MORE THAN WORDS

PHOTO: BARBARA KUBSKA



The ‘The Moon is a Woman’ workshop, aimed at women, focused on fostering a positive relationship with oneself and one’s body. The participants created a shared moon mandala, on which they recorded their experiences from the previous lunar cycle.

Can poetry be a product of scientific research? Can photography help us understand emotions better than a questionnaire? More and more researchers are turning to art-based research – an approach that combines science and art to describe human experiences in greater depth. Magdalena Hyla-Zając, PhD, from the Institute of Psychology of the University of Silesia, discusses the possibilities and applications of this method. We often associate science with something that stands in opposition to art. According to the researcher, the two worlds can be successfully combined.

HOW ART HELPS US EXPLORE HUMAN EXPERIENCES

Psychologists have been using questionnaires and interviews for years to better understand people. However, words are not always enough, which is why some researchers turn to art-based research. In this case, the tools of inquiry can include, amongst other things, photography, poetry, and film.

'This method has developed, among others, from the belief that there is no single, fully objective perspective capable of describing human experience. In research on human beings, value lies not only in measuring and comparing phenomena, but also in exploring them in depth from a humanistic perspective. Art can help in this regard because it allows us to tap into the physical, emotional, and creative dimensions of experience, which do not always come to light in conversation or in a questionnaire', explains the psychologist.

THE (UN)PRESENT RESEARCHER

Many classical scientific approaches assume that the researcher should be an impartial observer. Art-based research takes a different approach.

'The assumption is that it is not possible to completely separate the researcher from the research process. Therefore, the researcher does not conceal their presence, and sometimes even creates works themselves, inspired by encounters and the experiences of those taking part in the research', explains Magdalena Hyla-Zając.

Art-based research also has a social dimension. The results do not necessarily have to take the form of a scientific article.

'They can be published as poetry, short stories, or exhibitions. I am particularly drawn to dialogical art, in which the audience not only learns about the research findings but can also add their own story and become part of the conversation', says the researcher.

According to the psychologist, this approach also helps to communicate scientific issues more effectively.

'We live in an age of information and disinformation overload. If the language of science is too difficult for the audience, they are easily tempted by the appeal of simplistic explanations. That is why it is our task to convey knowledge in an accessible and responsible manner', believes Magdalena Hyla-Zając.

Professional ethics are also important.

'Some people put forward certain theories, but when their actions lead to suffering or harm, they do not take responsibility for it. In science and psychology, accountability for one's words is extremely important', emphasises the researcher.

FROM POETRY TO PHOTOGRAPHY

Magdalena Hyla-Zając combines academic work with psychotherapeutic practice. In her view, art opens up access to areas of experience that are difficult to reach through conversation alone. However, drawing or more complex artistic techniques don't suit everyone – which is where photography can be especially helpful.

'We make use of photos to stimulate conversation. This also works well in group work, as images help people open up and talk about themselves', says the psychologist.

The researcher also uses art in her research projects. As part of a grant from the National Science Centre, she created poetry based on women's accounts of their first period.

In 2025, together with Prof. Katarzyna Krasoń and Prof. Jolanta Jastrząb, she published the book *On the journey. In search of an artified every day* [W podróży. W poszukiwaniu codzienności artyfikowanej], which is an example of the practical application of art-based research.

'We ran workshops with older people in hospices and at universities of the third age. Later, each of us recounted these experiences through our own medium: poetry, film and painting. In this way, we demonstrate that classical qualitative research, statistics, and art can complement each other', says Magdalena Hyla-Zając who is currently continuing her work with women exploring their relationship with their bodies, developing her own model of contextual behavioural art therapy.

ART THAT SHIFTS PERSPECTIVES

According to the researcher, art can support people on a social, biological, and psychological level. It helps to build bonds, triggers memories and emotions, and facilitates a better understanding of one's own experiences. Therapeutic activities using visual art serve as an example.

'When women create self-portraits from the perspective of strength, agency, or happiness, they begin to perceive themselves differently. Such experiences get imprinted not only in their minds but also in their bodies and emotions', she explains.

In her therapeutic work, the psychologist also uses less obvious media, such as Dixit cards or Lego bricks.

'I remember a client who used the bricks to create figures symbolising different parts of himself. This made it easier for him to accept aspects of his personality that he hadn't liked before. It allowed him to work through certain difficulties much more quickly than if we'd simply talked about them', says the psychologist.

For Magdalena Hyla-Zając, art is not merely an optional component of research or therapy. It is a way of gaining knowledge about human nature and, at the same time, a tool for conveying that knowledge.

'I would like to emphasise: let us be responsible researchers and seek out different ways of reaching people. Art is not merely a painting, a song or a drawing. It is, above all, a way of thinking, an openness, and a process of getting to know people', concludes the psychologist.

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