ARTISTIC EXPRESSIONS OF JOY AND SORROW: THE STORIES OF SIXTEEN WOMEN IN ESHOWE CORRECTIONAL FACILITY AND THE DOKODWENI COMMUNITY

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Abstract

The goal of my research was to hear the stories of women in rural South Africa and to understand the experiences in their lives that have brought them joy and pain. Specifically, I wanted to hear the stories of women in prison and compare those to women in the rural community. To achieve this, I used a combined method of art and interview. Over the course of three weeks I facilitated art sessions in Eshowe Correctional Center with seven juvenile women between the ages of twenty to twenty-five. I was able to create my own program through the organization Phoenix Zululand Restorative Justice, which holds programming within 11 prisons
in the KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa. These programs allow offenders to earn certificates and gain life skills and perspective. The first week I focused on developing various artistic techniques. The remaining weeks focused on artistic expression and personal narrative. During the second week, I asked the women to depict a moment or time of joy in their life and interviewed them individually about their artwork. The third week I asked the women to depict an experience of sorrow and repeated this process. In addition to facilitating at the prison, I offered a two-day arts workshop in the village of Dokodweni, roughly twenty minutes by car from Eshowe. There were nine local women between the ages of eighteen to twenty-eight that participated in the workshop and received a certificate of achievement from Phoenix Zululand upon completion. The workshop followed a similar structure as the program within the prison. Through these programs, I hoped to provide knowledge and practice for technical artistic improvement, introduce these women to artistic expression, and provide a space in which they could tell their stories. I wanted to see the difference in life experiences between the women in prison and the women in Dokodweni, and I wanted to know how they believed their gender impacted the quality of those experiences.

I found that all women were eager to use art as a medium for self-expression and were open in sharing life experiences verbally as well. I found there was not a great difference between the lives of the women in prison and the women in Dokodweni, rather, their current circumstance was the biggest difference impacting what they depicted and their emotion as they told of the joy and sorrow in their lives.

Introduction

Art is a “meeting ground of the world inside and the world outside.”¹ Art can give an image to complex emotions that are difficult to discuss, and because of this it is important. Art can allow for self-expression and reflection, and even healing or therapy.

A combination of personal experiences in South Africa and an introduction to the Phoenix Zululand Restorative Justice program inspired my research. First, an eight-day stay in the village of Dokodweni raised question of artistic knowledge and expression among rural South African women. While in Dokodweni, a colleague and I conducted a research project on gender perceptions among youth. Our method was an artistic survey, and a interesting trend we noticed was the willingness of young males to participate and the insecurity of young women to draw.

This curiosity deepened during a two-day program with Phoenix Zululand Restorative Justice and the School for International Training at the women's prison in Eshowe. Phoenix facilitated a program including artistic expression and the two offenders in my small group expressed insecurity regarding their artistic ability. In addition, I was staying with Zulu families in which the women of the household rarely expressed their emotions, verbally or non-verbally. I began to wonder: would art be a useful way for South African women to express themselves?

Personally, art has always been an important part of my self-expression. I grew up coloring with crayons and markers, and now study studio art at my university. Art has the ability to turn complicated emotions into images that allow for insight, and discussing these images can deepen understanding of self and others. I chose to study in South Africa to hear the stories of its people and, through Phoenix Zululand, artistic expression presented itself as a valuable process of personal narrative. Because of these previous experiences with women and art, I decided to focus on artistic expression with women in prison and in the Dokodweni community in collaboration with Phoenix Zululand.

Objectives and Layout of Paper

The objective of this paper is to share the stories of the women I interviewed and offer some observation on the process of art as expression or therapy, specifically for South African women. It is difficult to convey such a rich experience through words, but this paper is an attempt. My opportunity to meet with these women was made possible through Phoenix Zululand Restorative Justice, but I did not follow a previously established program as a temporary facilitator. Instead, I
created my own program that would allow me to instruct the women in art technique and provide a space to hear the stories of joy and sorrow that they have experienced. Therefore, this paper does not address the organization of Phoenix Zululand, its structure, strengths and shortcomings. Instead, it focuses on the program I facilitated, the method of my study, and the stories of the women.

This paper is structured into different sections for clarity. The literature review provides a definition of art therapy and a research base for my work with Phoenix Zululand. After the literature review, I discuss the methodology and process of my research in detail. Following the methodology I discuss my research limitations which lead into the body of the paper: my research findings. Finally, I conclude and offer possibilities for further research. Following the conclusion is a series of appendices I reference throughout the paper.

**Literature Review**

Art therapy must be defined in order to understand its possible impact for self-expression, especially in conflict situations like prisons. Music, dance, poetry, painting, drawing, drama, writing, sculpture, graffiti, and photography: these and more are included under the broad definition of ‘art’. The term ‘art therapy’ encompasses a similar range of mediums, because it includes all forms of artistic therapy, such as music therapy or visual art therapy. I wanted to research what art therapy is, why it is used, and how it can be applied to conflict situations, specifically prisons. I found that research on art therapy was difficult due to its highly individualistic nature, yet the individuality of art therapy is where its beauty and power lies, especially within conflict situations.

What distinguishes art therapy amongst many other therapeutic methods? I endeavored to answer this question first, and concluded that the non-verbal process of art allows people to better articulate emotion through color, shape, and line. Cathy Malchiodi states, ‘Visual art has been celebrated not only for its aesthetic and decorative value and as a record of historical events but also for its potential to help
us express and understand ourselves.”

The expressive element in art therapy is active, and creates a “dynamic therapy, requiring one to participate in one's own treatment.” Malchiodi and Marian Liebmann, both art therapists, recount different client cases to support their argument that art can break down walls that verbal therapy encounters.

Despite being so case-specific, the process of art therapy follows a fairly standard pattern. It is either conducted in groups or individually, with a therapist facilitating the session. Malchiodi explains that art therapy may involve building artistic skills, but “the emphasis is generally first on developing and expressing images that come from inside the person.”

A focus on art skills over personal expression can increase a common fear among participants that they have poor art skill or ability. Typically, participants receive a prompt; they create an artwork in response to the prompt, and the participants and therapist discuss what was expressed and why. The variation of personalities, prompts, personal experience, and human emotion create an endless amount of possibilities to ensue in this process. This unpredictability is multiplied in a group setting, as “art groups that take place in ‘real life’ are much messier than the ideal versions laid out in theory.”

Art therapy relies on individual circumstance because the setting (either group or individual), facility or institution, and therapist all impact the process and outcome of the therapy. Therapist Sue Pittam describes the benefit of this characteristic of art therapy. She states, “Art therapy offers a triangular relationship between the therapist, the client and the image. The art product is a tangible and concrete product on which the client can place feelings safely.” Caroline Case also

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5 Malchiodi, *Sourcebook*, 51.
discusses the importance of the relationship between client and therapist. She states, “It is through the aesthetic experience that the therapist can enter and share the client’s world; that is, it can be a non-verbal sharing.” \(^8\) The relationship between the therapist and client is so unique that it shapes each art therapy experience differently. 

This individual reality about art therapy means research is comprised mostly of individual case studies or general trends noticed by therapists, and it is difficult to deduce general trends regarding art therapy. Art therapists who held either a Master of Arts or Doctoral degree wrote most of the art therapy literature I read. Therefore, most of the literature was pro-art therapy. Andrea Gilroy conducted a study solely on the lack of art therapy research and concluded that the field has neglected research for too long. She states, “The conviction that art therapy works is gained through personal experience and the continuing affirmation that comes from clinical practice, yet we can no longer expect this to be taken on trust.” \(^9\) This plea for research makes sense among the vast amounts of case study or ‘how-to’ art therapy books. However, case study analyses do have merit in highlighting the possibilities and mechanics of art therapy.

Art therapy’s individual attention and opportunity for non-verbal communication is especially useful in conflict situations, which has increased its popularity amidst institutions working with populations affected by inner or outer conflict. \(^10\) I wanted to research the impact of art therapy in conflict situations, specifically prisons, but the aforementioned individualistic nature of the therapy made that difficult. Additional barriers to performing research in prison also have limited literature regarding art therapy within the institutions. However, several case studies have been helpful in understanding how and why art therapy can be an effective treatment in prisons and other institutions.


In addition to case studies, research about life for offenders before and during prison sheds light to why therapy is necessary. To understand why art therapy is useful in prisons, it must first be understood what environments offenders face before and during prison. South Africa imprisons people at the third highest rate in the world (behind the United States and Kazakhstan) with 335 prisoners per 100,000 people. Within the prison population, 34.6% of prisoners are between the ages of 18 and 25, and 2.2% are female. Offenders face dehumanizing situations and relational, regime, and institutional dimensions while imprisoned. From a mental health aspect, the most important relationship is between offender and warden. For example, female offenders often suffer sexual abuse by wardens or dehumanizing practices regarding menstruation sanitation. In *Human Rights in African Prisons*, Vetten cites a South African prisoner who was required to show a warden her used sanitary towel before being offered a new one, and Vetten later concludes that "to menstruate under the conditions described earlier must be considered a form of cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment." These kinds of treatment can damage psyches, making people feel less than human. Demoralizing experiences in prison do not create a successful citizen after prison, and offenders often struggle with reintegration.

In Rachel Marie-Crane Williams’s *Teaching the Arts Behind Bars*, she discusses how art allows prisoners a needed platform to express themselves. Williams states, “Correctional facilities are traditionally devoid of programs that contribute to individual, emotional expression, which is essential to our humanity. Yet in an environment where individual expression is not encouraged, the arts

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12 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
result in therapeutic benefits for students.”¹⁸ Williams's study focuses on prison art programs in the United States, which she claims have lowered recidivism rates in addition to lowering inmates stress level.¹⁹ This sentiment is echoed throughout Prisons and Their Moral Performance, which states that "the search for what is life-giving out of what is experienced as painful was made in order to move ... the deeper and less circumscribed expression of the individual experience.”²⁰ Prisons can systematically strip away important elements of humanity; including emotional expression, and art therapy within this context offers a vital space for humanity and individuality to be regained.

One reason art therapy is effective in conflict situations like a prison is it allows invisible emotions to be exposed. Cameron asks, "How do you resolve conflict through visual process? First of all, the elements that are in conflict have to be made visible.”²¹ Art can allow hidden conflicts, inner turmoil, or skeletons in the closet to emerge in the forms of images, which the client and therapist can then discuss. In her essay, Inside-out/Outside-in: Art Therapy with Young Male Offenders in Prison, Sue Pittam recounts her art therapy experiences working with the prison population. She states, “Art therapy can reach the core of the problem and deal effectively with anger. Containment soothes and helps the pain or hurt, so the anger calms.”²² Art therapy's impact on anger is echoed throughout the work of many art therapists. Pittam delves into the scientific link between anger and art. She describes the centers of pain and anger within the brain and articulates that “angry behavior is often the result of not being able to articulate this emotional experience, and art therapy may help by enabling communication between the hemispheres.”²³

In addition to making conflict visible, art as therapy can also provide a safe space where anger can be expressed and processed. Pittam states, “When a young

¹⁸ Rachel Marie-Crane Williams. Teaching the Arts Behind Bars. (Boston: Northeastern UP, 2003), pp 3.
¹⁹ Williams, Behind Bars, pp 5.
²⁰ Liebling, Moral Performance, 134.
²¹ Dorothy Cameron, Conflict Resolution through Art with Homeless People, as found in Art Approaches to Conflict, (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1996), pp 185.
²² Pittam, Inside-out, pp 100.
²³ Ibid.
person comes into prison they bring with them their problems from the outside world. Anger is displayed outwardly as violent and explosive, or is quietly internalized.” The quietly internalized anger can build to later explode, or be expressed in unhealthy ways. Art therapy can offer a safe space in which anger can be processed. The existence of a separate space is important, because “reconnecting with anger can be extremely anxiety-provoking and overwhelming, unless held safely.” After the art therapy process, therapists remark on notable changes within clients. For example, Hannah Godfrey states, “I am often astounded at the level of insight and self-reflection demonstrated by many clients who attend therapy, and their realization that unresolved anger and referred aggression from past experiences have been catalysts in their offending.” Offender’s awareness of their emotion (all emotion, not just anger) through art therapy provides greater insight into their lives, actions, and personhood.

Verbal communication is difficult. Everyone has emotions that are complicated to articulate, and many people struggle with self-expression. Through its visual medium, art therapy has the ability to cut through language barriers, and allow for a new process of sharing feeling. Once an image has been created, the emotion or event becomes easier to discuss and talk about. “A picture is worth a thousand words”, and creating an image of a complex emotion does just that. Art therapy revolves around inner expression, not artistic talent, and sessions become a dialogue between the client and therapist about the client’s artwork. This highly individualized process provides a safe space in which emotions can be explored, but it also means that standardized research on art therapy is hard to come by. The majority of literature and research of art therapy is case study analysis, which is helpful for understanding the basics of art therapy and different scenarios that can

25 Ibid.
occur. However, the lack of standardized research means it is difficult to look at trends or widespread impact of art therapy. Despite widespread research, art therapy continues to be a popular form of therapy, especially for those who are institutionalized or in conflict situations. The safe space of art therapy allows even violent emotions to surface and be processed in a healthy way. Through art therapy, offenders in prisons can reclaim pieces of their individuality and humanity, which is often silenced by the experience and reality of prison.

**Methodology**

I wanted to study the lives of women within prison and in the local community through two methods: art and interview. Including both groups of women allowed me to compare and contrast experiences of joy and pain, as well as perceptions of the female reality in South Africa. Because it is illegal to do research within South African prisons without certain clearances from the state government, I was able as an intern or temporary facilitator with Phoenix Zululand to facilitate an art program in the Eshowe prison and in the Dokodweni community. Therefore my project was less research-oriented and more people-oriented, as I focused on developing artistic skill and encouraging self-expression.

The group of women within the Eshowe prison available to work with me was the juvenile women, which was comprised of seven women between the ages of nineteen and twenty-six. I had three weeks to work with them in the prison, focusing on technique the first week and on artistic expression the last weeks.

There was not a group of women of the same age range in the Eshowe community available for my study. Nonceba Lushaba, my advisor, coordinated a group of women in Dokodweni, a nearby village. The Dokodweni participants were nine women between the ages of eighteen and twenty-eight. I offered a two-day workshop through Phoenix Zululand that was a compressed version of my sessions in the prison. The first six-hour day focused on technique and the second day focused on artistic expression. All of the Dokodweni women had parents involved on the local school board, and the women mainly participated to receive a certificate of completion from Phoenix Zululand for my workshop.
I will first focus on my methodology within the prison. My program in the prison was slightly different than the workshop in Dokodweni because of scheduling differences. Before I began my program, I spoke with the women as a group to discuss what they wanted out of an art program. Most of the women had a desire to improve their ability to draw people and things more realistically and, in addition, many mentioned a desire to know what different colors mean emotionally. This shaped my plans for my program.

In total, I had twelve 90-minute sessions with the women in the prison. My first week focused on artistic technique. I began the program with the question, “What is art?” We had a discussion of the different kinds of art within their culture: cooking, dancing, embroidery, beadwork, painting, drawing, etc. I explained the concepts of artistic form and intent. After this question, I focused on the concepts of cool colors and warm colors. We discussed emotions related to each color and the women connected black with death, yellow with hope, red with passion, etc. After this discussion I introduced concepts of primary and secondary colors and color mixing. I asked the women to practice by mixing two different greens, purples, and oranges. The next day was focused on using warm and cool colors to make objects look three-dimensional (i.e. color theory). I gave a twenty-minute demo while the women observed, and then they painted. The day consisted of two 90-minute sessions in which the women completed two still life paintings. I walked around and gave suggestions or examples. The next day was focused on faces, with a session on charcoal faces in the morning. I followed the same pattern of completing a demo for the women and then giving them advice as they drew. In the afternoon we used oil pastels and color theory again to make a face look three-dimensional.

The second week began the process of artistic expression. The first day I had the group sit in a circle, and we went around and formally said names, where we were from, and what our family was like. The women most likely knew all this information about each other, but it seemed like it would make the group more comfortable with speaking with each other to share this information and provide

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28 Previous introductions had not been in the context of a group setting, although I had introduced myself to the group the first day.
me with necessary information. I then explained that we would be using art to express ourselves, and the focus was less on technique and more on intent. I asked the translator to emphasize that they could draw realistically or abstractly, and use whatever medium they preferred. Lamo helped me carefully explain consent for being a part of the program, and I repeatedly verbalized that it was not necessary to participate and the women could quit whenever they wanted. I passed out consent forms and explained further. After they understood this and consented, I told them the prompt for the joy painting and asked them to paint a period or moment of joy in their lives. I asked them to think of a specific memory, and express themselves whatever way they wanted. I did not offer help or advice during this time of painting, but instead participated. It was important for me to mutually share with them instead of taking from them.

During the afternoon session, I facilitated a group discussion of the artwork. I arranged the benches in a circle for a comfortable and egalitarian atmosphere and placed the artwork on a table in the middle where it was easy to see. I introduced the time of group sharing as a time to talk about the paintings as a whole or individual paintings, but not necessarily one’s own painting.

The next day I completed one-on-one interviews with each woman regarding her painting, using a standardized list of interview questions. While I interviewed one woman, the other women were in their cells, the courtyard, or meeting with the social worker. In the interview, I first asked each woman if she was comfortable with me taking notes and reiterated her freedom to not participate if she so chose. First, I explained my painting of personal joy to each woman. After I finished explaining my painting, I asked if she had any questions for me. After her questions, I would ask questions about her painting, starting with, “Please describe your painting to me.”

The process for the sorrow paintings was practically identical, except the subject of the artwork. I gave the women the prompt for the painting in the morning session, facilitated a group discussion in the afternoon, and conducted

29 See Appendix A for interview questions
interviews the next day. The program ended with a certificate ceremony and a small graduation party the day after the sorrow interviews.

My methodology in Dokodweni was similar, but altered slightly due to space and time constraints. I had two six-hour days to work with a group of nine women. The first day I started with the same question of, “What is art?,” discussion of color and emotion, and color mixing exercises. Instead of two sessions on still life there was only time for one. In the afternoon I did the same sessions on charcoal and pastel faces. During each session I walked around and gave individual advice.

The second day was focused on artistic expression of joyful and sorrowful experiences. I explained the consent form as I did in the prison, emphasizing ability to withdraw. I started the day with the joyful painting, and I participated as well. In the interest of time, they began the second painting immediately following the first, instead of interviewing the women twice. After both paintings were completed, I moved the desks to the edges of the room and made a circle of chairs in the middle of the room. I placed the paintings on the chalkboard with Bos-tik, separated into joy and sorrow categories, and then discussed the paintings as a group. After the group discussion, I explained my two paintings in depth to the group because of the time limitation. After questions, I began the individual interviews and interviewed the women on both of their paintings, and therefore the questions were slightly different. After the individual interviews, we held a small certificate ceremony for the women and I gave them their artwork back.

**Limitations and Strengths**

I encountered several limitations to my study, and most were related to the reality of prison administration. I should have had two 90-minute sessions every weekday (around twenty-eight sessions) but staff shortages, construction, and holidays inhibited me from entering often. I had a total of nineteen 90-minute sessions with the women within the prison, and these were strictly kept within the timeframe by the prison staff and lunch schedule. In addition to unpredictable participant access, other conflicts presented themselves within the prison. Usually the dining hall was available to my group, but sometimes it was double-booked.
This was especially a problem with the interview sessions. We were kicked out of the dining group by another group during the first day of interviews on joy. The woman I was about to interview came up to me and expressed great concern that others would be able to hear what she was saying, and asked me to negotiate with the other program to regain the private room. Finally, the unpredictability of schedules in the prison meant participants were constantly being pulled out for other programs, such as classes or social work meetings, and because of this I was unable to interview one participant about her sorrow painting.

In addition to the administration’s restrictions on time limits, my program duration length limited my results. I was only able to spend three weeks in Eshowe, and if given more time I would have had the opportunity to hear more stories of joy and pain and more deeply explore narrative/art therapy.

Language barrier was another limitation. The women in both the Eshowe prison and Dokodweni community spoke little to no English, and I had to rely on a translator for interviews and instruction. Thankfully, I was paired with Lamo, a very capable translator from Phoenix and she was able to translate with both groups. This allowed my results to be more standardized than if I had had two different translators. However, there is always meaning that is lost in translation, no matter how talented the translator.

Finally, my own lack of skill in art therapy limited my study. I am a student who has studied art and psychology at a university level, but this in no way qualifies me to be a therapist. Therefore, any observations on therapy benefits or emotion are tentative.

Despite these limitations, my project had an overall strength. The medium or method of art and interview effectively gave women a comfortable space in which to tell their stories. The women in both groups were eager to learn more art technique and to verbally explain their painting in interviews. I built trust with the women during the initial period of art lessons, and I think this increased the sharing in both our group discussions and one-on-one interviews. Finally, each woman described the process of using art to express emotion as something that helped her express difficult emotion and something they enjoyed and wanted to continue.
Research Findings

1. Introduction of Research Findings

The fullness of my research findings is difficult to articulate. The women shared rich and complex narratives that are difficult to boil down, and for that reason I have attached the complete individual interviews and artwork from both groups as appendices. However, I did notice certain trends across both groups, and distinct differences between the two. I have organized the findings into different sections. “Evaluation of Artistic Expressions” explains the similarities and differences between the two groups in technique, color choice, and subject matter. In the following four sections, I explain my findings for the joy and sorrow prompt for each group. The seventh section, “Ramifications of Being Female” discusses my findings on the question of gender. I asked each woman how her experiences of joy or sorrow (or her life) would have been different if she had been a man instead of a woman. Their answers speak to the reality of being female in rural South Africa. Finally, I evaluate my experience of using art as therapy, in both personal observation and what the women themselves said about the process.

2. Evaluation of Artistic Expressions

When I evaluate the paintings of joy and pain from an artistic point of view, three factors are most noticeable: technique, color choice, and subject matter. In some ways these factors varied between the two groups of participants, but in many ways they were strikingly similar.

Technique was an interesting aspect to analyze. While the art technique portion of my program was a week long in the prison, due to the prison schedules and administration I was only able to conduct five 90-minute art sessions. I had one six-hour day of technique classes with Dokodweni group. Despite the near equality in instruction, the women in the prison produced art that was technically much
better than the Dokodweni group. The women in the prison were able to more effectively use color and shadow to make objects look three dimensional, and grasped the notion of color mixing better. I am unsure of why their technique was superior, but I think it may have to do with the monotony of their lives and the value they put in my program. The women in Dokodweni had other things to look forward to, and I think this may have impacted how much they retained from my art lessons. Some of the women in both groups used specific techniques I had taught the group during our art sessions, which either they were thinking in terms of technique as well as expression or the new techniques allowed them to better express themselves.

The color choice was predictable. The early discussions regarding how colors evoke was manifested in the paintings. In both the prison and Dokodweni groups, women painted light and cheerful colors for the joy paintings and the sorrow paintings were noticeably dark.

I also noticed that subject matter differed in an interesting way. Among the joy paintings, not one woman painted a human figure. Houses, flowers, trees, and suns were common subject matter. However, among the sorrow paintings over 50% of the women depicted people. When I interviewed the women on their artwork, most mentioned family or other relationships in both categories. I concluded that relationships were a vital part of the lives of these women, but sorrow experiences were more linked to an individual person (such as a death or murder), and this was consistent in both groups.

3. Experiences of Joy in Eshowe Prison

When I asked the participants within the prison to depict a moment or period of joy in their lives, I asked the translator to emphasize thinking about a specific memory. I presented the prompt this way because I wanted to hear specific

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30 By “equality of instruction”, I am referring to my time of instruction with them. I did ask if women had had prior instruction, and no one said yes. However, some women mentioned exploring art on their own or through other Phoenix programs.

31 See Appendix C for visual example.
stories of joy in these women's lives, not simply a list of things that brings them happiness. However, despite the prompt, I found that many women depicted elements of joy and pain in the joy painting. The majority of women depicted both sorrow and joy in their art, and all of them expressed stories of sorrow in my following interviews with them. As one woman said of her life, “There is a little joy, but mostly sadness.” These interviews led me to conclude that for these women, joy is inexplicably linked with sorrow, especially because of their current circumstances in prison. The interviews I conducted regarding the joy paintings shocked me simply because I was not expecting the magnitude of pain in their stories.

The importance of family was the main thread running through the joy painting interviews. Family relationships and circumstances were the source of joy and sorrow, and each woman used her artwork to describe her family in depth. Happy experiences with family usually occurred when participants were younger or with their children. Many women also mentioned romantic relationships as a source of joy. Finally, several women mentioned hope in ‘the person I will be’. It was clear that joy was not attainable in the present moment, in prison. For these women, joy exists strongly in the past and dimly in the future.

4. Experiences of Joy in Dokodweni

Unlike the participants in prison, for the women in Dokodweni joy is something attainable now. Half of the women mentioned that this is the most joyful period in their lives, and drew objects that represented the present: the safe home where they now live, family get-togethers, or recent events such as the 2010 FIFA World Cup.

Also unlike the participants in prison, the women in Dokodweni depicted clear moments of joy that were not marked by sorrow. For the women in the prison, thinking of joy in the past caused pain because it is not attainable in their current circumstances.

32 Sarah, Joy Interview, Appendix E
33 Read individual joy interviews in Appendix E for more detail.
reality. For the women in Dokodweni, the two were easy to separate and only a few women told sorrowful stories in the joy painting interviews.

5. Experiences of Sorrow in Eshowe Prison

Similar to the artistic evaluation observations, most experiences of sorrow revolved around relationships. While some of these experiences were prior to entering prison, many of the painful stories were related to currently being in prison.

Four of the six interviews centered on death of parents. These women spoke of how strongly the loss of parents shaped their lives. One woman commented on the white stars in her painting of her mother’s tombstone, saying, “I did not have hope, I could not see light.” These deaths shaped the entire course of life for these women, often causing them to drop out of school to take care of younger siblings and therefore sacrificing their future.

The death of parents or loved ones was also related to the pain of sexual abuse. One woman told the story of ‘falling pregnant’ when she was 12 years old due to flattery which turned sour, and a painful miscarriage. Another woman discussed how her mother’s death meant the loss of protection. She stated, “I was worried because one time my uncle wanted to rape me and my mother stopped him. Now that my mother was dead, [I wondered] would he rape me?” In their lives, the loss of parental protection led to increased vulnerability, creating opportunity for sexual abuse, failure in school, and lack of money or food.

However, being in prison stood out as the most painful and noted experience, and most women recounted the sorrow of being cut-off from the world, notably loved ones. The trauma of being incarcerated entirely affected the way the women viewed their lives, which in part explains why their paintings of joy were so filled

34 Mathula, Sorrow Interview, Appendix E.
35 Andrea, Sorrow Interview, Appendix E.
with sorrow. One woman stated about her experience in prison, “Even if people don’t see the tears coming out of my eyes, deep inside I’m always crying.” Painful statements like this were ten-fold, and many women cried while telling me of their time in prison. Another woman described prison, “When you are in prison it is like you are in a closed tin and there is just darkness.”

Relationships with children were also a source of the pain while being incarcerated. Six of the seven women had children, and all the women were under the age of twenty-five. One woman stated, “This is my son. I don’t know how to be a mother to him now. He’ll be nineteen by the time I get out of here.” (Her son is currently three years old). Another woman’s entire painting focused on a recent incident in prison. She heard via relatives that her child was sick, and the medication was too expensive. She told how she went into her cell and cried, knowing how her actions had affected her children. She stated, “All I want is to share love with my children.”

Every woman who had a child mentioned the pain of separation.

The sorrowful stories of the participants were connected by a shared experience: prison. Painful moments before prison, such as parental death or abuse often lead to actions or friend groups that started a life that led to prison. When asked how her experience of her mother’s death had affected her life, Sne replied, “It made me do things in life that are not right. That made me to have friends for security. I stopped going to church, became pregnant, and shoplifted.” Life experiences of sorrow were interconnected among these women.

6. Experiences of Sorrow in Dokodweni

Similar to the women in the Eshowe prison, experiences of sorrow among Dokodweni women were heavily connected to relationships, and six of the nine women’s experiences of sorrow were death of a loved one. Unlike the Eshowe Prison participants, only two of the women had one of their parents die. The

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36 Nosipho, Sorrow Interview, Appendix E.
37 Sarah, Sorrow Interview, Appendix E.
38 Sasha, Sorrow Interview, Appendix E.
39 Sne, Sorrow Interview, Appendix E.
structure of the family is so tight-knit among the community that the death of a family member can have ramifications on a woman’s entire life. One woman mentioned how her gogo (grandmother) had died before being able to perform a certain ceremony, and how her entire life was now altered.

A surprising result was how education was mentioned throughout the interviews. Failure of matric or dropping out of school was mentioned twice in the nine interviews, but never mentioned within the Eshowe Prison group.

Finally, three of the nine women had experienced their house burning down and expressed how it was the most painful time in their life. Like death, this experience impacted every area of their life and often meant a complete lack of resources for the entire family.

7. Continuing Impact of Experiences

I asked each woman how the experience of joy and sorrow they depicted continued to affect them. If they stared blankly at me, I would explain further, sometimes mentioning my own painting and how the difficult experiences of the past have made me stronger. This prompting may have elicited biased responses, but on the whole the women spoke of the pain and weight they continued to feel from the experiences of sorrow. Some women mentioned how it has made them stronger women, or hope for the future, but mainly women spoke of the negative impact these events have had on their lives and emotional well-being. Finally, there were several interviews that ended in tears and it was plain how deeply the event of sorrow continued to impact the woman. In these circumstances, I did not ask this interview question and wrote, "N/A" for an answer.

8. The Ramifications of Being Female

One of my interview questions was “How would this experience of joy or sorrow been different if you were a man?” I wanted to know the impact of being female in their lives. This was a difficult question to translate, and a difficult question for many of the women to comprehend. It seemed ridiculous to them at first, something ludicrous to even contemplate. That reaction in and of itself
suggested an acceptance of each woman’s ‘lot in life’ and that gender issues mostly lay unchallenged for them. I often rephrased the question, “How would your life be different if you were a man? Do you think it would be different?”

Three of the seven women in Eshowe prison stated that their lives would have been different if they had been men. The strongest statement was that, “I do not think I would be [in prison] if I were a man.”40 The woman went on to explain her story; a man had sexually abused her, and after she married and moved away he followed her and continued to abuse her. Her husband killed the man, which she was part of, and was sent to prison. She felt if she was a man she would not have been sexually abused, and therefore would not be in prison. The three women also stated that if they were men they would not feel sorrow as much.

Three of the nine women in Dokodweni asserted that their lives would be different if they were men. Of these three, all of them asserted that their experiences would remain the same, but their emotions to them would change. One woman stated, “As a woman, you easily feel the pain.”41 Another woman described that she would have been more useful as a man, saying “I would have dropped out of school to get a job and help my mom. That is what I see other men do. It is good, I am not.” Many who responded their experiences would have been the same cited the experience of their brothers as evidence of their sameness.

Among both groups, most women did not think their lives would be different if they were men. However, over 30% of each group asserted their lives would be drastically different. Among this 30%, experiences of sexual abuse and emotional pain were consistently mentioned as what would be most different. This indicates the males are perceived to have a greater emotional strength, as well as lower rate of sexual abuse.

9. Art Expression as Therapy

As mentioned earlier in my limitations, I am not a qualified art therapist. However, my program within the prison had elements of art therapy within it, as art

40 Sarah, Joy Interview, Appendix E.
41 Dokodweni Interviews, Appendix F.
was used as expression and a vehicle for personal narrative. I observed that the women were eager to express themselves both artistically and verbally throughout the process in both groups. However, the group within the prison put more effort into their artwork and the interviews. Again, I think this difference is similar to the difference in technique; the women in prison have less going on in their lives and a more terrible reality of incarceration, which creates a need for expression.

My program was effective in giving women a space to share their stories. The first few interviews regarding joy were very emotional and sad, and I began to doubt that the process was positively impacting the women. However, Lamo (my translator) and other Phoenix staff reiterated that it was good for the women to have someone new to tell their story to and a space where it was safe to process difficult emotions. Over my three weeks within the prison, I observed how women opened up more and more. One woman in particular was very shy, and didn’t speak at all during the first group discussion of the art. However, by the second group discussion she contributed twice.

The result of the workshop was similar in the Dokodweni group, but to a lesser extent. The women were there for something to do, to earn a certificate, and maybe a little about art in the process. When I expressed surprise that nine women would sign up for an unknown two-day art program to Nonceba, she stated, "Everyone is scrambling for some kind of opportunity to lift them to light." The women were there for more opportunity, and I did see their technique improve over the two days. The day of expression was too short to notice a change in how open they were.

My final interview question to all the women was, "What did you think about this process? What do you think about using art to express yourself?" The responses were overwhelmingly positive. Each woman expressed a feeling of relief or release throughout the process, and a desire to continue to express herself through art. Response ranged from, "I think it is a good thing, because if you can’t write, by painting or drawing you can express your feeling," to "It helps to get out what is bothering me," to "It will start to heal me." The magnitude of positive emotion toward the process and interviews reinforced what I researched about art therapy,
and made me feel increasingly grateful for choosing to ask to hear the stories of these women.

**Recommendations for Further Study**

If I were to continue this study I would continue the process I had begun, giving the women in the two groups prompts, discussing them as a group, and then interviewing them individually. I think it would be interesting to look at joy and sorrow for each year of their lives. It would also be possible to expand the sample of participants and hear the stories of more women on this topic.

In addition, the artwork and interviews of the women in Eshowe Prison and the Dokodweni community are powerful in and of themselves. I included them in their entirety as an appendix to this paper so that they could be shared.

**Conclusion**

The process of this study was a learning process about art therapy, common challenges women face, a portion of the female experience in rural South Africa, and the experience of being in prison.

The biggest difference between the group of women in prison and the group of women in Dokodweni regarding their experiences of joy and sorrow was just that: the women in Eshowe are imprisoned and the women in Dokodweni are free. Both groups have faced immense challenges such as death of family, sexual abuse, house fire, and lack of education and these intense experiences of sorrow have altered their lives. However, the women in prison are most affected by being in prison. Past events continue to cause pain for both groups, but this pain is intensified for the women in the Eshowe Prison as they remain isolated from the most important people in their lives: family and children.

I conclude that because the women in Eshowe are incarcerated, every event is viewed through a painful lens. This is the reason their paintings of joy were so filled with sorrow; for them joy exists in the past and maybe in the future but not in the present. For the women in Dokodweni, joy is attainable now and that allows them to more easily separate the two.
My program achieved my original goals. By using the combined method of art and interview, I was able to hear the highlights and low points of each woman’s life, and understand her better. The atmosphere of artist expression and interview gave the women a comfortable space for sharing their stories. By painting and telling my own stories of joy and pain I was able to share with them as well, and even learn more about myself in the process. The overwhelming approval of the program from the women validated my study more than any observation I could make.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions in Eshowe Prison

1. Joy
   a. Please describe your painting to me.
   b. Why did you paint this as a period of joy?
   c. Did being a woman influence this experience?
   d. How has this experience shaped the person you are today?

2. Sorrow
   a. Please describe your painting to me.
   b. Why did you paint this as period of sorrow?
   c. Did being a woman influence this experience?
   d. How has this experience shaped the person you are today?
   e. What did you think of this process- using art to express emotion?
Appendix B: Interview Questions in Dokodweni

1. Please describe your paintings to me.
2. Why did you paint this as an experience of joy?
3. Why did you paint this as an experience of sorrow?
4. Does this experience continue to affect you?
5. How have these experiences shaped the person you are today?
6. Are you satisfied with how the artwork turned out?
7. Would these experiences/your life have been different if you were a man?
8. What do you think of using art to express emotions?