Article

Embodied tableaux: A drama method for social work arts-based research

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Abstract

Due to the increased interest of social workers in arts-based research, there is a need for guidance in how to apply arts-based research methods to social work questions and research. The lack of detailed methodological procedures in the existing literature potentially inhibits social work researchers’ ability to select and implement appropriate arts-based research methods. This article thus provides a step-by-step procedural guide for a drama-based arts-based research method called embodied tableaux. Adapted from Boal’s Image Theatre techniques and tableaux exercises common in drama ther-apy, this ABR method can serve as a rich source of embodied, aesthetic, imaginal, and relational data suitable for many of the populations and social issues that social work researchers typically focus on. This article also highlights ways to adapt this method for the various stages of the research process and explores important ethical issues. Illustrative examples of the embodied tableaux method are included from a recent study conducted with drama therapists who are employed in schools. Implications and considerations for future research design are included.

Keywords

Arts-based research, embodied, tableaux, school, image theatre, aesthetic

Introduction

Social work researchers are increasing their use of the arts as intervention tools and as ways to conduct and disseminate research to a wider audience (Chambon, 2008,

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2009; Chapman et al., 2017; Clark and Morriss, 2017; Foster et al., 2018; Huss and Bos, 2019; Konrad, 2019; Leonard et al., 2018; Sinding and Barnes, 2015). This turn to the arts in social work is not new, but is instead a revival of the early social work of Jane Addams who used theater as part of her community change work and on-the-ground research and practice (Addams, 1911; Cisneros, 2019).

Arts-based research (ABR) is defined as “the systematic use of the artistic process. . . as a primary way of understanding and examining experience by both the researchers and the people they involve in their studies” (McNiff, 2008: 29). The “artistic process” consists of a wide range of artistic methods, including, but not limited to, poetry, performance, music, collage, painting, dance, improvised movement, fiction writing, and dramatic plays. Leavy’s (2018) edited collection on ABR demonstrates how art-making values multiple ways of knowing, including preverbal, nonverbal, sensory, kinesthetic, perceptual, embodied, imaginal, and aesthetic forms of knowledge. In addition, ABR can be used at any stage of the research process, including in the design, data generation, analysis, and/or dissem-ination of the findings (Foster et al., 2018).

This revival of the arts as a legitimate way of knowing coincides with a number of scholars writing about the alignment between ABR and social work principles and practices (Chambon, 2009; Gergen and Gergen, 2018; Huss and Bos, 2019; Sinding and Barnes, 2015). ABR privileges layered, complex, and multiple per-spectives on issues, consistent with social work principles of understanding indi-viduals holistically within their environments (Clark and Morriss, 2017; Foster et al., 2018). Because the arts do not focus only on verbal communication, ABR offers avenues for exploring issues and experiences that can be challenging to articulate in words (Bagnoli, 2009; Ball, 2008; Clark and Morriss, 2017; Foster et al., 2018). Stelter (2010) and Branscombe and Schneider (2013) argued for the necessity of embodied research methods to deepen the research process and give credit to the lived body as a way of holistically understanding the world. For example, Stelter’s (2010) body-anchored interviewing techniques include specifi-cally asking questions about the interviewee’s bodily experiences, feelings, and physical sensations when thinking about the topic of the research.

Additionally, the arts are interwoven with symbolic and unconscious processes; therefore, ABR can result in unexpected, contradictory, surprising, and typically unspoken aspects of experience (Battacharya, 2013; Copeland and Agosto, 2012; Leavy, 2018). As Chambon (2009: 220) wrote, “Like a churning of the stomach, art turns the implicit over into forms of explicit, layering reality until it blurs what we know. Art works through social imaginaries and can be perceived as extended political imagination.” In this quotation, Chambon (2009) linked embodied knowl-edge with aesthetic knowledge, suggesting that approaches that privilege more than just the cognitive can reveal new perspectives on a topic and encourage researchers to embrace multiple truths or ways of knowing. The complexity offered by the arts may allow the nuances of experience to be explored, potentially offering useful data for social work practice. For example, a verbal recounting of a

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traumatic event may limit a participant’s abilities to express aspects of experiences not easily captured in words. For such participants, movement might help express their bodily reaction to this violence, colors and shapes through visual depictions might help them share their experiences of dissociation, or the structure of poetry (how lines and stanzas are organized on the page) may illustrate the “stuckness” or silencing they feel when remembering this event. In this way, the arts can provide alternative ways for meaning to be expressed, layered, and understood.

Social work as a discipline and a practice is focused on building relationships between individuals, their families and communities, and the broader world of policies, institutions, and structures. In this way, social work aligns with ABR researchers who highlight the importance of the arts to deepen one’s empathy toward a topic, reduce stigma, and connect researchers and audience members with experiences that are typically marginalized in society (Ball, 2008; Chambon, 2009; Clover, 2011; Foster et al., 2018). To this end, a less articulated rationale for using drama-based ABR methods in social work is that the aesthetic drama is, at its core, also relational. Sajnani (2012) argues that in drama, theater makers create performances with the intention of bringing audience members who witness this work into a different relationship with each other, the topic/s of the performance, and to the theater makers. For example, a research drama based on the experiences of those living with dementia was performed for families and health care providers (including social workers), and included pre- and post-performance focus group discussions on audience members’ understanding of dementia (Mitchell et al., 2011). Health care providers in the audience said that the play deepened their awareness about the lived experiences of those with dementia, caused them to question practices they were complicit in that might be doing harm to patients in long-term facilities (e.g., repetitive cognitive testing), reinforced their need to slow down and more deeply listen to their patients, and expanded their compassion and understanding for patients and family members. In examples like these, the data generated, analyzed, or disseminated using drama can help the communal and multiple perspectives of an issue to be expressed more deeply and heard with greater empathy (Sajnani, 2012).

Last, ABR is an action-oriented research practice that can evoke research par-ticipants, researchers, and audience members alike toward social change and undo-ing dominant ways of knowing and acting (Battacharya, 2013; Sinding and Barnes, 2015). Desyllas (2014) and Foster et al. (2018) have argued that ABR is particu-larly helpful for engaging underrepresented participants in traditional research. As Sinding and Barnes (2015: 35) wrote, “It is now readily understood that theatre and drama can be used as a concrete, embodied language through which we can examine human action and also try out alternative ways of being and acting – what Boal calls ‘a rehearsal for revolution’ (1979: 122)”. For example, Theatre of the Oppressed NYC (TONYC) uses Legislative Theatre (Boal, 1998), a form of inter-active theatre where individuals create and perform plays based on an oppressive structure or policy that affects them; their audience is the general public and gov-ernment officials (Kelly-Goffman, 2017). The audience then engages in a process of

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improvised acting out of a number of potential solutions to the problem, first aimed at the interpersonal level and then at the policy level. Legal and policy experts collect, sort, and contextualize the policy ideas and present them to the audience. After a space for debate and conversations about the potential policies, government officials typically agree to act on these policies if the majority of those present reach consensus on the issue. TONYC has a long history of using Legislative Theatre to educate, agitate, and help to push forward new social change policies. In 2017, a play focused on illegal landlord harassment to get tenants to leave in order to raise rent, resulted in policy statement generated to protect tenants. The following day, the NYC City Council passed a “Certificate of No Harassment” legislation inspired by the policy suggested during this perfor-mance (Kelly-Goffman, 2017). As demonstrated in this example, Battacharya (2013) similarly argued that ABR helps to provoke dialogue, imagine solutions, and identify action steps. In these ways, critical ABR has an explicitly political agenda to use aesthetics to challenge neoliberal and oppressive ideas and imagine new possibilities (Battacharya, 2013; Finley, 2011; Foster et al., 2018; Sinding and Barnes, 2015).

Despite this growing interest, there is a need for articles that provide detailed guidance on applying specific methods to social work questions and research. As Foster et al. (2018: 308–309) argued, “While they may be adept at developing interview questions, investigators new to arts-based research will have less experi-ence and competence selecting and designing or adapting an appropriate arts-based approach.” Many ABR articles provide scant details about how to implement ABR, resulting in recent calls for procedural writing on how to generate and analyze ABR data in social work (Chapman et al., 2017; Foster et al., 2018). Further, Chapman et al. (2017) suggested that social work researchers rarely ana-lyze or code the actual art or images generated, instead of relying on additional verbal data from interviews or focus groups in order to interpret the images and thus failing to examine the additional, missing, or contradictory data embedded in the images themselves. While Chapman et al. (2017) discussed ways of coding the present or absent content and themes in the images, they did not show how to analyze these images in terms of aesthetics (e.g., proximity, symbols, framing of the image, perspective, focus) that can offer additional, rich data. There is a clear gap in existing literature focused on these details.

As a registered drama therapist and board-certified trainer of drama therapy for the North American Drama Therapy Association (NADTA) and an instructor in arts research, I have a wealth of experience implementing drama-based exercises for therapeutic, community, and research purposes. In this article, I outline a step-by-step procedure for implementing the embodied tableaux ABR method, dis-cussed earlier and detailed below. I highlight ways to adapt this procedure for various research stages, and I discuss ethical considerations. To illustrate this method, I have also included examples from a recent ABR study conducted with drama therapists who work in school settings and who contend with

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neoliberal pressures (Mayor, 2019). An early version of this paper was first pre-sented at the 2018 Social Work Day at the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry.

Embodied tableaux method

Description

In drama, tableaux are embodied frozen pictures or still sculptures created by participants to signify stories, scenes, emotions, themes, and relationships. As Branscombe and Schneider (2013: 96) defined tableaux, “Specifically, in the drama sculpture of tableau, participants use gesture, body position, touch, and expression (i.e. ‘complex signifying systems’) to create frozen scenes. The frozen scenes are embodied, three-dimensional images that can be navigated and interpreted by others.” Tableaux elicit both narrative and performative data (Jen, 2016).

The ABR research method I have designed, which I have named the “embodied tableaux method,” blends the tableaux techniques common in several drama ther-apy approaches (e.g., Emunah, 1994; Landy, 1996) with elements from Boal’s (1992) Image Theatre. Due to the strong influence of Image Theatre in my work, I use the term tableaux and image interchangeably in my facilitation of this research technique and in the write up of this article. As in Image Theatre (Boal, 1992), in the embodied tableaux method the researcher asks participants to first create a solo tableau with their body in response to a prompt or research question and then to create small group tableaux based on the solo image/s that participants feel have resonance with their own. Consistent with Image Theatre, these small group tableaux are then shown to the wider group, and the wider group is asked to call out words or phrases of what they see when they view these creations.

The embodied tableaux method is inspired by, but differs from, the tableaux techniques described by other ABR researchers (Branscombe and Schneider, 2013; Jen, 2016; Marin, 2007). Unlike both drama therapy and Image Theatre, the embodied tableaux method does not intend to have therapeutic or activist goals; rather these techniques have been adapted explicitly for research purposes. Additionally, while Image Theatre was created to address oppression (Boal, 1992), the method I have developed does not assume participant experiences are necessarily oppressive and instead invites discussion and tableaux creation around the most common, important, and challenging roles, stories, and experiences in relation to the topic being studied. Further, several of the authors who use tab-leaux in ABR offer only brief descriptions of their procedure, and they do not build into the method embodied forms of data analysis that the research partic-ipants themselves conduct. For example, Jen (2016) lists the seven steps of his procedure in bullet form, providing few details about the process of tableaux

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creation or his instructions to the participants. Therefore, this article focuses on how to conduct social work research using tableaux in a detailed way.

Study context of the case examples

The case examples used to illustrate the research applications and ethical consid-erations of the embodied tableaux method are taken from a mixed-methods study that examined the roles and challenges drama therapists face in schools (see Mayor, 2019). This present article is a companion to this previously published article that did not elaborate on the details of the embodied tableaux method. Participants (n ¼ 18) were 2017 NADTA conference attendees with experience in school-based drama therapy. The NADTA Board and Wilfrid Laurier University’s Research Ethics Board approved this study. Participants completed an informed consent and engaged in a one-time semi-structured 45-minute verbal focus group, followed by a 45-minute embodied tableaux process. The findings from the study emphasized the impact of neoliberal school reform climate (i.e., the increase of capitalism in public education through for-profit changes, including the increase of charter schools and the expansion of high-stakes standardized testing) on drama therapists.

Implementation sequence

Warm-up. I believe it is important to warm-up participants through physical and/ or relational activities in order to prepare the group for creative work together. This is in line with drama therapy and drama-based ABR practice wisdom that suggests that warm-up activities can build rapport, increase communication, con-nect participants with their bodies, and encourage sharing (Branscombe and Schneider, 2013; Emunah, 1994; Jen, 2016; Marin, 2007; Sajnani, 2012; Sajnani and Johnson, 2014). In this case example, participants were drama therapists with a high degree of comfort with embodied activities and familiarity with one another due to the small community of drama therapists who attend the national confer-ence. Therefore, I chose to only conduct a brief warm-up and instructed partic-ipants, “Can everyone stand up and just pay attention to how your body is doing? We’ve been sitting for a while! Let’s get into our bodies. Do what you need to do to feel a little more grounded in this space. Move a little, stretch a little.” Participants engaged with little hesitancy while chatting, laughing, and moving their bodies through various stretches.

The amount of time dedicated to warming up may vary based on the research participants and their histories; more time is often needed with groups who do not know each other and/or have little familiarity with drama or embodied activities. In these instances, I have used other warm-up activities like structured stretching, mirroring exercises, or spectrograms (where group members answer questions by placing themselves along an imaginary line representing a spectrum of

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possible answers). See Emunah (1994) or Boal (1992) for a range of possible warm-up activities.

Individual tableaux creation. Drawing on Boal’s (1992) Image Theatre process, I asked participants to gather in a circle facing outwards away from the group. I then provided a prompt connected to the core research questions and themes (i.e., What are the roles and challenges for drama therapists working in schools?). I asked participants to pay attention to their bodily response to my prompt and create an individual, still tableau to represent their embodied response. My instruc-tion was: “Can everyone get in a circle and turn around with their backs facing the center? I want you to think about a day in the life of a school-based drama ther-apist. How does that feel in your body? How might you represent that with your body in a tableau or a still, embodied sculpture? Put yourself in the position without turning around. Feel free to experiment with different ways to represent this idea, until you feel like you are in the position that feels ‘right’ for today. You will show this image to the group soon, but don’t turn around yet!” You will notice in my instruction that I let the participants know that they would be show-ing these individual tableaux to the group so that they were able to select the level of disclosure and vulnerability they were willing to share.

When facilitating this process, I was careful to give time for this creation and encouraged participants to experiment with various expressions of their answers using their bodies. I paid attention to the group, patiently waiting for individuals to stop experimenting with their images until each person had created their tab-leau. This is important so that participants have time to represent their response authentically and accurately. I then let the participants know we were going to move into a group sharing process, stating, “Please remember you do not need to participate in any of these exercises if you do not wish. On the count of three, turn around and show your image. 1, 2, 3. Take a look at the images around you while you hold your pose. Notice what you see, what the images make you feel, and which image or images resonate with your own.” Following Boal’s (1992) process, in this technique participants are asked to show their tableaux simultaneously rather than individually. I have found that this reduces anxiety for those who are less familiar with embodied creations. Further, showing the range of responses to the same prompt simultaneously highlights the range of embodied knowledge a particular group has to offer, and often sparks participant curiosity and engage-ment. This also visually demonstrates a range of perspectives on an issue, com-plementing social work principles of context, self-in-environment, and multiple experiences (Clark and Morriss, 2017).

Group tableaux creation. In the next phase, I engaged participants more rela-tionally, asking them to begin a process of sorting into groups based on which images resonated with their own. This step served as further data-generation and began the process of group data analysis. In this case example, I stated, “Looking at the images, which one or ones seem to reflect a piece of your own image? You may see something you relate to in the body shapes, facial expressions, or themes. When you find this image or images, please move towards them without

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speaking. It is okay to have groupings that are larger than others. If you feel like you are doing something that is not reflected in the others, stay on your own. Once you have found your group or decide to be solo, relax your body, shake it out, but remember your image!” Most participants swiftly joined with others, while a few took longer, moving from group to group to determine which images reso-nated with their own. One participant decided to remain alone.

In this instruction, I encouraged participants to take their time and look for resonance in theme, emotionality, or aesthetic shape in the other tableaux, allow-ing grouping and data analysis to unfold in a participant-centered way. Participants were asked to partake in the grouping process nonverbally, thus engaging aesthetic, symbolic, and embodied knowledge (Chambon, 2009; Leavy, 2018). I believe it is important to do this without discussion because this allows these other forms of knowledge to be centered; words during this phase can inhibit the creative and kinesthetic impulses.

Next, I invited these smaller groups to use their original images to create a single group tableau together, stating, “Working together, I want you to create one image together that combines each of your individual images into one sculpture which you will eventually show the whole group. How do your tableaux relate to one another? You can use as much or as little of the room as you wish. You have about 5 minutes.” During this phase, groups can either choose to stay silent or discuss with each other in order to create their joint tableaux. In the past, if groups appear stuck, I have provided support by asking questions of the group to inspire their creativity, e.g., “Which of your tableaux belong closest together and which should be further apart?” or “What happens if you stop planning the tableau and instead add your images one at a time without talking?” However, in this study the groups worked steadily and fluidly; no additional support appeared necessary and no groups asked for my assistance.

During this phase, I paid close attention to how the groups created their images (e.g., immediately moving to embodied experimenting, verbally processing before constructing an image together, or deciding on a connecting theme). As Clark and Morriss (2017: 38) indicated, “It is important to understand how the process of creating or producing visual material becomes as important as the product (or what could be termed the ‘data’ itself). Many have drawn on participatory and emancipatory ethos to outline the need to focus on the processes, power-dynamics, negotiations and intentions that go into its production.” There is importance in the gaps, laughter, silences, flow, pace, etc. to the creation and reaction to the various tableaux. Therefore, I took notes on the process of the tableaux creation as part of my data collection (Fraser and MacDougall, 2017).

“Reading” the group tableaux. In this case, I asked for a small group willing to share their tableau first by stepping into the center of the room. I invited the rest of the participants, who were spread out standing around the room, to look at the group’s tableau. This allowed the viewing participants to see the same group tab-leau from a variety of proximities and perspectives, in line with the values of varied and contingent knowledge (Foster et al., 2018; Sajnani, 2012). During this next

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phase of sharing verbal responses, I typically audio record the verbal responses to these tableaux. In this study, I asked, “What do you see? What do you notice? Call out a word or a phrase that comes to mind when you look at this image.” In order to challenge participants to experiment with perspective taking, I then invited participants to, “Move around to another side of the image, or get closer to it or further away. What do you see now? What do you notice?” After moving positions in the room, many participants let out audible sighs or exclaimed “oh!” A large number of new readings poured out from the participants after they changed perspective, deepening the data and analysis. After several of these “readings” of different tableaux, participants appeared to be bolder in their crea-tivity, experimenting more freely with their viewing practices (e.g., crouching down, lying on the ground, standing on a chair). To deepen the embodied reflec-tion, I asked questions such as, “What does it make you feel? Do you notice anything happening in your body? If this image had a title or a caption, what would it be?” I allowed for silence, and asked often “Anything else?” before moving on.

In addition to the group reading, I welcomed the creators of the tableaux to call out any missing words or phrases that they would like included, including addi-tional or divergent “readings” of the image, asking, “Creators, what are we mis-sing?” This varies from many ABR methods where the creators are typically immediately asked to discuss their art and what they intended to create. Instead, I invited the creators to offer additional words or phrases as a form of member-checking only after the group had read and responded to the image. I did this in order for the group participants to more freely convey what they see without the influence of creators, which may have included surprising but resonant connections for the creators.

This process of reading the images served as a collaborative data analysis pro-cess, which allowed for multiple interpretations of the images and did not give all the interpretative power to me as the primary researcher or solely to the creators. This is critical given that “[Art] is an interpretive medium, thus the meanings, or intentions, of the creator and the meanings of the viewer are not always shared” (Foster et al., 2018: 319). This also allowed for co-constructed and polyphonic (two or more independent perspectives co-existing together) meaning, rather than becoming flattened into a singular meaning determined by the creators. This pro-cess also highlighted the relationality of experiences and the co-construction of knowledge, values that I believe are critical to social work practice which takes seriously the collaborative engagement and sharing power between social workers, individuals, and the community. It also tends to generate more collaborative own-ership over the tableaux. In this case, I used the audio-recordings and transcrip-tions of this phase as both a first layer of data analysis and as a member-check to some of my analysis. I coded the transcriptions from this phase and looked for emerging themes, repetitions of phrases, and specifically focused on comparing the participants’ reading of the tableaux with my verbal focus group data and the

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Figure 1. Example of a small group tableau.

tableaux themselves using a process of crystallization (described in more detail in the data analysis section).

In this case example, Figure 1 was created in response to the prompt: “What is the most important role drama therapists play in the schools?” Participants “read” this tableau, calling out “Discovery; curiosity; tenderness; connection; nurturing; come to where they are; supporting; protecting; hiding and seeking; touching; gentle; mystery; willing; meeting; caring; guide?; guide; timidity.” When the crea-tors of the tableau were invited to add if anything was missing from the interpre-tation of the image, one of the creators of the tableau then shared the word “vulnerability.”

Documenting the group tableaux. For research purposes, I have found it helpful to take a picture of each group tableau. I use these pictures as important pieces of data during the data analysis stage and will often publish these pictures alongside participant quotations and analysis from a study so that readers are also able to view the tableaux to gain embodied and aesthetic insight into the research topic.

If this method is being used only to develop the research question and will not be publicly disseminated, I will take a photograph of the creators of the tableau in position. However, if this method is being applied to the data generation phrase and may be included in the dissemination, to protect confidentiality I typically invite viewing participants to replace the creators of the tableau for the

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photograph. Appearing in a photograph heightens the risk of anonymity being compromised; therefore participants are cautioned about this risk as part of the informed consent. In this study, I stated, “We are going to take a picture of this tableau for additional data analysis and possible presentation in articles or confer-ences. To protect your privacy, we will replace members of the original sculpture with volunteer actors. For those willing to be photographed as a volunteer actor, please remember that this will show you have participated in the research project.” In this way, no participants were photographed in the tableaux they created (including in the pictures provided in this article); instead, other participants vol-unteered to appear as an actor in the photographs to reduce participants’ public exposure.

In line with common practice in drama therapy (Emunah, 1994) and Boal’s (1995) Rainbow of Desire techniques (a therapeutic theater method which uses exercises to help participants unpack the relationship between personal and polit-ical issues), I did not ask volunteers to randomly replace participants in the version of the tableaux to be photographed. Instead, I asked volunteers to only replace a person who portrayed with their body position a theme or emotion that the vol-unteer had some connection with. This ensured that the photographed tableau conveyed some of the original emotionality and story portrayed by its creator. I asked, “Who recognizes part of this tableau from their own experience? Who can play this role? If so, come out and replace that person.” I also asked creators to teach the volunteers how to portray the essence of their image by giving them direction and correction. I stated, “Creators, feel free to instruct them. Make sure they’ve got your image as it needs to be.”

Additionally, how the photograph is taken is important; the framing, proximity, angle, perspective, and height matter in terms of conveying meaning to a future audience. Therefore, I asked creators where I should take the photograph from and showed them the picture to ensure it matched their meaning, retaking the photo until the creators felt it represented their work. In this case example, in the first photograph I took, two additional participants appeared in the image background and the face of one is obscured (see Figure 2). Creators consulted on the retaking of this photograph (see Figure 3). You can see that each photo-graph takes on different meaning based on the aesthetic details. This highlights the importance of having the creators give instructions and approve each photograph taken of their tableau. This process of sharing, reading, and documenting was then repeated with each group tableau and additional research prompts.

Closure. Because the creation of embodied tableaux can be an emotional and evocative experience, particularly when creating imagery on difficult subject matter, I always reserve time for a closure activity (see Emunah, 1994 or Sajnani and Johnson, 2014 for detailed closure examples). In this case, I stated, “Imagine in this circle are all the things we discussed or embodied today. Reach in and take one of these pieces out of the circle and hold onto it. If there is anything you need to leave behind, the circle will hold it for you.” This brief imaginal closure activity

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Figure 2. First attempt at documenting a tableau.

was selected to transition the participants out of the research, but closing activities can be verbal or use drama exercises.

Data analysis. As described above, the collaborative data analysis took place during the embodied tableaux method itself. This began when participants engaged in an embodied process of sorting and grouping by moving toward the images that resonated with their own to create group tableaux. Second, the group engaged in collaborative data analysis by answering, “What do you see?” when reading the tableaux (Boal, 1992). In addition, member-checking was conducted by asking the creators of each tableau to add any additional or divergent phrases or themes missing from the group responses during collaborative data analysis. In this way, the role of interpreting and coding an image is not left alone to the researcher, but is engaged with collectively.

Typically ABR methods are used with another form of data, such as interviews or focus groups (Chapman et al., 2017; Copeland and Agosto, 2012; Foster et al., 2018). I would argue that far too often, ABR social work researchers over-rely on this verbal data to interpret the art, without considering what data exist only in the art and what knowledge is stored in the aesthetic choices (Chapman et al., 2017). For example, in this study the participants did not discuss verbally the emotional labor required of them in the schools during the opening verbal focus group;

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Figure 3. Finalized documentation of a tableau after incorporating revisions from the creators.

however, many of the facial expressions (e.g., pained looks on faces), body posi-tions (e.g., body position stretched uncomfortably or crumpled on the ground), and the collaborative data analysis of the tableaux (e.g., “exhausted,” “burned out,” “hopeless”) revealed information about the emotional toll that the therapeu-tic work and the school policies were having on the drama therapists. Therefore, coding practices should include not only coding the transcripts of verbal discus-sions and the participants’ verbal reading of the tableaux, but also of the content and form of the photographed tableaux themselves. It is important to note that interpreting body language does rely on inference, so the possibility of misinter-pretation is a limitation to this method. While I prefer to hand code images, photographs can also be uploaded to software like NVivo or ATLAS.ti.

During the data analysis, I would recommend researchers consider not only analysis of content or themes but also read the aesthetics of the tableaux, including proximity, use of levels, how space is used, facial expressions, center of weight, areas of tension in individual bodies and between bodies, and framing. In addition, I often ask myself, “What do the images make me see, feel, and think? What happens in my body when I view this tableau? What stories or words emerge?” I will compare what I see in these tableaux with the transcripts of the group verbal reading of these same tableaux, asking myself where there is thematic and affectual

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resonance, tension, and overlapping analysis in the group analysis and my own. As in other qualitative methods, I keep a self-reflexive record of how my own positionality shapes my understanding of the data.

When verbal data are also gathered, I recommend the process of “crystallization” (Ellingson, 2009) to explore the relationship between the verbal data and the embodied tableaux data (rather than using the verbal data to try to explain the tableaux). Crystallization intentionally combines two or more forms of qualitative data to allow for multiple, contingent, and embodied readings of research findings. For example, in this study the verbal discussions and tableaux creation were viewed as dialogic and related, but not necessarily the same. Some themes emerged in the embodied process of ABR and verbal reading of the images by participants that were not explicitly articulated in the opening verbal discussion (e.g., the use of arts for creative resistance to neoliberalism were depicted in multiple tableaux and included verbal analysis like “resistance,” “togetherness,” “ferocity”). Other themes were mirrored in both forms of data (e.g., drama therapists as connectors to various school actors). Thus compar-ing and contrasting the verbal and embodied data, both in content and form, is an important part of this work.

Applying embodied tableaux method to various phases of research

Developing a research focus

The embodied tableaux method can be adapted to various stages of the research process. This process can be used when working from a participatory action research model, when research teams are determining an area of inquiry. In this phase, the prompts for tableaux creation would be broader and open-ended. For example, “create an image of an important issue facing youth in Canada” or “create an image of a problem you care about changing in your community.” The embodied tableaux method centers embodied and relational knowledge in the decision-making, and builds in both individual and group processes in deter-mining the research direction. This is particularly helpful when verbal discussions become stuck, circular, or “too heady,” allowing the team to connect with what matters to both themselves and the group. As Bagnoli (2009: 551) argued, art can have a “condensing quality,” which I have found particularly helpful for groups to determine a new line of inquiry.

Data generation

As illustrated above, the embodied tableaux method can generate both individual and group data. Depending on the epistemology and theoretical framing of the research project, investigators can choose to use a single, broad prompt (e.g., create a tableau of the day in the life of a drama therapist working in the

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schools) or to utilize this process with several specific research questions (e.g., create tableaux of the most challenging aspect of working in the schools, the most meaningful aspect of working in the schools, and an image of the “role” you are called to play most often). The process of data generation can be done once, pre- and post- an intervention or experience, or several times over time. Additionally, this process can be done alone as the sole source of data or used in mixed-method studies along with data from interviews, focus groups, and/or other ABR techniques.

Data analysis

As described above, the embodied tableaux method builds in collaborative data analysis through organizing themselves into small groups and during the reading of the images, and member-checking through the additional readings of the tab-leaux provided by the creators. In addition, this method can be used solely during the data analysis phase of a verbal research project. This is inspired by the work of Russell and Diaz (2013) who conducted a grounded theory analysis of verbal interviews, and then asked participants to take photographs to represent the the-oretical codes from the original interview study to offer an additional layer of analysis and aesthetic coding. Rather than asking participants to take photo-graphs, the embodied tableaux method could be used during this analysis phase instead, asking participants to create tableaux to represent each of the major the-oretical codes from the verbal analysis.

Dissemination

When writing up a scholarly article using the embodied tableaux method, the structure of the article follows that of most academic writing (introduction and context; literature review; method; findings; discussion; conclusion and future implications). Specific to the embodied tableaux method, I recommend authors clearly articulate in their methods section at which of the research phase/s the method has been used. In addition, I suggest including a brief description of the embodied tableaux method and specific details about what questions or prompts were used in the tableaux creation, how many tableaux were generated, and wheth-er additional data have been gathered (e.g., verbal focus group data or interviews). Where possible, descriptions of the creation process and photographs of the tab-leaux created should be included in the findings section to allow readers to make their own assessment of the tableaux’s content, themes, and aesthetics. If using the suggested crystallization method of data analysis, the findings section should include a range of data, including verbal interview or focus group quotations, photographs of tableaux, and quotations from participants’ collaborative data analysis. The discussion would include the author’s written analysis of how these data relate to one another and existing scholarship. For an example of

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how to write up a scholarly article using the embodied tableaux method, see Mayor (2019).

In addition to more traditional research dissemination where photographs and descriptions of the tableaux are included in the findings of a study, these tableaux can also be used as an alternative form of knowledge dissemination. For example, live enactments or photographs might be publicly displayed as an art exhibit or an advocacy campaign, and could include titles or readings of the tableaux generated by the research participants and/or by public audience members in an interactive display. With this case example, when I present my findings at conferences and workshops, I include an interactive component where audience members view a tableau and call out answers to: “What do you see? What does it make you feel? What happens in your body?” Audience members regularly reflect that being asked to engage with data in this way increases their level of empathy and interest in the subject matter, aligning with other ABR researchers who argue using art forms in dissemination increases audience connection to the research topic (Ball, 2008; Chambon, 2009; Clover, 2011; Foster et al., 2018).

The descriptions of how to adapt this technique provide a number of sugges-tions for how embodied tableaux might be utilized by other researchers; however, readers are encouraged to adapt and experiment with this form to best match their research topic, social work setting, and needs of participants. The portrayal of this procedure is not meant to be prescriptive, but rather to serve as inspiration for further work. Similarly, Clark and Morriss (2017: 30) suggested, “We do not intend to be prescriptive about what visual research should entail; any individual project will have different and distinct issues for the researcher(s) to think through.”

Ethical considerations

As with all research, there are a number of ethical considerations for using the embodied tableaux method. One of the strengths of ABR methods is the capacity to evoke strong emotions, which can allow for deep sharing, connections among research participants, and rich data generation. However, this also means that participants may experience unexpected emotional responses when participating in art making (Chapman et al., 2017). Thus, researchers must be careful to build in strong scaffolding, including warm-up and closing exercises to help with the con-tainment of strong affect and to reduce the likelihood of participants becoming emotionally overwhelmed. Research questions and prompts for tableaux should be mindfully ordered and paced to become incrementally more evocative. In addition, for those who have experienced harm to their bodies, embodied research methods have the potential to be overly activating; therefore facilitators must pay close attention to the participants’ well-being. When possible, a co-facilitation model can be helpful so that one can provide individualized support if needed. Researchers should also build-in time for verbal or physical processing after the data generation and analysis phases are complete if warranted. Similar to other

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research projects, the informed consent forms might include information about additional mental health or social supports. While in my experience the over-whelming majority of research participants have expressed the liberating and heal-ing outcomes of sharing their experiences through embodied tableaux methods, researchers should be mindful of the emotionality it can evoke. To this end, the research must be clearly structured so that participants understand that they are free to opt out of any step of the embodied tableaux process. In this case example, two participants chose to engage in the reading and analyzing of the tableaux without creating one.

Further, confidentiality can be an issue, particularly if the tableaux are photo-graphed for the purposes of dissemination. As Chapman et al. (2017: 812) highlighted, “Researchers must consider research ethics [with photographs] as vig-ilantly as they would when collecting highly sensitive survey or interview data.” While the solution of volunteer participants is often acceptable for ethics boards and for many participants, researchers should take additional precautions if the research topic is of a sensitive nature or may pose risks to the participants for being associated with the study. In these cases, researchers can provide completely sep-arate actors to pose in the tableaux. However, it should be noted that in either case, a tableau’s meaning and how a wider audience reads it may be altered when new individuals enact a tableau, based on the identities of the participants and actors. Differences in race, age, height, gender presentation, etc. may influence how audiences and researchers read the images. When relevant, efforts should be made for the actors’ identities to reflect the research participants. Alternatively, additional descriptors may need to be provided by the researchers in the dissem-ination phase.

As in all research, it is important to consider the impact of the researcher on the research process. There is no such thing as neutral; for example, how one asks the prompts, how long one allows for the reading of the images, which forms of analysis one includes, and which photographs are selected will all influence the results. Those embarking on this form of research should think carefully about their impact on the work. As Clark and Morriss (2017: 30) argued, “We are advo-cating a deep and thoughtful engagement with the complex issues associated with undertaking visual research, which will need to be contextualized and situated in relation to each research project.”

Some who advocate for the use of the arts can fall into the trap of espousing the “universality of the arts” or imply that the arts are necessarily connected with social justice. Instead, the arts are as embedded in culture, both dominant and marginal, and as any other form of data researchers need to think carefully about the appropriateness of using this particular art form for each population and research topic. Further, Chambon (2009: 220) reminded us that the arts are not necessarily any more collaborative or any less oppressive than other forms of research, writing, “Those of us who are not of the art world may think of art as a free space, which it is not, no more so than social work. Practices of art are just as embedded in institutional regimes and cultural imperatives as are other fields.”

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Similarly, Leavy (2018) asked researchers to consider whether we are colonizing or reproducing stereotypes of our research participants, or if we are providing images and analysis that reflects their complexity and multidimensionality.

Last, how ethical review boards choose to review ABR research varies greatly, and many are not familiar with ABR or embodied methods and take a positivist perspective on research (Pitt, 2014). As Miller’s (2015) article on a photography method pointed out, the review process can delay, significantly alter, or block ABR research designs. Therefore, it may be helpful to include in ethics protocols com-pelling arguments for the value of ABR and embodied methods (e.g., differences between verbal and aesthetic knowledge; alignment of participatory research with social work as discipline and social justice principles; the unique data that embod-ied methods can elicit). Educating review boards about the precedent and impor-tance of these research designs may facilitate a smoother process (Miller, 2015; Wiles et al., 2012). In order to expand the potential of ABR in social work, more writing is needed on ethical review board gatekeeping of ABR studies, including preemptive education strategies, common concerns, and methods for addressing these worries.

Conclusion

The embodied tableaux method described in this article demonstrates how a single ABR research method can be adapted and applied at each of the research phases depending on the research participants and overall design. This method can be applied to a range of populations and its clear steps, adaptability, and resource-low qualities make it suitable for novice ABR researchers. This method holds promise for researchers in uncovering embodied, relational, and aesthetic understanding of social work issues.

Arts-based social work research offers, as Leavy (2018) showed, an alternative form of knowledge and a way of lifting up and listening to marginalized voices and experiences. It also provides another way to conduct research that does not con-form to the increasing view in the academy that “evidence-based” research is exclusively limited to post-positivist epistemologies and quantitative paradigms. In order for this potential to be realized, there is a need for researchers to detail their ABR procedures in order to demystify their practices and for others to con-sider utilizing arts-based methods. As Battacharya (2013: 625) argued, “If quali-tative researchers want to inform their work with arts-based approaches, fertile spaces of discussion need to be opened up for methodologies, data analysis, and representations of the intersections of these two disciplines.” It is my hope that this article, and others like it in social work (e.g., Chapman et al., 2017; Foster et al., 2018; Russell and Diaz, 2013) will begin to fill this gap and serve as a model for others to provide more detailed ABR methodological procedures, possible appli-cations, and ethical considerations for doing work that deepens social work’s knowledge base.

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