

Use of Arts among Single Mothers in Taiwan: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Research Study

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Abstract

Use of art-painting, literary works, poetry, music and film—as expressions of life have the potential to explain the everyday world of human beings. The aim of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore the lived world of 15 single mothers in Taiwan through the processes of in-depth semi-structured interviews and the use of art work. Van Manen (1997)'s analysis was used for data analysis. In addition to using interviews as the traditional method of data gathering, we also included art work as representations of participants' lived experience of the phenomenon. The inclusion of art work provided a rich repository of information that not only complemented the interview data (by adding a different dimension to the participants' experiences of the phenomenon of being a single mother in Taiwan), but also lent support for the use of art work in human science research.

Keywords: Works of art; The Arts; Depression; Single mothers; Culture Differences

Introduction

The use of artwork - painting, literary works, poetry, music and photography - as modes of sharing personal experiences in research has been given little credence over the years with the exception of Arts-based Research [1,2]. However, more recently the inclusion of art work as an information source in qualitative research is gaining acceptance. The inclusion of art work as a knowledge source for researchers however, is dependent on the ontological position of the one conducting the research and the type of knowledge (epistemology) the researcher wishes to generate.

The epistemological aim of the inquiry therefore, provides a pathway for legitimate knowledge development which can advance understanding of a phenomenon. The central imperative in taking a particular philosophical or theoretical stance is therefore, to generate knowledge that is consistent with the intent of the inquiry. Such an imperative is predicated on the belief that the chosen modes of information gathering provide the best means by which the phenomenal world of human beings can be accessed and understood.

For the authors of this paper, works of art as 'expressions of life' provide such a means of conveying the everyday world of human beings. By expressions of life, the research study could start to help people share their experiences from their life from the image world and express in personally significant ways through which understanding of lived experience can be gained [3]. In other words, works of art as expressions of life are a conduit for expressing personal reality. Use of art suggests Gadamer has both the ability to speak out at a personal level, and it powerfully expresses all the life materials into

the readers' hearts. Use of art help the participants finding a way to speak the things a person needs to say through reflective action [4]. Thus, the use of art work as a mode of information gathering is consistent with a phenomenological approach to inquiry in which the primary focus is on exploring and explicating the everyday world of human experience.

Several phenomenological research studies have utilized works of art to express the essential meanings of people's experiences. Welch utilized paintings, poetry, and music to express the meaning of human experience and found that "such expressions of life provide insight into the ontological world of humans as they construct a personal reality amid the ebb and flow of daily living." (p.55). Edward included several Australian paintings in her phenomenological study to depict her reflections of the participants' experiences. The purpose of this study was to understand the single mothers' experiences. Use of art did a good way to express their lived experiences.

Rationale for the inclusion of art (painting and photography)

The rationale for including works of art (in this case painting and photography) in this study was to provide a complementary and/or alternative means of accessing the lived world of participants who may not be able to express their experiences solely in everyday language and where, through the process of translation (as this study was conducted in both English and Chinese) the essential meaning of the participants' experiences could be lost. Having two forms of data collection as in interviews and the use of art work could reduce the loss of essential information and can contribute additional information not shared in interviews.

Aim

The aim of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore the lived world of single mothers in Taiwan through the processes of in-depth semi-structured interviews and the use of art work (in the case of this study paintings and photos as representations of lived experience).

Review of Literature

During the past three decades the number of one-parent families headed by women has substantially increased worldwide. Studies by McHugh and Miller and Weston and Hughes found that single mothers are emerging as new sub-strata of societies. In an attempt to identify the reasons for such a growing phenomenon and the potential impact on the mother and her child/children, there has been increasing interest in exploring this phenomenon. Several studies (both quantitative and qualitative) concerning single mothers have been located which examine various issues such as achieving a work-life balance between being employed and caring for children [5], attempting to meet multiple role demands that normally would have been shared by the marital partner [6-8], the need for personal leisure [9] parenting pressures [10,11], socio-economic disadvantage, psychological distress, and the development of mental illness in single mothers [12-16], depression, low self-esteem, everyday stressors, and sexual abuse in childhood [17,18].

Several studies in Taiwan concern single mothers. For example, Chen conducted a Grounded Theory study on the recovery process of five never-married single mothers. The study was conducted against the background of a society that continues to view single mothers as amoral despite change in community attitudes. The findings of Chen's study suggest that once single women become pregnant, their preference is to remain single despite social and financial pressures to marry. Chou's Grounded Theory study of 10 never-married single mothers aged 15 to 20 years further explored the experiences of becoming a mother. The findings suggest that well-educated widowed single mothers were more likely to access social welfare support than those with limited education or, who had never married. Tsai's study of 12 single mothers and their housing needs in Taiwan found that the participants elected for low-income housing – housing that was affordable – to ensure their stability of accommodation, access to social welfare, and time to spend with their children. However, living in low-cost housing was found to have its own set of problems, not the least of which was safety. The findings of Lai's study which explored the motherhood experience from the perspective of five single mothers in Taiwan found that strong parent-child relationship was a catalyst for both mother and child to move forward in reconstructing a new life. However, no studies were found that explored the everyday world

of single mothers in Taiwan using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to inquiry.

Study Design

Hermeneutic phenomenology based on a Heideggerian approach to inquiry was used for this study. Hermeneutics within the context of this study was chosen as a perspectival lens through what Heidegger describes as the pathway to understanding one's humanness and life situation as lived out in daily life. Heidegger argued that hermeneutics is a fundamental element of human existence. His approach to phenomenology which primarily followed the hermeneutic (interpretive) tradition underpinned by existentialism which held as its central tenet the 'here and now' of personal experience, posited that an understanding of the everyday lifeworld of human beings can only be achieved by 'being in the world' in the way human beings exist. van Manen (1997) supports Heidegger's position by suggesting that human beings are continually engaged in an ongoing process of interpretation in order to make meaningful sense of the world in which they live. The inclusion of art (painting/photography in this instance) as modes of information gathering was based on the need to provide participants with a complementary additional mode of expression through which to convey their experiences of being a single mother in Taiwan.

Ethics Approval

Ethics approval from each of the facilities (Elementary School; Women & Children Safekeeping of Security Association and The Garden of Hope Foundation) to conduct this research was obtained. Approval from the University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) was obtained prior to the commencement of the study.

The following research question informed this: What is the lived experience of being a single mother in Taiwan?

Method

Participants

There were 15 individual participants between 33 and 53 years of age, who were single mothers residing in Taiwan, willing to share their experiences of being a single mother, and who had 1-3 children aged 2-16 years. The participants had been a single mother for periods ranging from 1 to 11 years. Most of the participants had completed either junior or senior high school. A few of the participants were college or university graduates. Among these participants, 10 of the 15 indicated that they had experienced mental illness in recent years (Table 1).

Name	Age	Children	Marital (Divorce, Widow, Unmarried)	Years of being a sole mother	Illness (Self-Report; See a doctor)
A	33	2	1 D	3	Self-report: Depression
B	40	1	1 D	4	No
C	37	2	1 D	6	Diagnosed: Depression

D	43	2	1D	11	Diagnosed: Depression
E	43	2	2 D	8	Diagnosed: Breast Ca; Depression; Suicide
F	43	2	1 W	3	Self-report: Depression
G	44	2	1 D	7	Diagnosed: Depression
H	48	2	1 D	4	Child want to suicide
I	41	2	1 D	8	Suicide
J	36	1	1 D	6	Diagnosed: Obsessive-Compulsive disorder; Major depression
K	38	3	1W	2	Self-report: Depression/ Delusion
L	53	3	2 D	11	Self-report: Depression
M	33	1	1 D	3	Diagnosed: Depression, Child has developmental delay
N	38	1	1 D	3	No
O	42	2	1 D 1 U	1	No

Table 1: Participants' Information

Recruitment of Participants

All participants were accessed through four single mother support groups, three of which, were attached to the Taiwan Women's Development Association operating in different municipalities in Taiwan. The fourth is being the Single Mothers Network Blog website. Contact was initially made with the Director of each of the three municipal services to seek permission to access the support groups, while an advertisement was placed on the Single Mothers Blog website inviting interested mothers. All participants were willing to use of arts to express their feelings of thoughts and being a single mother's experience.

Data Collection

Participants were required to be involved in two face-to face in-depth unstructured audio-taped interviews. The first interview was to provide the participants an opportunity to describe their experiences of being a single mother. The focus of the second interview was to provide an opportunity for participants to share a work of art that captured for them the essential nature of their experience. This second interview time for presentation of their chosen piece of art allowed participants time for quiet reflection on their experiences and to consider the most appropriate piece of art work that reflected to them the essential nature of what it meant to be a sole mother in Taiwan. In respect of the fifteen participants discussed in this paper the art forms were painting and photography.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was undertaken following principles identified by Greatrex-White and van Manen. Audio-taped interviews were transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were read several times to become intimate with each single mother's account. Art was used at the second time of data collection. The researcher asked the participants bring one piece of art (photo/painting/poem/movie) to the interview and express their meanings. Significant phrases were extracted relating to the phenomenon of being a single mother and meanings formulated. Formulated meanings were clustered into themes. Themes were continually compared with and across transcripts, noting similarities and differences.

Data analysis was undertaken using three core processes of the hermeneutic approach: Dwelling with the text in search of the meaning of the phenomenon under study; Interpreting the words, phrases, sentences of the interview texts and the descriptions of the art work presented by participants; Synthesizing the ideas into a formal presentation of research findings [19].

Findings

The analysis of the complete study revealed seven core themes. However, for the purpose of this paper which is concerned with positioning works of art as an appropriate and complementary method of data collection to the traditional phenomenological interview, three core themes are presented using the data from fifteen

participants. These are: Survival means living day-by-day, Feeling alone and lonely, Transcending difficult times through being resilient.

Theme 1: Survival means living day-by-day (N=10)

Participant description

I am constantly on the move, always busy with no time to stop and take stock...being caught up in a frenzy of activities...as a single mother you have to put yourself last...there is no time to rest...it would be good to focus on one task at a time.

Researcher interpretation

Daily living for this participant was an unrelenting disquieting struggle to make ends meet amid the constant discordant array of necessary activities. The need for personal respite was denied as the needs of others took priority.

Presentation of art work

This participant when asked what was the piece of art work which best reflected her experience of being a single mother produced the painting titled Purgatory. When asked to describe to the researcher the meaning of the painting she provided the following description:

I constantly feel physically and emotionally exhausted...like the painting I just want to curl up, rest, and let everything go away...I have no energy to continue. When asked to talk about what the colours represented or whether they had any significance she replied: The Black Represents the Ever Present Thought That You Might Fail and Be Consumed by The Darkness While The Red And the White Centers Represent Feelings of Being Overwhelmed. The Woman in The Fetal Position is Me Needing to Hold Myself Together in Order to Survive.

Researcher Interpretation

Everyday life for the participant was one of tenuous survival. Self-doubt and fear of failure were constant antagonists. The will to survive was the point of resistance to being consumed by the vicissitudes of living day-by-day.

Synthesized interpretation

Daily living for this participant was an unrelenting disquieting struggle to make ends meet amid the constant discordant array of necessary activities. The need for personal respite was denied as the needs of others took priority. Everyday life for the participant was one of tenuous survival. Self-doubt and fear of failure were constant antagonists. The will to survive provided a point of resistance to being consumed by the vicissitudes of living day-by-day.

Theme 2: Feeling lonely and alone (N=15)

Participant description

I just wanted to be in the dark, the darker the better. I didn't want to socialize with anyone. I felt ashamed and disappointed with how my life had turned out. After receiving a phone call from a friend, I felt sick inside for I knew that my best [and only] friend had betrayed my

confidence. From that point on I began to believe that I couldn't trust anyone. That was the worst period of my life.

Researcher Interpretation

Feeling lonely and alone for this participant was at times a tortuous experience fuelled by personal shame and betrayal leading to feelings of mistrust and self-imposed isolation which only served to increase her sense of loneliness.

Presentation of art work

The participant when asked to share her thoughts about what the painting represented to her about her experiences of being a single mother stated:

The picture has much to say about what being lonely is like. No one understands the pain of being by oneself, being let down with no one to trust. Wanting to be with others but too afraid to. The woman has her back to the viewer so you cannot see her misery, her pain, her shame. The hills in the distance represent how life is for me, dark and uncertain. The colours of the painting with its different shades of grey and black represent my state of mind – depressed.

Researcher interpretation

Being lonely and alone involves personal anguish and hurt at feeling betrayed by significant others. Self-imposed isolation as a means of self-protection escalated a sense of disconnection from friends while uncertainty about how to reengage with others surfaces feelings of depression.

Synthesized interpretation

Feeling lonely and alone was at times a tortuous experience fuelled by personal shame and betrayal leading to feelings of mistrust and self-imposed isolation which only served to increase a personal sense of loneliness. Personal anguish and hurt surfaced at feeling betrayed by significant others. Self-imposed isolation as a means of self-protection escalated a sense of disconnection from friends while uncertainty about how to reengage with others surfaced feelings of depression.

Theme 3: Transcending difficult times through being resilient (N=13)

Participant description

I feel that depression is a very terrible thing to live with. I still feel terrible now when I think about the past. I was in pain at that time as a sole mother. Everything in the world looked black and hopeless. However, I have been able to work through those difficult times. That was the past. I never want to return to feeling that way...Faith in God was what kept me going without which I would not have survived...I feel the future will be much kinder to me.

Researcher interpretation

Transcending difficult times involved finding the strength to overcome daily challenges through faith in God, choosing to move forward with personal resolve never to revisit the past and to look at the future with hopeful expectancy.

Presentation of art

The art piece chosen by this participant as a representation of her experience of being a single mother was that of a photo of grass. When asked to share her thoughts about the image the participant stated:

Grass is strong and flexible. It can resist such things as the Sun, Typhoons, and even draught. I am like a blade of grass. I am strong and flexible. At times I know I need to bend and nearly break but not quite. I am able to bounce back from difficult situations which have been many.

Researcher interpretation

Transcending difficult times involved taking a stance while being able to bend with the ebb and flow of daily life. Being open and willing to adapt to each situation without compromising self.

Synthesized interpretation

Transcending difficult times involved finding the strength to overcome daily challenges through faith in God, choosing to move

forward with personal resolve never to revisit the past and to look at the future with hopeful expectancy. It involves taking a stance while being able to bend with the ebb and flow of daily life and being open and willing to adapt to each situation without compromising oneself.

Discussion

In this study the inclusion of two forms of data – interviews and works of art were used as modes of data collection and analysis. As previously mentioned, the inclusion of works of art (painting/ photography in this instance) as modes of data gathering was based on the need to provide participants with a complementary additional mode of expression through which to convey their experiences of being a single mother in Taiwan. The inclusion of the two data sources not only resulted in validation of the findings from the participants' interview transcripts but also contributed to explicating new perspectives of the life world of the fifteen single mothers discussed in this paper and represented in Table 2.

Theme 1: Survival means living day-by-day		
Unique to interview	Common to both	Unique to art the modalities
1. The need to put self last	Always busy and no time to stop and rest.	1.Wanting everything go away
	Caught in a frenzy	2.Fearing failure
		3.Needing to hold self together
Theme 2: Feeling lonely and alone		
Unique to interview	Common to both	Unique to the art modalities
1. Feeling ashamed	Feeling disappointed	1. Feeling no one understands
	Feeling betrayed	2. Wanting to be with others but afraid to
	Unable to trust	3. Living with uncertainty
	Not wanting to socialize	Feeling depressed
Theme 3: Transcending difficult times through being resilient		
Unique to interview	Common to both	Unique to the art modalities
1.Not wanting to return to the past	Work through difficult times	1.Being flexible
2.Having faith in God	Being strong in the face of adversity	2.Prepared to bend but not break
3.Having a positive view of the future		3.Able to bounce back from difficult situations

Table 2: World of the fifteen single mothers

The shared or common experiences identified in both participant interviews and the art representations was a point of conformation that what the participants' shared in the context of their respective interviews were substantiated in their presentation and description of their piece of art work. Having the findings of interviews confirmed in this manner (although this was not the original intention of including art modalities) provided addition support to the interview and analysis processes. However, the additional data provided by the inclusion of the participants' use of painting and photography as a vehicle to further convey their experiences of being a single mother in Taiwan

provided not only new insights but were points of qualification that had not been achieved through the first interview. Three examples are provided:

In Theme 1

Survival means living day-by-day, the analysis of interview identified that the participant expressed the need to put herself last however, in describing her chosen painting she talked about the need to hold herself together. These ideas can be seen as being juxtaposed which introduces a level of tension to the participant's experiences of

trying to survive which would not have been identified by the researcher simply on the basis of interview.

In Theme 2

Feeling lonely and alone, the participant described that she felt ashamed, betrayed, unable to trust, and not wanting to socialize. Each of these descriptions were explicated from the first interview and restated when the participant described the significance of the painting brought by her to the second interview. However, at the second interview the participant used the painting to describe the tension she experienced at not wanting to socialize because of feeling ashamed and betrayed at the same time yearning to be with others.

For each of the participants the experience of feeling lonely and alone engendered thoughts of being a boat alone on the sea, having to do everything on their own, going unnoticed by others, and feeling isolated. The participants brought the photos or paintings and described their feelings of lonely and alone. The participant's description of the tension of wanting not-wanting to be with others introduced the paradoxical nature of such an experience otherwise not explicated in the interview. From a research perspective, a number of studies concerning single mothers were located which identified loneliness as part of their experiences. However, none of them conducted using arts to express their lonely and alone experiences of being a single mother.

A further example can be found in Theme 3

Transcending difficult times through being resilient. Resilience is a way an individual responds to adversity, demonstrates elasticity in a difficult situation, and maintain a positive outlook on life [Wu, 2006]. Within the context of the interview, the participant made mention of the importance of being strong in the face of adversity without any further qualification even when prompted by the researcher; however, at the second interview where the participant presented a photograph of grass, points of qualification emerges as she described the meaning of the photograph in relation to being strong. The notion of being strong in the face of adversity was initially seen by the researcher as the participant being resolute and uncompromising in pushing ahead despite continuing difficulties; however, the information shared by the participant through the use of the photograph provided an additional dimension to what constituted for the participant being strong, that of being able to be flexible, to bend but not break and to move with the ebb and flow of daily life.

Each of these examples provides an illustration of the potential contribution the use of art work can make to enhancing the exploration of phenomena beyond the traditional interview process.

Conclusion

Works of art, in respect to this paper, painting and photography, have the capacity to provide an additional pathway to data collection beyond personal description as in interviews. The ability of works of art to be a conduit for expressions of life is well supported. The use of works of art as expressions and representations of a person's lived world within a phenomenological study provide a complementary adjunct to data collection and analysis. This paper provides an important discussion about how the use of art forms can be a source of rich data that adds to, and expands on data gathered through the use of interviews alone. The use of art work can provide a unique

conceptual lens through which new illuminations of what it means to be human can be explicated.

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