork, a significantly new technique for him, which definitively broke out of the instruction book mode that had structured his earlier works. Such experimentation continued in a series of subsequent works.

![Figure 41. Abstract design created from beads. *Untitled*, by Marine, 2011.](image)
Figure 42. Another abstract design created from beads. *Untitled*, by Marine, 2011.

Figure 43. Another abstract design created from beads. *Untitled*, by Marine, 2011.
In Figure 41, for example, Marine made a flower-like image with lavender, blue, and green beads against a black beaded background. In Figure 42, he created a linear abstract design out of black, orange, and gray beads. In Figure 43, he pursued another abstract design, showing a marked advance in design creativity in orange, white, light blue, dark blue, and turquoise beads. All of the works in which Marine surprisingly allowed himself to experiment with spontaneity, creativity, and abstraction indicated a new level of artistic knowledge and confidence, which in turn contributed to his increasing sense of empowerment. He built upon his confidence in crafting skills and his sense of himself as an esteemed community member to develop a new path of growth as an artist.

Cross Analysis

To a great extent, for individuals working with arts and crafts within the group of veterans at the Dallas VA hospital, the sense of community engendered by the cooperative creation and sharing of artworks was the most important source of feelings of empowerment. As I mentioned earlier in the chapter, all the participants were in counseling during the same time as my data collection. I cannot say that art solely helped them reach these feelings of empowerment or how much counseling contributed to their perceptions of empowerment. However, art did give these participants another outlet beyond words whereby they could concretely express their own style, thoughts, and emotions.

The three main themes that emerged during my cross-analysis of the case studies as mentioned from the beginning of this chapter were personal transformation, empowerment through learning, and creation as a tool for self-esteem. I witnessed and analyzed through my coding what transformation and empowerment meant to each veteran. I discovered through my coding that the two themes of empowerment through learning and creation as a tool for self-
esteem overlapped each other and times seemed to be interchangeable but both resulted in personal transformation (see Figure 44). I elaborate on these themes in the next section.

**Figure 44.** A diagram representing my findings.

**Personal Transformation**

The clinical definition of “transformation” from *Dorland's Medical Dictionary for Health Consumers* is “a change of form or structure; conversion from one form to another.”

Each participant had a unique way of gaining personal transformation. The definition of transformation for Chuck was “growing to be less angry, to be more forgiving and improving my life and being happier” (Personal communication, November 12, 2011).

Chuck’s sense of personal transformation came from his ability to self-express himself and reflect upon his work and how it reflected his past and present life. From dark colors to lighter colors, Chuck described that his “darkness started to go away once he started to heal and forgive people” (Personal communication, June 10, 2010). Chuck told me that while he was creating his series of paintings and going to counseling, he started to reflect upon his memories of hatred towards his family. He describes his thoughts:

I was looking at my painting of the old house and the demons. I thought to myself “I have carried hatred towards my mother, step-father and grandfather for the past 50 years. I
thought it was time to let that go.” I started to forgive my mother even though she would never apologize or acknowledge what happened to me with my rapes and beatings. I forgave her and I started letting the hatred and anger go. My step-father and grandfather are dead and now they have to answer to God. I held onto that hate for the last fifty years and I wasted my life hating them. I started to paint brighter colors because I want to be happy and not hold onto the hate anymore. (Personal communication, June 10, 2010)

As I saw his paintings become brighter in their colors, I interpreted this as a sign of him healing himself emotionally. Based on the data I collected from my observations and what he told me, I concluded that he indeed, became more empowered through his newly transformed positive attitude when he created his art.

On the other hand, Alexander defined transformation, as when he mastered painting techniques. The more that Alexander practiced, he became better in his artistic skills and that gave him a sense of accomplishment and confidence. Hence, he transformed from a novice to a more masterful artist, and with that switch, came increased confidence. In fact, his confidence in painting noticeably branched out when he started to create surrealistic paintings Storm Brewing and Story of the Sea (See Figure 28 and Figure 29). Story of the Sea includes a seascape featuring a ship with a startling image of seawater pouring out of a book containing a picture of the sea. This surreal painting demonstrated the growth and development of Alexander’s creativity, which, in turn, was an expression of his newly perceived sense of empowerment. As such, it gave him the courage to break free of “copied picture” paintings, making something personal that reached beyond his comfort zone of realism focused on landscapes and animals.

On the contrary to his earlier works that were realistic in style with no personal meaning attached to them, his later works where he became more imaginative, showed his sense of personal transformation from novice to a more masterful, confident painter, demonstrated by his willingness to take risks. As Alexander told me when I first met him, “I am scared to do paintings where I make something up on my own. I am afraid I am not good enough to think of
something out of my head. This is why I look at pictures when I paint” (Personal communication, January 2010).

In the same way, Marine defined transformation as an artist as becoming more confident as he improved his bead-making techniques. He also regarded transformation as “feeling good and growing as a person while helping others learn and giving art away so others could be happy” (Personal communication, February 20, 2011). In the beginning, he would create bead crafts that were from the kit but as he became more confident in his ability to make them, he started to make more abstract images (See Figure 41, Figure 42, and Figure 43). Marine demonstrated this sense of personal transformation when he made bead crafts such as beaded geckos and airplanes for others and gave them away. Though such figures are small, Marine took ample time and applied careful craftsmanship to create these shapes, working especially to make each piece unique by using a variety of color combinations. His investment in the quality of these pieces indicates their function for Marine as a method of creating community because he told me that when he gave them to other veterans in the hospital, it made them feel happy that a complete stranger would make a gift for them. This created a sense of community that other veterans cared for other veterans even if they did not know each other.

Empowerment Through Learning

All three participants gained empowerment through learning because they demonstrated their increased self-confidence and willingness to teach others art skills and techniques. Second, each showed the desire to become life-long learners because of they all took initiative to work on art projects at home and learn through experimenting or watching instructional DVDs. Chuck became self-motivated to paint after much hesitation when I first met him. In the beginning of my data collection, I had to show Chuck painting techniques on how to mix colors and create
composition. Later as he progressed in his series of paintings, he started to create compositions on his own initiative without asking me if he made a mistake or not. Chuck painted his last two paintings *The Jungle* and *Heaven* (See Figure 17 and Figure 18) without asking me to show him how to paint a technique. I observed him to become more confident and more expressive during the twelve months I observed. One day, Chuck showed me several canvases, twenty paintbrushes and twenty tubes of acrylic paint he bought from a store. This is significant because he had to ride public transportation in a wheelchair to go to the art store and he spent his own money to buy the art supplies. He told me, “I really like to paint and I bought these. I want to start making some paintings at home now. It helps me a lot get my anger out. I never thought I could paint but I can” (Personal communication, June 10, 2010). It was a far step from when he first asked me how to hold a paintbrush and now, he continues to learn on his own initiative. Not in the sense of technical perfection, but for the sense of learning more about improving himself and how to express himself in constructive ways.

In the same way, Alexander’s sense of empowerment came from his sense of becoming a life-long learner through art. The more that Alexander learned techniques the more inquisitive he became. Additionally, he took initiative to sign up for art workshops outside of the VA Hospital. Alexander told me that he even flew to Virginia once and paid $1,000 for a painting workshop so he could learn how to paint landscapes better. When he came back to the VA Hospital he shared what he learned with others so they would know how to do the painting technique. Helping others also empowered Alexander because he found joy in teaching others.

For example, there were several times, I saw Alexander teach other veterans inside the arts and crafts room how to blend colors. This was after I taught Alexander how to blend, and once he became good at blending, he started to show others how to blend paint. Alexander also
taught veterans how to mix colors for background landscapes using a wet brush. Another time, I saw Alexander teach a veteran how to use a palette knife to create broad strokes for grass.

From my personal observations of Alexander, he really grew as an artist and found personal meaning in his life through making art. As he passed out business cards to his peers in the arts and crafts room, it stated his full name and his title as “Artist.” He smiled as he told me,

I always want to learn more and more things everyday on how to paint. My goal is to be a master artist and paint as realistically like a photo. I intend to practice and make as many paintings as I can. I want to master how to paint animals and landscapes (Personal communication, January 2010).

In the same way, Marine also became empowered by learning. His determination to create as much beadwork and give them away to others has motivated him to become better at his craftsmanship. Marine told me that he did not have much time to live in his life, but the time that he did have, he would like to give others his bead crafts. As Marine progressed from smaller bead works to more elaborate abstract designs in his later works, it showed that he became more confident in his skills and his ability to use his imagination with this medium. In his craft Freedom (See Figure 35), such works were especially important to Marine’s perceived empowerment because he created them to contribute to the VA hospital community’s collective efforts to overcome the difficult legacies of wartime service. He was gratified when his beadworks were hung on the arts and crafts room wall, but during the months of my observation of him, Marine also dedicated himself to helping other veterans, volunteering his time to teach them how to make bead crafts. His role of helping to empower others to make crafts on their own made him feel personally valued within the veterans’ community.

Creation as a Tool for Self-Esteem

In all three case studies, creating the objects and then giving the arts and crafts to other veterans, even to patients they did not know, gave participants a sense of self-esteem based on
the ability to help others and the opportunity to feel appreciated. Such opportunities for empowerment and self-esteem stemmed from participants’ immersion in the hospital’s culture of veterans, which provided acceptance and belonging. Most specifically, for all three veterans, socializing with peers who understood their mental illness and depression was crucial. All three veterans insisted that any civilian who has never served would not understand them and would think they were “crazy.” This feeling of belonging helped bolster the sense of self-esteem as the participants helped others learn, making their own contributions to the community that had accepted them.

While the importance of community was common to each participant, each experienced perceived self-esteem through the act of making arts and crafts in distinct ways. For Chuck, personal expression was paramount, while Alexander most valued mastering painting techniques, and the power of painstaking work to take his mind off troubling memories and fears of death was most important for Marine. The process of learning arts and crafts was relatively free of frustration for Marine and Alexander, but for Chuck, the decision to paint was daunting, since he was hampered by the fear that he would not be able to be “good” at painting. All three, however, found arts and crafts work to be a powerful way to cope with personal difficulties such as post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and social isolation.

Finally, a notable feature of each participant’s experience was the way that his sense of personal confidence expanded when he began creating works more from imagination rather than copying pictures or following instructional templates. Personal confidence helped develop self-esteem because it gave each participant the courage to grow as an artist and experiment with their newly developed skills and expressions.
Alexander learned how to blend colors, paint movement, and use various stroke techniques. Once he had learned all of this, he eventually stopped looking at pictures and created two paintings from his own imagination. Similarly, Marine started using templates and instruction books to guide him in creating beadwork, but he finally embarked on his own abstract designs. The transformation of his work indicated a personal change in which Marine found a way to express his individuality and desire for personal empowerment. Chuck also struggled with how to free himself, having felt trapped in his own personal hell. He found a way to empower himself, however by learning to express his feelings with painting. His series depicting his journey from hell to heaven expresses his pilgrimage to an individual transformation, built on a thematic and technical progression from painting to painting. For all three participants, embracing a journey of art making fostered a new maturation of self-understanding, personal cultivation, and individual expression.
CHAPTER 7

SUMMARY

Chapter 1 of this study addresses the statement of the problem, research questions, the role of the arts and crafts program in veteran’s hospitals, an introduction to the study, the significance of the study, the limitations of the study, and chapter overviews. Thematically, Chapter 1 describes how the arts and crafts room at a veteran’s hospital can promote perceived empowerment among veterans, charting how the lessons of the study are significant for addressing art education’s relationship with disenfranchised groups. The study’s research process was limited in a number of ways, including the number of participants, but the researcher successfully collected sufficient data to explore the research questions.

As described from Chapter 1, my research questions are:

1) Do veterans perceive that they become empowered through their creative activities and interactions inside an arts and crafts room at the VA hospital in Dallas, Texas?

Sub-questions for this study are:

a) If so, to what degree does making arts and crafts influence veterans’ perceptions of empowerment?

b) If so, to what degree do interactions among veterans influence their perceptions of empowerment?

Of the many strands of scholarly literature drawn upon in this study, two categories are most essential to its analysis: connected knowing, which formed the basis of explicating stories and experiences shared by veterans, and situated learning, which illuminated the forms of teaching, learning, and communal art making that occurred in the VA hospital arts and crafts room.

Having been theoretically undergirded by the literature review in Chapter 2, Chapter 3 describes the purpose of the study and its research design, as well as methods of data collection,
sample selection, data analysis, and validation. Chapter 4 presents a description of the physical environment of the arts and crafts room at the VA hospital, along with the details of its program, mission statement, rules, policies and activities.

Finally, the three case studies described in Chapter 5 include participants’ personal stories and experiences, drawn from semi-structured interviews conducted in the arts and crafts room and my observations, providing a personal perspective on how each veteran learned arts and crafts. The overall results are described in Chapter 6, which, based on documentation and coding, presents an analysis and interpretation of the participants’ perceptions, as well as data-analysis of the case studies, including a cross-analysis of the data.

Interpretation

For the beginning of this section, I describe to what degree my participants became empowered through their creative activities and interactions inside an arts and crafts room. For Chuck, making art influenced his perceptions of empowerment to a great degree because it gave him a sense of healing and hope to change what was negative in his life to a more positive outlook. Painting also helped him clarify in a more physical format his pain that he symbolized in sometimes frightening images such as demonic entities. Chuck’s empowerment was evidenced in his paintings during the course of a year where it transformed from dark to light. The darker paintings represented his pain and suffering but then became lighter colored when his attitude and outlook on life became positive.

On the other hand with Alexander, making art influenced his perceptions of empowerment to a great degree because it gave him a sense of accomplishment to learn painting techniques to build up his self-esteem. Art-making also helped him break free of just painting realistically from looking at pictures to more surreal images that came from his imagination.
When he painted realistically, Alexander told me that he had no emotional attachment to what he was painting, but when he painted from his imagination, he told me there were deeper meanings to it and the images were symbolic to how he felt. His empowerment also allowed him to teach others inside the arts and crafts room when they asked for help because he was confident in his skills.

Similarly, Marine’s told me he felt fulfilled and appreciated when he made bead crafts and gave them away to other veterans inside the hospital. Marine decided one day to not follow the instructional manual in the craft kit and use the beads to make something more abstract. Making bead crafts and then winning first place for beadwork for the Veterans Arts and Crafts Show empowered him to a great degree. Making bead crafts at first seemed like a distraction to his physical and mental pain, but it later became his passion and his purpose to live.

Creative activities not only helped develop each participants self-esteem and confidence which in turn led them to be more empowered individuals but it also helped all three of them become lifelong learners. Each participant wanted to learn more art skills on his own outside of the arts and crafts room to a high degree. Chuck bought paint and brushes and created paintings on his own at his house. Alexander invested money in buying over fifty canvases and practiced painting in his own house, and Marine bought thousands of colored beads that he ordered online and made family portraits at his house. Overall, All participants told me that they wanted to create art for the rest of their lives.

I think interaction was a huge part of all three participants’ perception of empowerment because they felt appreciated, honored, and respected when people praised their arts and crafts and asked them for help in making arts and crafts.
For Chuck, his interactions influenced his perceptions of empowerment to a high degree because he told me that it gave him a feeling that he was worthy and valued among his peers. He told me that people in the arts and crafts room were afraid of him and sat away from him or left him alone. When I first met him in the arts and crafts room, he was sitting alone in the corner and nobody was talking to him. He told me that he was very depressed and lonely and that he felt bad. For Chuck, the positive and supportive social interaction was important for him. When he started to not wear his Satanic relics to the arts and crafts room, more people started to interact with him. From my observations in the arts and crafts room, when people talked to him or looked at his work, he appeared to be happy because people though his work was interesting and asked him questions. This in turn, motivated him also to continue to make more paintings in the room. Towards the end of my observation, several veterans who visited the arts and crafts room talked to him and he never sat alone towards the end of my observations.

At the same time, Alexander’s perception of empowerment was very influenced to a high degree from interactions in the arts and crafts room. People constantly praised Alexander’s work. I have observed many times where people asked him for help in teaching them paint something. There were multiple compliments given to him each time I observed him in the room. Alexander was popular and well liked in the room and people respected that he learned painting skills so fast. Alexander told me that it felt good to him when people asked him for help and told him that he was a good artist. I observed him to become more motivated the more people praised him. He also started taking requests on the side to paint pictures for other people that appreciated his art. His interactions were very important because he was appreciated by those who asked him for help, and I believe that gave him much confidence and self motivation to learn more art skills.

In the same way that Alexander was appreciated in the room, so was Marine.
Marine was also asked for help in teaching others in the arts and crafts room how to make leather and bead kits. His interactions with others also gave him a high degree of empowerment because people respected his patience to do bead work so intricately with craftsmanship. Marine enjoyed giving his smaller bead works to others in the hospital; mostly patients and strangers who came into the arts and crafts room. He told me that he felt good when he gave his work to others because they appreciated what he made. I believe that because others appreciated his bead work, he became motivated to make more to give to patients each time I came to observe him. Marine came into the arts and crafts room as a regular visitor because he was also a patient with leukemia. The fact that he managed to complete large intricate bead work despite his physical limitations, gave him a sense of purpose of life that he shared with others. His work was honored inside the arts and crafts room’s walls and people who came in always commented on them which gave Marine a boost in self-esteem.

In sum, all three participants to a great degree became empowered through their creative activities and interactions inside an arts and crafts room. The rest of this section will describe my interpretations of their works they created inside the arts and crafts room.

Chuck’s work showed not only his progress in becoming more creative, but it also showed his progress as an individual transforming with a more positive outlook on life. It seemed to me that during the many months I observed him, he was depressed most of the time. However, towards the end of data collection, I noticed that Chuck became more energized and appeared to smile more. When I compare his work The Demon (see Figure 16) to his later work Heaven (see Figure 18), I interpret both of those images as a reflection of his inner being. The Demon to me is his own personal demons of committing evil acts during the Vietnam War (when he reported to me that he raped and killed both boys and women). Heaven may seem like a blob
of yellow light emphasizing the canvas, however, I see that light as a representation of how he transformed himself to a more positive person. Although there is no bodily defined shape in *Heaven*, the fact that the yellow light fills out a similar mass of space as in *Demon* makes me believe that *Heaven* is his opposite comparison. Chuck gained this sense of transformation once he became empowered by his learning. Looking back at how he did his first painting The *Haunting* (see Figure 11) to his last painting *Heaven* (see Figure 18), one could say that his first painting has more elements and composition to his work and his first painting looks more developed compared to his last painting because there is more form and value to the work. However, my interpretation as a researcher for his learning progress was more about his context and meaning. What each painting meant to him personally and how he compared himself past to present. His progress of making paintings on his own initiative led him to build his self-esteem and self reflect upon his life and experiences so that he could improve his outlook.

In the same manner, Alexander’s learning progress showed when he later developed a more conceptual perspective in his paintings rather than just copy pictures. In Figure 28, *Storm Brewing*, Alexander told me that whenever he worked on this piece, he felt sick and unhappy, suffering from a severe headache. I interpret the strong wave in the center of the painting as his headache attacking him and causing unsettling feelings. It seemed to me that once Alexander broke away from copying animals and landscapes from pictures, he started to create images from his own imagination that reflected his own personal feelings or attitudes. I observed him later to be more open to creativity; something that he was adamant against doing since he was strictly into realistic landscapes and animals in order to master technique. Alexander became confident and empowered in his painting skill once he learned the basic and intermediate skills and started to show his sense of self through more creative context once he reached that level of technical
ability. In Figure 29, *Story of the Sea*, Alexander showed a new level of creativity when he incorporated elements from a realistic landscape into a surreal one. In this image, water is pouring out of a book into the foreground of the sea, integrating the scenes of imagination and realism together. During this time, Alexander told me that he was reading literature of sea adventures and I believe this scene was inspired from his readings. Alexander was interested in the life at sea on a boat but he could not live that life on a sea since he was confined to a walker. I interpret that the book that floats on top of the water as a representation of his longing to live out in the sea but cannot. Instead, water pours from book towards a more realistic seascape. It seemed like if he could not go to the water, the water could come to him through images and pictures that he could envision living on as they pour out from his longing towards his imagination. Alexander also gained his sense of purpose of life through art-making. He told me, “I have a purpose of life now. My purpose is to be an artist and paint the very best I can. I want to grow as an artist and learn as much as I can about painting” (Personal communication, January 15, 2011).

The sense of purpose was also demonstrated when Marine started to create beadwork that looked more creative and abstract. When Marine started to create *Tiger and Tiger II* (See Figure 35 and Figure 36), he made them from a craft kit. He chose the tiger image because he felt that he was as strong as a tiger inside. Marine is a very small framed and physically thin male who is about 5 feet 3 inches. As mentioned in the earlier chapters, he was a tunnel rat, which meant he had to crawl in small tight holes in the ground that were booby trapped with poisonous snakes, bombs, and pitfalls where the Viet Cong were hiding. Marine describes his ordeal to me:

I went inside each hole shaking; my arm shook—my hand shook. I was terrified. To this day, I cannot look at the drains under the sidewalk…I just can’t look at them. I had my gun cocked and ready to shoot. I could die anytime, I saw two soldiers inside the hole and they both took off running like ants in tunnels. I don’t know how many people I killed.
Sometimes I went into a hole and just started shooting. You don’t have time to look and think but just shoot. It was the most terrifying thing in my life but I am strong inside…. I am like a tiger. (Personal communication, August 2, 2010)

When Marine made these, he felt it was a symbol of him and how he survived his ordeal. I observed Marine as someone who chose certain crafts that reflected his beliefs or representations. In Figure 33, Rosary, Marine created this work because of his strong religious beliefs. Sick with the terminal illness leukemia, Marine focused on his spiritual journey. When I observed Marine do Rosary, I felt that it was like a catharsis to him; as if he felt a connection to the image when he completed it. He often told me, “I am not afraid to die” (Personal communication, August 20, 2010). Rosary, in my interpretation was a comforting image for Marine to bring peace to himself when he accepted that his cancer was terminal. Like Alexander, Marine started to create bead crafts to master the technical aspect of making them. However, his growth and personal transformation as a craftsman developed once he tapped into his creative side and started to make abstract designs. I noticed that when he was halfway through creating Circle (see Figure 40), it was from a bead craft kit with a Marine Corps logo on it. Then I noticed Marine break away from the instruction book and started to develop the logo but then create something different with the design opposite of the template design. He told me that he was thinking about a Native American design (probably based on his Apache heritage) and wanted to incorporate it in the logo. The Marine Corps logo is a symbol of strength and courage. I interpreted this piece as Marine trying to assimilate his Apache heritage into this logo to represent him as a person of strength and courage. Finally, during his last projects of beadwork, (see Figure 41, Figure 42, and Figure 43), he did not care about the design of the craft kit. He just opened several craft kits to use the beads and organize the colors in a bead holder (see Figure 30). Figure 41 looks like there is a glowing blue band around a flower shaped image similar to
the *Rosary* (see Figure 33). I interpret that Marine uses elements of previous designs from his works and incorporates them in his own design that represents himself. Marine told me once that he was “strong like a tiger but fragile as a flower” (Personal communication, August 2, 2010) and maybe this image is a flower protected with the glow (the colored band of beads that outline the shape) of spirituality from the Rosary. In Figure 42, I am not really sure what that is because Marine did not know, but it reminds me of tiger stripes with gray beaded areas. I am not sure if Marine ran out of orange or black beads and substituted them with gray ones, but his reason for designing with these colors showed Marine’s ability and newly developed confidence to experiment with his favorite medium. Marine told me, “I am not sure what this is but I wanted to do something different outside of the craft kit” (Personal communication, October 15, 2010). Doing something different outside of the craft kit indicated to me his progress of personal transformation demonstrated by his artistic confidence. During one session, Marine told me that he “felt good” because he just helped a high school student make a leather wallet. He told me that when he “felt good” he liked to use the color blue because it represented tranquility (Personal communication, November 5, 2010).

Figure 43, shows different colors with the lightest color of blue in the middle outlined by a band of dark blue, and an orange and white band. Again, the colored outline bands in my interpretation mean the same spiritual essence of the Rosemary that Marine holds meaning to. Marine made this abstract image after he reported his positive feelings from helping the high school student. I believe this beadwork represents his emotions about “feeling good” (Personal communication, November 5, 2010) and that he created his piece because he was at a level of contentment. To me, this was evidence that he was empowered through learning on his own experimentation inside the arts and crafts room. In previous observations with him, Marine told
me that he was not ready to make bead designs on his own because he “wasn’t good enough” (Personal communication, July 15, 2010). However, he became confident enough to make his own designs and told me that he “felt good that he could make something without looking at a picture in the box” (Personal communication, November 5, 2010).

*Implications for Future Research*

I hope that my collaboration with veterans in my dissertation research will provide a model for art educators, preservice students, and others, inspiring a sense of responsibility to construct deeper insights about marginalized groups by listening to their stories and accepting their feelings. Listening to the veterans’ stories in order to understand their perspectives can enlarge conceptions of art education in that it can occur in community settings as well as formal school and museum programs. Furthermore, it can help dispel negative stereotypes of veterans that the media projects, such as them being crazy and killing people. As such, interchanges with the veteran community can promote lifelong learning outside the classroom—for both veterans and art educators—through the process of creating, talking about, and reflecting upon veterans’ arts and crafts.

Indeed, throughout my research, I have learned that through creating arts and crafts, veterans have not only gained positive transformations in their lives, but the participants in this study have also shown evidence of becoming lifelong learners. Each participant avowed his desire to continue making arts and crafts outside the hospital, which demonstrated the veterans’ passion for learning or for art-making. Arts and crafts made significant contributions to the lives of such individuals, giving them a sense of meaning and the inspiration to reflect upon and explore their own feelings and attitudes. Each reported that they benefitted emotionally from making arts and crafts in a safe, nurturing environment, demonstrating how art education in
communities of marginalized adults can generate mutual empathy and awareness that allows healing through understanding (Stout, 1999).

In addition to this study, I have visited other VA hospitals in Texas, Florida and California and I confirmed that in each setting, there was no formal arts curriculum. Although no curriculum currently exists for learning inside the arts-and-crafts rooms of VA hospitals, I integrated some studio components of school-based art education into my relations with the veterans during my work as a participant observer. To me, this lack of curriculum is problematic because there is no structure for someone who would want to learn art beyond a craft kit or who seeks to improve their art making skills whether through production, learning vocabulary, or critiquing art work.

For example, I taught Chuck and Alexander how to paint value, blend colors and make colors through demonstrations and hands-on activities such as practicing how to do this using different types of paint brushes and palette knives. I also provided feedback as I observed veterans’ arts and crafts work and helped them learn new art vocabulary. In response to these pedagogical practices, the veterans clearly became more interested in learning about arts and crafts. Gravells (2009) argues that individuals are more influenced by teachers or peers when motivation and inspiration are meaningful and relevant, and the participants most certainly gave me more personal information when they trusted me and came to view my research as valuable. In turn, I believe that my genuine interest in and caring attitude for the participants helped stimulate and challenge them as learners.

Moreover, this research also helped me discover the importance of adapting teaching methods to fit the learning environment and the learners in order to help learners become more involved and self-directed in their learning process (Gravells, 2009). The ability to see different
perspectives encourages individuals to find similarities with one another and respect differences amid the cultivation of self-development and connected knowing (Stanton, 1996), fostering greater understanding, respect, and awareness for isolated and disenfranchised groups such as veterans (Clark & Zimmerman, 2000).

An example of another disenfranchised group, that was not examined in this study, is women in the military. Solaro (2006) describes that women in the military were not fit for combat and the only acceptable jobs were nurses because it was a nurturing and subservient job. Women who chose other jobs had to confront being labeled as “whores or lesbians” and were sometimes viciously abused (Solaro, 2006, pg. 197). The reason for this assumption was of the physical difference between men and women to battle in combat. The difference is predicated upon the military’s cultural assumptions about acceptable weights and body-fat levels for physically active women (Solaro, 2006). This is why it is so important to understand the perspective of another group, whether different from your race, culture, or gender. Such an orientation allows individuals to connect and see the human who made the art as much as they see the work itself (Brenson, Jacob, & Olson, 1995). The conclusions of this study, then, point the way to further research on the power of art education to foster commitments to lifelong learning among adult learners in marginalized communities. There are some additional research of women and individuals from recent wars such as women who served in the Vietnam and Gulf War (Solaro, 2006) but there is currently no research specifically within a situated learning environment within a Veterans Hospital where participants were observed learning. It would be interesting to see how women’s perspectives are similar or different from the participants in this story. I wanted to have case studies from female veterans who do art inside the arts and crafts room, but there were none who had come into the room during my study. Like I mentioned
earlier, most female veterans do not want to come to the VA Hospital in Dallas because of the majority of males and how the females are treated. An employee with the recreation department at the VA Hospital told me, “We would like to have more females participate in the arts and crafts activities but they just don’t come in here. We have only men in here and that’s how it’s been for years” (Personal communication, March 1, 2010).

For future implications, myself and others interested in situated learning within an arts and crafts environment or the topic of veterans and art could research women veterans and their art, preservice observations in a situated learning environment, and testing a merging curriculum based on the veteran community’s needs and interests. These are just some examples of other research topics that could expand and develop from this research.

Conclusion

My identity as a veteran helped me establish myself within the culture inhabited by the participants of my study, although it was not easy because of my age, gender, and race. It was because I am an Asian-American female in my late 30s. Most of the veterans at the VA Hospital are Caucasian males ages 50-80; many voiced clear prejudices against Asians and females. For someone who is not familiar with the veteran community and would like to build relationships, volunteering or collaborating with them is the first step to connecting with them.

It was hard to connect with one of the participants at first because he was very distrustful of me. Later, I found that he had horrible experiences with Asians during the Vietnamese War and he associated me with those people that tried to kill him. In fact, many veterans assumed that I was a wife of a veteran and did not believe me when I told them that I was a veteran myself. I am not married and I come to the VA Hospital because I am a veteran. Veterans commonly have asked me if I was at the hospital with “my husband” or “picking up medication for my father.”
Other veterans clearly distrusted me because of my age and gender. Over time, I built connections because I kept coming back to the hospital to help people learn art. Therefore, that persistence helped those veterans trust me more. I also painted very surreal paintings so that some of them would ask me what I was painting so that I could start a conversation as an ice breaker through my own art.

I learned that it took a lot of time to build trust with people, especially due to biases against my race, age, or gender. It was also very challenging to put aside my personal feelings as best I could when someone offended me with their racist comments or annoyed me when they started talking Chinese, assuming that I was from China, when I have always lived in America. I learned that being a researcher in an environment with people who have various mental and physical disabilities was also challenging because I did not want to cross a line; moving from friendly in nature to caregiver. I learned patience and tolerance towards those who I observed. On one occasion, I encouraged a participant to seek additional counseling when he was threatening suicide because I was unwilling to hang out with him outside of the hospital.

Feeling alone in that hospital was also a challenge. I learned how to ignore males that would harass any woman, including myself, in the hospital. I patiently explained I was there to complete my work and I needed to focus on several veterans inside the room.

I found many examples of gender inequity. There were few female veterans around my age in the hospital. Most female veterans do not come into that hospital because they feel uncomfortable. I remember years ago, I saw one female veteran who looked like she was my age and about five males surrounded her and asked her for her phone number. She looked at me and I could tell by her body language that she was very uncomfortable and annoyed by them. I understand why younger female veterans do not like to come here. As a researcher, I have
become more skillful in knowing what to say to people that distract or disrupt me and I have learned how to create boundaries with them. I also learned how to build trust with those who did not like or connect with me at first by showing them empathy and compassion towards them.

Furthermore, the arts and crafts environment in this study allowed each participant the flexibility to learn on his own through self-discovery and by learning through others. This goes back to situated learning where individuals can learn through helping each other, and through observing one another because they are in the same setting. There is a sense of comfort and support of one another in this type of classroom and learners learn at their own pace based on interests.

It is different however, from a classroom situation because each participant could come in and out of the arts and crafts room whenever he wanted to. It was also different from a classroom because this environment could be seen as therapeutic since it was in a hospital and most of the veterans came inside because they wanted to create something to feel better about themselves or distract themselves from various problems or issues. The pros to coming inside the arts and crafts room was that there were no deadlines, nobody pushing them to finish, no grades, no stress and there were a few veterans who came inside the arts and crafts room to do “busy work”, which was to make something so that it would fill time while they were waiting in-between doctor appointments.

On the other hand, I learned that there was no bridge of learning art education with a formal curriculum to oversee the potential of individuals who wanted to learn to create and talk about art. Had I not been there to teach the veterans art, they would not have learned skills and techniques that they directly asked about and I am dubious whether they would have learned it on their own. There was no art educator there except for myself. I feel strongly that there needs
to be a bridge between formal curriculum and an art educator there who could understand the needs of each individual person and develop that connection. There needs to be someone there to recognize the needs of the veterans to help them learn the skills and techniques as they ask for them. This learning environment was different from a regular classroom because the lessons taught were more differentiated to the needs of each person. However, in a similar manner, it was like a regular classroom because in a classroom, each learner is different and the teacher has to adjust the lesson for students who have special needs or learning disabilities within the classroom.

The case studies detailed in this research demonstrate that there are many unique ways humans can learn through exchanges with others in diverse settings. Each participant’s voice invites the reader to explore and interpret the ways that veterans’ encounters with arts and crafts convey the variety and depth of their experiences. Having carefully examined the particularities of three individuals’ experiences, this study suggests that by building relationships with various communities, art educators gain cross-cultural connections that will forge meaningful connections, providing platforms upon which creating and reflecting on the meaning of art becomes a powerful mode of empowering individuals. As an observer of and participant in such processes during the course of my research, I learned new insights about the diverse ways arts and crafts can foster a perceived sense of empowerment. For example, I learned that I had a firm preconception that empowerment through art is tied to an expressive mode of art making in which the creator gives voice to his or her individual ideas or feelings, much in the way that Chuck’s art functioned to represent his inner struggles. Art no only helped him see his many personal demons, but clarified how these struggles were well rooted in his past. Art really
helped him express himself physically and let a lot of his anger out so that it would not fester inside.

I was, then, quite surprised to learn that the mode of art making pursued by Alexander, mastering a technique to produce realistic images with no personal connection to the artist, could be a true method of empowerment. Likewise, I had never considered the power of tedious and painstaking crafting to foster personal liberation for an individual like Marine, for whom crafting became a method to come to terms with painful experiences in his past personal history. The most valuable lesson offered by such research insights are that people with unique experiences make arts and crafts for diverse reasons, often explicitly distinct from the desire for expression.

In addition, this collective case study demonstrates how the participants helped themselves overcome personal oppression through making arts and crafts in a community setting, becoming both learners and teachers as they learned new skills and, in turn, imparted their knowledge to others. Similarly, the research process was, for me, both a teaching and learning experience as the veterans gave me the gift of their stories. At first, it was very hard for me to share the veterans’ personal stories because hearing their histories made me recall my negative experiences in the military. Indeed, at times, it was very difficult as a researcher to draw a line between empathy and becoming too emotionally connected to my participants’ lives and stories.

For example, my relationship with Chuck often impeded my role as a researcher. I gave him my phone number so he could text me when he came into the arts and crafts room, but he called me several times in crisis, contemplating suicide. Several times, Chuck became angry at me when I did not return his calls right away, accusing me of “betraying” and “ignoring” him. I understood that his attitudes stemmed from his personal difficulties, but my empathy and
compassion for him in this situation drained my capacities as a researcher and undermined my objectivity. Nevertheless, I got through the data collection process by working closely with Chuck and continuing to urge him to seek professional mental health and assistance, which I could not offer, despite the fact that his trials affected me greatly in a personal way. For example, when Chuck told me he used to hate Asians and wanted to kill them, as well as revealing the names he called them, I was reminded of my own painful experiences as the object of such racism. When Chuck confessed that he raped boys and women in Vietnam, it was a trigger for me since I was a victim of attempted rape by fellow soldiers during my military service and was hospitalized as a result. As a researcher, I had not expected to confront such a personally disturbing experience, but it happened. Nevertheless, over time, Chuck learned to trust me and considered me his “sister,” giving me more personal information about himself in each meeting I had with him. As a result of my personal involvement with his story, I feel that I was able to contribute to his sense of empowerment because he understood I valued him personally and cared about his well-being and mental health.

Showing care also helped me gain trust with Marine. I showed care by being persistently nice to him even though he acted rude to me in the beginning of my observation period. I also helped him with volunteer work putting materials away, cleaning, and doing inventory, since he was in the arts and crafts room almost daily. Listening to his stories with empathy, compassion and genuine interest was how I showed him care. He did not trust me in the beginning, because, being Asian-American, my race “triggered” him. I felt a sense of prejudice from Marine during our first three meetings, and I understood the origin of it, since he had been shot at during the Vietnam War by the enemy, and I reminded him of them. At first, Marine would not disclose much formation about himself, and he did not open up to me until after a few months when I
attended a volunteer party. He asked me if I knew what a tunnel rat was? I said I thought it was a large rat in a tunnel, and Marine laughed. He then told me his horrific stories of being a tunnel rat and how he was scared to death to crawl in a hole with his arm extended in front of him as he crawled in ready to shoot. To tell me about such a personal traumatic event in his life was a breakthrough in his trust for me. It was then that he shared with me his feelings about his experiences in the arts and crafts room. Surprisingly, Marine never revealed to me that he had terminal leukemia until the last month of my research, but he told me towards the end of the data collection phase and he was concerned that I would not have details of his stories. He eventually shared some photos that he took of his work, but during the last phases of my research, Marine was too sick to answer any more questions. I felt grateful for the chance to interview him and that he shared his personal war stories with me. Because of Marine, I learned to change my perspective and consider craft kits art in their own right, having felt previously that “real art” could only be fine art created from an individual’s original vision. Now I understand from considering Marine’s perspective that “art” can signify the power of a craft kit to give a sense of hope and purpose in life, even to affirm the existence of one’s being in the face of death. For me, the idea of art now positively encompasses the idea of making crafts as a way to live a hopeful life and secure a sense of self, which is how Marine perceived empowerment.

Finally, through his engagement with painting, Alexander’s sense of self developed significantly over a year’s time, and his self-confidence as an artist grew. During my first meeting with Alexander, he was unsure how to mix paint or use a paintbrush, but a year later, during our last meeting, he showed no hesitation in learning new painting techniques. Moreover, he found more than individual empowerment, since he built on his own success with learning painting in order to teach others in the arts and crafts room, developing as a lifelong learner. For
example, when people asked him how to paint something, he would buy more books, canvas, and paints to practice techniques and learn more in order to pass those skills on to others. This journey was a struggle for Alexander, however, because he is a perfectionist by nature and thought that to be a good artist one must paint perfectly. During my time as a participant observer, I told Alexander that it was “ok to mess up,” explaining to him that the process of creation is just as important as the product and encouraging him to embrace the freedom to paint over failed attempts. Over twenty paintings later, Alexander showed me five works he had re-done over the past several months. Throughout the year, he showed a dedicated willingness to improve himself as an artist and create a positive attitude toward life. This orientation allowed him to develop a philosophy of art as a tool to reflect upon life spiritually, and it was this belief that empowered Alexander to become a positive influence to others around him in the arts and crafts room. Indeed, he even inspired me to renew my own creativity in art making, which I had neglected during my years of study and teaching.

As a veteran myself, the many instances of generosity, collaboration, and sharing I observed among the members of the arts and crafts room community touched me deeply, helping me realize that personal empowerment through art can have many meanings beyond the process of creation. The true value of art creation can come from sharing the experience with others. It is through this sharing of ideas, stories, frustrations, and accomplishments that empowerment becomes a mode of connection and an opportunity to appreciate the contributions of others.
APPENDIX A

RULES OF THE ARTS AND CRAFTS ROOM AT THE DALLAS VA
1. All veterans must present their government ID and sign in.
2. All veterans must fill out the thank you cards inside the craft kits and return them before they leave the room.
3. Veterans may not smoke or bring any weapons inside the crafts room.
4. Veterans must be responsible for completing each craft kit and returning it the next time they visit. A picture of the completed craft may also be accepted.
5. Veterans must comply with what the volunteers and staff request of them.
6. Veterans may not take more than one craft kit within a week’s period.
7. Veterans must clean their tables and put away materials they use.
8. No loud music in the room.
APPENDIX B

QUESTIONS ASKED TO RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS FOR THE FIRST MEETING
1. When did you serve in the military?
2. What was your job assignment in the military?
3. What positive experiences stand out during your time in the military?
4. What negative experiences stand out during your time in the military?
5. What is your experience in creative activities in the past or present?
6. What kinds of experiences have you had before inside the VA Recovery Center in Dallas, Texas?
7. How do you define creativity?
8. Have you interacted with veterans in this room before? If so, could you describe your experiences?
9. Have you helped others during your sessions here and if so, what were your experiences?
10. How do you describe your feelings and attitudes being in this room at this moment?
APPENDIX C

QUESTIONS ASKED TO RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS AFTER THEIR ART PRODUCTION
1. Can you describe any experiences in which you felt successful while working on a project at the VA Recovery Center?

2. Can you describe any experiences in which you felt unsuccessful while working on a project at the VA Recovery Center?

3. How did that experience make you feel about yourself?

4. Can you describe your experiences in making arts and crafts?

5. Have you interacted with others or not during the sessions?

6. If you have interacted with others, describe your experiences.

7. Can you describe your attitude about yourself presently here in the VA Recovery Center?

8. Have you helped others during your sessions here and if so, what were your experiences?

9. Have you learned or not learned anything from being in the sessions. Please explain.

10. What is your favorite media to work with in art? (Art is defined as any creative production that an individual expresses in any media.)

11. What is your favorite media to work when making crafts? (A craft comes from a craft kit which generally has instructions and pieces that are assembled in sequential order. It may or may not be decorated when it is completed.)

12. How do you describe your feelings and attitudes being in this room at this moment?
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