

Using art therapy to address the protective false self when working with queer identity

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Bio

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Abstract

The exploration of one's queer identity can prove significant for queer-identifying people. A result of exploring the multiple layers and aspects of queerness that comprise one's identity is being able to engage in society from the perspective of one's most authentic self, or as psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott termed it, the 'true self'. In this paper, I contend that for a queer person to explore their identity, they must first address their protective 'false self', the self that develops from having to comply with the external world. I draw on findings from my dissertation study, which used qualitative methodologies, of an eight-session group art therapy intervention for queer-identifying individuals that aimed to determine whether art therapy can be used to foster self-acceptance. Each session resulted in the creation of an artwork followed by a discussion prompted by the artworks. Many artworks featured bodies and parts of bodies as representations of self and revealed an ambivalence between the true self that wanted to be witnessed and the false self that wanted to conceal the true self. One of the core findings from my dissertation was that the false self only began emerging into the consciousness of the participants at the end of the intervention. In this article, I focus on the artworks created by two participants who attended the group most regularly and tracked the false self in their artworks. This paper argues that there is value in the false self's protective function as a defence mechanism for the

queer population and concludes by highlighting the importance of making visible the false self, through art therapy, before exploring the multiple layers of queer identity.

Keywords: Art therapy, creative arts, false self, group art therapy, LGBTQIA+, queer identity

Introduction

A better understanding of queer¹ identity and the various aspects of a queer person's identity can be gained as definitions, theories, and concepts around sexual orientation,² gender identity,³ and gender expression⁴ continue to expand. Identity holds a significant place in the queer community. It is a defining trait that expresses who these individuals are and "impacts how they experience the world around them" (Wiggins, 2018, p. 13). Research shows that identity issues are prevalent in the queer community and can often have a negative impact on mental health (Nel, Rich & Joubert 2007; Pelton-Sweet & Sherry 2008; McWilliam et al., 2019; Mongelli et al., 2019). It thus becomes important to consider the effects of exploring identity for queer people.

Much of the negative associations that sit with queer identity develop from cis-heteronormative societal oppression and rejection of queerness, thus perpetuating a negative development of self-image. Queer individuals are faced with trying to exist in a society that rejects their most authentic self, a self that Winnicott (1965, p. 140) termed the 'true self'. The question then arises, how is it possible for a queer person to engage with, be curious about

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- 1 Fassinger and Arseneau (2007, p. 23) describe the term 'queer' as a "pan-descriptive term that embodies defiance of existing norms about gender and sexuality". In the essence of this description, throughout this paper I will use the term 'queer' as an umbrella term for those who ascribe to being part of the LGBTQIA+ community.
 - 2 The Human Rights Campaign (2022) website defines sexual orientation as "An inherent or immutable enduring emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction to other people. Note: an individual's sexual orientation is independent of their gender identity".
 - 3 The Human Rights Campaign (2022) describes gender identity as "One's innermost concept of self as male, female, a blend of both or neither – how individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves. One's gender identity can be the same or different from their sex assigned at birth".
 - 4 The Human Rights Campaign (2022) defines gender expression as "External appearance of one's gender identity, usually expressed through behaviour, clothing, body characteristics or voice, and which may or may not conform to socially defined behaviours and characteristics typically associated with being either masculine or feminine".

and move towards an authentic self when the authentic self is branded as sinful, criminal, and a sickness (Smart, 1989, p. 383).

Literature review

To exist in this society, a ‘false self’ develops, a self that is borne out of the need to protect the true self by presenting a self that is deemed compliant within cis-heteronormative societal standards (Winnicott, 1965, p. 140). In attempting to present a version of the self that appears to be assimilated into these societal norms, the false self plays the role of a defence mechanism,⁵ attempting to protect the true self by masking it. Carl Rogers (Maynard, 2022, p. 189) suggests that “part of the process of ‘becoming’ is in being supported to gradually drop the mask that was adopted. This work cannot be done until the client themselves understands the need for the mask”. The idea of masking or letting the false self play a role in avoiding or subjugating distressing feelings and experiences is common with queer identity. In my dissertation, this was reflected and became a significant finding that led me to develop this article, despite the fact that neither I nor the participants discussed the idea of the false self during the group sessions; it was only after examining the artworks at the end of the eight-session intervention that I realized its significance. Butler and Astbury (2008, p. 225) refer to ‘repairing’ as a defence mechanism used by queer individuals, explaining it as “an attempt to undo one’s individual make-up by appearing heterosexual (straight acting and behaviour modification)”. This is an indication of the role that the false self plays as a coping tool, providing some insight into why the false self develops so strongly for queer individuals and thus why it is so important to acknowledge and understand its role in relation to queer identity.

Criticism of Winnicott’s theory of true self and false self in relation to queer identity may stem from its outdated and perceived dichotomous nature,⁶ overlooking the complexity and fluidity of queer experiences.

5 Walker and McCabe (2020, p. 42) define defence mechanisms as “an unconscious psychological strategy, with or without resulting behaviour, which aims to reduce or eliminate anxiety arising from unacceptable or potentially harmful stimuli” and that “Defence mechanisms protect the mind, self and/or ego from perceived negative consequences, and provide protection”.

6 I say “perceived dichotomous nature” as I believe that the true self and false self are only dichotomous in the language (true and false) and not in the concepts. In my perspective the false self is not in opposition to the true self but in protection of it. It is a part of the self that develops to protect the true self, not to oppose it.

However, it offers insights into how individuals navigate societal expectations and develop adaptive personas. Despite its limitations, Winnicott's theory can foster discussions on how queer individuals negotiate their identities within societal norms, contributing to ongoing conversations about authenticity, self-expression, and identity.

Much of the early literature about queer identity was dominated by stage model theories that suggested that queer-identifying individuals worked their way through stages in the development of their identity (Troiden, 1989; Cass, 1984; Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Eliason & Schope, 2007). Emphasis was placed on trying to understand how a queer identity develops and the processes that a queer person might experience as they move towards accepting their queerness. More recent literature has shifted away from thinking of queer identity as a linear process that ends with acceptance. Instead, studies explore the role of mental health practitioners in working with queer individuals, as a continuum. The exploration emphasises the importance of accepting the layers within queer identity and acknowledging the lack of training or good enough training when working with this population (McWilliam et al., 2019, p. 9, 15).

It is seldom discussed that queer people may have defence mechanisms in place when exploring their identity. Winnicott's concept of the true self and false self is engaged with in some of the literature about queer identity (Ehrensaft, 2012; Hansbury & Bennett, 2014; Wiggins, 2018; Qushua & Ostler, 2018; Bojarski & Qayyum, 2018). However, there is a gap in the literature investigating the importance of bringing the defence mechanisms into consciousness to be able to explore all parts of a person's authentic queer identity.

The purpose of this study, thus, is to consider the importance of defence mechanisms that are in place for queer people when exploring their identity and will specifically look at the concept of Winnicott's false self as a protective defence mechanism. This article draws on research conducted for my master's thesis, in which I used an eight-session group art therapy intervention for queer-identifying individuals. The intervention aimed to determine whether art therapy can be used to foster self-acceptance in queer people by exploring the theme of difference in queer identity. This article focuses on the most important learning I gained from facilitating that intervention, recognising the importance of the false self.

As someone who identifies as queer, I recognise that my personal experiences and perspectives may introduce a potential research bias.⁷ I also understand the significance of my own experiences and identity in conducting research on this topic. By being a member of the queer community, I can offer unique insights that can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of other queer individuals. I believe in the importance of recognising both the research participants and the researcher as experts by experience. Placing value on the knowledge and insights of all individuals involved in the research process ensures that the lived experiences and perspectives of queer individuals are authentically represented in the research findings.

Methods

Background

At the time of writing this article, I am registered as a student at the University of Johannesburg where I am completing my master's degree in art therapy. A component of this degree is to gain practical experience through interning as a student art therapist at placement sites. In the first year of my master's my placement site was Lefika La Phodiso – Community Art Counselling & Training Institute,⁸ a non-profit organisation based in Johannesburg. Funding for the project that informed my dissertation was provided through Lefika. In the funding proposal, the establishment of a queer mental health support group was listed as one of the objectives. Although Lefika has an extensive history of running arts-based therapeutic groups, this was their first venture into

7 Reflexivity is crucial when acknowledging my research bias, particularly when examining the experiences of participants related to their queer identities. As a researcher who identifies as queer, I recognize the potential for projecting my own personal journey and biases onto the participants and the research process. It is important to continuously reflect on how my perspectives, assumptions, and experiences may influence the way I interpret and understand the data. By actively engaging in reflexivity, I aim to remain open, self-aware, and attentive to the diverse range of experiences and perspectives of the participants, while also acknowledging and managing my own subjectivity to ensure the integrity and fairness of the research.

8 Lefika La Phodiso – Community Art Counselling & Training Institute is a non-profit organisation that offers group arts-based mental health services for children of various ages as after-school programmes and training in community art counselling (about us – Lefika La Phodiso, 2023). As recent as 2021, the organisation introduced a low/no cost clinic, making individual counselling and therapy part of the offerings available.

running an art therapy group for queer people. The number of participants (maximum of ten) and number of sessions (eight hour-and-a-half sessions) was pre-determined by the funding requirements outlined by the organisation.

Research design

This study used qualitative research methodologies, drawing elements from action research and Most Significant Change (MSC).⁹ Although MSC was part of the methodologies used for my study, I will focus on action research as it played the most significant role in the findings and learnings that I will present in this article. The methodologies I used place the research participants as co-researchers and holders of knowledge. Considering the multi-faceted nature of queer identity, it was important not to homogenise these experiences but instead to witness and learn from them to find commonalities and shared experiences.

Action research and the link to art therapy

The action research methodology is a “systemic inquiry that is collective, collaborative, self-reflective, critical and undertaken by participants in the inquiry” (McCutcheon & Jung, 1990, p. 148) and follows the procedures of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. These elements informed the procedure and structure of the art therapy process, which will be outlined in more detail below.

The art therapy training that I received is grounded in psychoanalysis.¹⁰ This methodology lends itself well to psychoanalytically based art therapy. It requires collaborative, self-reflective inquiry of the participants and researchers and emphasises learning, discovering, and growing through self-reflection. Furthermore, part of the foundation of the therapeutic encounter places importance on inter-relational engagement between the therapist and client (and in art therapy, between the art therapist, client, and artwork). These aspects are grounded within the methodology that encourages collaborative

9 The MSC method is a participatory technique that involves “the regular collection and participatory interpretation of “stories” about change rather than predetermined quantitative indicators” that are discussed, analysed, and recorded (Dart & Davies, 2003, p. 137).

10 A psychoanalytic approach form of therapy that uses self-examination to uncover thoughts, feelings, desires, and memories that are unconscious (Cherry, 2006).

participation and co-production. There is thus an alignment between the methodology and psychodynamically informed art therapy.

Participants

As this study involved working with participants, ethical clearance from the University of Johannesburg Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee (Ethical Clearance Number: Sem 2-2022-010) was obtained before the group started.

Group members were recruited through purposive sampling to ensure that the following criteria were met: (a) the participant should identify as queer, this included any variation of sexual orientation and gender identity, (b) participant should be 18 years or older, and (c) participant has an expressed interest and curiosity about exploring all or parts of their queer identity. There was no prerequisite that participants had to have experience with art, artmaking, or art therapy.

Several organisations that work with the queer community were approached. An email was sent to each organisation that explained the purpose and aim of the group and encouraged the organisation to share the invitation to participate in this study with any queer individuals that accessed their services. Posters advertising the research study and group were also placed in a tertiary institute. The group was given the name Rainbow Rising.¹¹

Seven participants showed interest in joining the group. Of these, five joined the group when it started. Two participants attended the sessions regularly, attending six of the eight sessions each. I refer to them as Participant 1 and Participant 2. Participant 3 dropped out of the group after the first session, and Participant 4 dropped out of the group due to work commitments after the second session. One participant chose not to partake in the study.

At the time, Participant 1 identified as cis-gender and lesbian, used the chosen pronouns she/her, and was a postgraduate student at a tertiary institute. At the time, Participant 2 identified as cis-gender and exploring their identity and sexuality, used the chosen pronouns she/her, and was a second-

11 The name Rainbow Rising is one that I came up with when conceptualising a community and arts-based counselling group for queer people in 2012 as part of an assignment when completing a course offered by Lefika La Phodiso. The outcome for students of this assignment, which formed part of the social entrepreneurship module of the course, was to be able to develop project proposals.

year student at a different tertiary institute from Participant 1. At the time, Participant 3 chose not to disclose their gender and sexual identity. At the time, Participant 4 identified as non-binary, used the chosen pronouns they/ them and worked for an organisation that specifically supported queer-based projects. None of the participants had met or known each other outside of this group.

Procedures

Interested participants were initially invited to join an information session prior to joining the group. A week later, the Rainbow Rising group started and ran for eight consecutive weeks. The physical space used for these sessions was the art studio at Lefika. I was physically in the art studio for all sessions and conducted the hybrid sessions from this space.

Information session

The hour-long information session took place online via videoconferencing. Three potential participants attend the introduction session virtually. The information session provided information about art therapy, the research study, and what it would entail. Therefore, the potential participants could make an informed decision about whether they would want to commit to being part of the group. They were given an outline of what would be required of them if they chose to participate in the research study, and informed consent and ethical clearance were discussed. Of the three information session attendees, only one chose to join the group.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, online and hybrid sessions became more common. Originally, sessions were not conceptualised to be online. However, this changed as most of the potential participants indicated they would not be able to attend the session physically but would want to attend online if possible. Thus, the information session and main sessions were adapted and became hybrid sessions in which participants were invited to attend physically or virtually. While this provided increased access to some individuals, it also limited access for those who lacked access to the necessary technology or reliable internet connection.

Main sessions

In Session 1, the group created a living group contract in which they responded to the question: *What do we need from one another to feel safe when engaging with each other in this group?* This was called a living group contract as the group members were encouraged to revisit, add, and edit the contract throughout the eight sessions if the need arose to respond to the group needs to ensure their sense of safety. We discussed the purpose of artmaking in an art therapy group, emphasising its role as a form of expression that could hold conscious and unconscious communication within the medium and imagery used.

The structure of each session was determined by the methodologies used for the research study. In line with action research (Altrichter et al., 2002) the sessions followed the structure of planning, observing, acting, and reflecting. Thus, for each session, the group would check in using a feeling wheel¹² (observing and reflecting), discuss the opening theme (acting), create an artwork in response to their discussion (acting and reflecting), and reflect on their artwork (observing and reflecting). Thus, they determined a theme for the following session by responding to their artwork-reflection discussion (planning). At the end of the session, they would check out using the feeling wheel (observing and reflecting). Using the feeling wheel at the beginning and end of each session provided a contained way to start and end the session. The feeling wheel acted as a monitoring tool for changes in the emotional states of each group member.

The last two sessions differed slightly in that the artmaking process was guided by a directive that I introduced instead of the group creating art in response to their discussion. The Most Significant Change methodology led the directive, and I asked the group to create an artwork that captured their stories about their journey with the group (in Session 7) and their journey with their identity (in Session 8). Along with their artwork, they were encouraged to write their stories and share them verbally with the rest of the group. Artworks created by the participant who attended virtually were shared electronically, and I could download them with their consent. In cases where

12 A feeling wheel is a visual tool that helps individuals identify and articulate their emotions. It is designed as a circular diagram that categorizes emotions into different layers or levels. The innermost layer typically contains basic or primary emotions, such as happiness, sadness, anger, fear, and surprise. As you move towards the outside of the wheel, the emotions become more nuanced and specific. The wheel allows individuals to pinpoint their emotional state by visually exploring the different layers and selecting the emotions that resonate with them.

the participants were in the physical environment, I received consent to take photographs of their artwork.

Data collection and results

Data that was collected and that informs the results of this study include the following sources: (1) the artworks that the participants created during each session, (2) the shared discussions about the artworks that were created, and (3) the session reports that I wrote at the end of every session. The artworks are analysed through a psychodynamically informed art therapy lens.¹³

Results

Through the data collected, the theme that emerged most strongly was the depiction of bodies or parts of bodies, which emerged in six of the eight sessions (Sessions 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, and 8). Thus, the results below will specifically present only the artworks created where representations of bodies and parts of bodies appear and only focus on the two participants that attended the most sessions, Participant 1 and Participant 2. Even though I will not be delving into discussing the importance and intricacies of bodies in relation to gender expression, gender identity, and sexual orientation within queer identity (Adkins, 1998; Addison, 2002; Maher, 2011; Ehrensaft, 2012; Mazzei, 2017), as it falls outside the scope of this article, I do want to acknowledge the significance of queer body politics and dynamics in the queer community and cis-heteronormative society. For this article, I explored these depictions of bodies in relation to Winnicott's concept of the true self and the false self (Winnicott, 1965).

13 When analysing an artwork through a psychodynamically informed art therapy lens, the focus is on uncovering the underlying psychological processes and meanings embedded within the art. The art therapist examines the artwork as a whole, considering the use of colour, line, texture and composition, explores symbols, metaphors, and imagery, looking for recurring themes and unconscious communication. Attention is paid to emotional content, developmental aspects, and connections to the personal and collective unconscious. Through a collaborative dialogue with the client, the therapist explores the intentions, thoughts, and emotions associated with the artwork. This process allows the client to gain insight into their own creative process, uncover hidden aspects of their psyche, and foster self-awareness and personal growth.

Unpacking and discussing the artworks

I discuss my understanding of the artworks, specifically with the false self in mind and how I believe it presented itself in the artworks.

During Session 2, in Participant 1's first image (see Figure 1), she depicted a gingerbread person shape. Inside the figure is a heart and an organic plant-like image with vines. She notes that "I created a thick, watery outline for my figure to keep what's on the inside, inside. Like my heart". The water-like quality of the outline could be thought about for its reflective quality, reflecting what is around it while keeping the inner parts sheltered. This almost barrier-like outline (the false self perhaps) seems to be barricading the true self and keeping it protected.

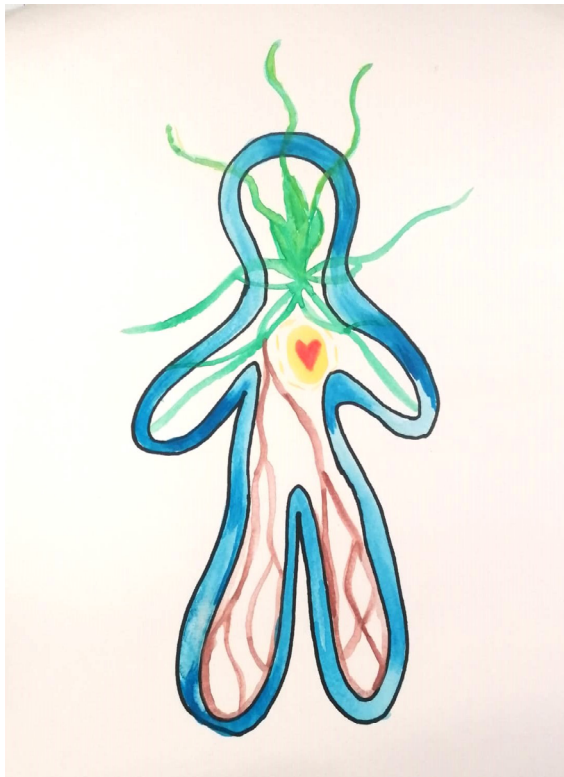


Figure 1: Participant 1, Session 2 artwork, 2022. Watercolour paint, felt-tip pens (photograph by author, used with permission).

Winnicott (1965, p. 143) states that “The false self is built on identifications”. This was clearly visible in Session 3 where Participant 2 created an artwork (see Figure 2) that has a core body from which other bodies sprout, what Participant 2 explained as “the different people I have to be in different spaces. That’s why they are different colours”. Participant 2 could have been hinting at the false selves that are presented to the outside world. Thus, fulfilling the false self’s protective function to conform and exist, creating a distance, or “isolating ourselves” as Participant 2 writes in this artwork, between the core self (true self) and the outside environment.

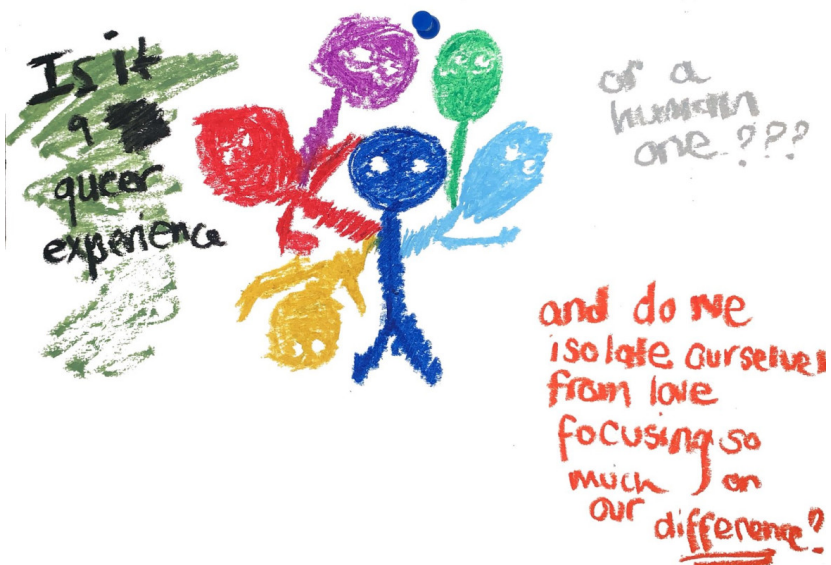


Figure 2: Participant 2, Session 3 artwork, 2022. Oil pastel on paper (photographed by the author, used with permission).

In the following session (see Figure 3), Participant 2 created two figures next to each other, one filled with scribbles while the other remains empty. During our discussion Participant 2 shared “We absorb from others so that we can feel a familiarity with them, become like them”. The empty figure can become whatever it needs to become, to adapt to fit in (feel familiar). Participant 2 could be hinting at the adaptive nature of the false self to protect the true self from possible rejection.

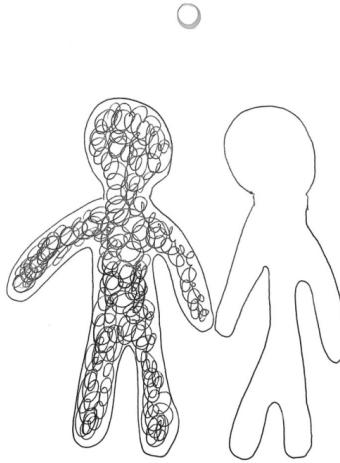


Figure 3: Participant 2, Session 4 artwork, 2022. Black fine-liner pen on paper (photographed by the author, used with permission).

In the later sessions, there appears to be a shift in the curiosity about the false self and a move towards it becoming more conscious to the participant. In Session 7 (see Figure 4), when prompted to create an artwork in relation to their journey with the group, Participant 1 revisited her gingerbread person from Session 2, this time filling the inside with natural elements to create a landscape and the outside (background) to resemble a galaxy. Notably, the figure outline is thinner, possibly indicating the false self feeling safe enough to reduce its protective function, but it remains present, as the landscape that now fills the figure (pointing to a growth of the true self) does not extend beyond the outline. Participant 1 reflected on the background that it is filled with “elements designed to be weathered” (see Figure 5), indicating the unsafe nature of the outside, and in doing so, reiterating the valuable function of the false self to protect the true self. In this reflection, Participant 1 showed an awareness of a protective function, thereby bringing the false self closer to consciousness.

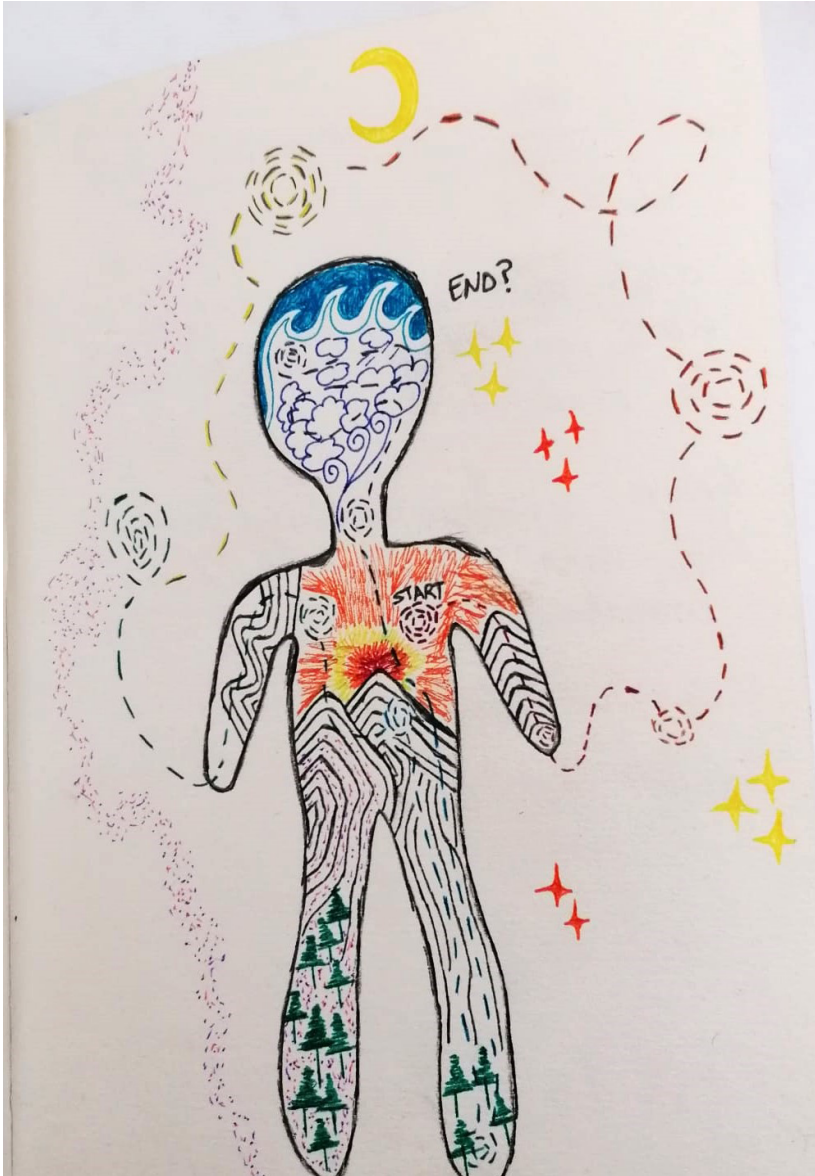


Figure 4: Participant 1, Session 7 artwork, 2022. Felt-tip pens on paper (photographed by the author, used with permission).

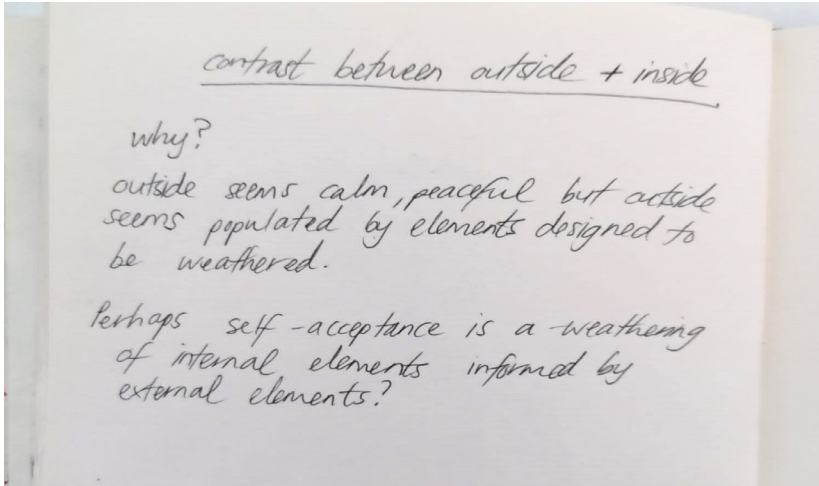


Figure 5: Participant 1, Session 7 artwork reflection, 2022. Pen on paper (photographed by the author, used with permission).

In Session 8 the participants were prompted to create an artwork in response to their journey with their own queer identity. Both participants created artworks with two characters. Participant 1 created an image of two masks facing each other (see Figure 6), their eyes looking backwards towards the entangled vine-like patterns behind the mask. Participant 2 created two female body outlines without heads (see Figure 7), the first facing the viewer with arms covering the body, the second facing the first and dancing. She wrote some thoughts that ran through her mind while making her artwork. In discussing their artworks during the session, both participants spoke about their characters as being two parts of themselves and their experiences. For Participant 1, this was “the masks that I show to the world and the part of me that I keep hidden behind the masks”. For Participant 2, “the self that represents my love for the arts and the self that represents my love for the sciences”. For Participant 1, her artwork was about wanting to self-reflect and discover what is behind the mask. Participant 2’s artwork was about recognising and wondering how to integrate different parts of the self. In both their reflections, there is a curiosity about something creating a distance from connecting to something deeper that would lead to an integrated sense of self. Although presented as representations of self, the images are devoid of any identifiable aspects that could be linked to the individual who created

the images, often showing up as a generic gingerbread person outline or a simple line-drawing shape of a person without any detail and lacking any facial features. Only Participant 1 created an artwork representing some facial features, the masks in Session 8.

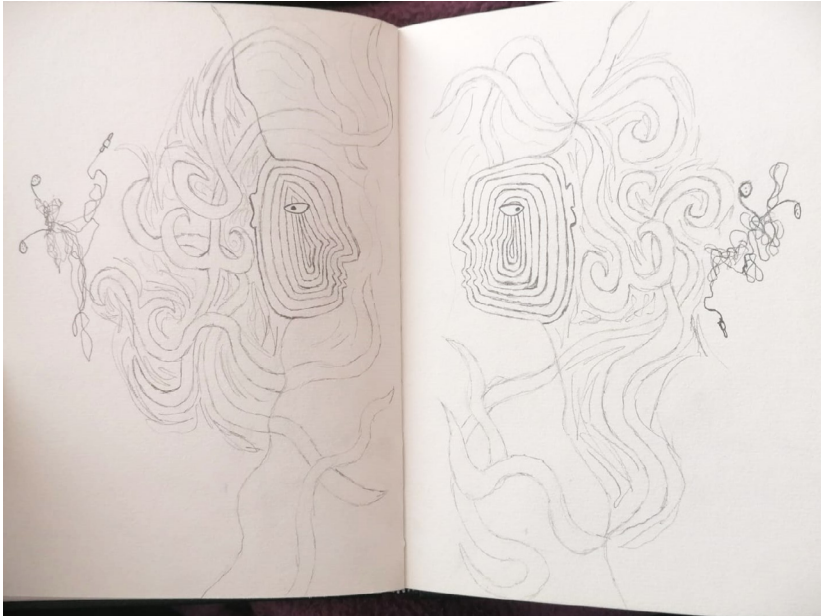


Figure 6: Participant 1, Session 8 artwork, 2022. Pencil on paper (photographed by the author, used with permission).

The false self remained unnamed throughout this intervention but kept appearing in the artworks. In reflecting on their artworks, the participants kept moving towards recognising an element preventing a greater understanding of their identities but never engaging with it. The false self made it hard for the participants to bring it into consciousness, always pointing towards its protective function. Reflecting on their artworks allowed this to become noticeable. The false self kept showing up in a way that showed that it was protecting something precious and thus deterring or guiding the participants away from wanting to explore what it was protecting. The false self's need to hide speaks to its intensity in needing to protect the true self. This parallels many queer people's experiences of choosing or needing to hide their queer identities to feel safe in the cis-heteronormative society in which they exist.



Figure 7: Participant 2, Session 8 artwork, 2022. Black fine-liner pen on paper (photographed by the author, used with permission).

Learnings

In this study, there was a limited number of participants, which consequently limited representation of various queer identities. Although many organisations were approached, the number of responses and eventual group members was not a wide enough representation of all or even many of the queer identities that exist. Many reasons could be attributed to this, the stigma around mental health in South Africa, the limited mental health resources available to the queer community, the shame of identifying as queer, and being unfamiliar with art therapy as it is a new modality in South African are among some of the reasons that come to mind. Some of these could have been addressed by taking more time to connect with and build trust with the queer organisations that were approached. Furthermore, more information about the study and art therapy as a mental health modality could have been provided.

Despite this, there were many important learnings that emerged from the study in relation to understanding the role of the false self for queer individuals and how to approach working with queer identity using art

therapy as an effective modality. Throughout this intervention, the images of figures that so prominently featured never revealed details about the self they represented. They remained generic outlines resembling human figures, concealing the maker's identity. In concealing their identity, the participants can distance themselves enough to disappear into the broad zeitgeist of cis-heteronormative society while still being able to engage in parts of their authentic selves from a distance. The false self protects the true self in this ambivalence of concealing and revealing. We see this when tracking both participants' artworks, none of which contain any identifiable aspects that would reveal who they are, but still being able to explore parts of their identity in the symbols and metaphors in the artwork. Familiarising oneself with prevalent symbols from the queer community thus becomes important for art therapists (Addison, 2003; Wiggins, 2018). The sense of exploring the true self seems to grow tentatively over the weeks. However, the false self always remains present, always protecting from too much being revealed, conforming the artworks and images into something non-specific. Only in the last few sessions is there a recognition and curiosity about the false self, a wondering about its function, and a shift to bring it into consciousness.

In exploring the artworks, there is a sense that the false self presented so strongly as a defence mechanism that its presence remained in the unconscious, making exploring one's authentic queer identity challenging (Butler & Astbury, 2008). This was an oversight that I made when conceptualising an art therapy group for queer people to explore their identity. This highlights the importance of including more training in this area for practising and student art therapists (Addison, 2003). It has also given me my biggest insight into queer identity. The false self cannot be overlooked when exploring identity with queer people. More must be done to make the false self visible for the client before delving into exploring authentic parts of themselves, especially considering that cis-heteronormative societal norms often reject those authentic parts and are the source of immense inner turmoil for many queer-identifying people. The false self serves as a defence mechanism that protects.

Consequently, it serves a crucial function for queer people, who often suffer from negative experiences and harm due to their authentic identity (Ehrensaft, 2012). Thus, in undertaking to work with the false self as part of queer identity, there must be an understanding of the role that this defence mechanism plays for the person, and accordingly, the approach needs to be gentle, deliberate, and unhurried while recognising the value of its protective

function. Furthermore, providing spaces for exploring the complexities of queer identities through art therapy may play a preventative function by mitigating self-harm and suicidal ideation in queer individuals (Bojarski & Qayyum, 2018). This study served as a learning for me as an example of how art therapy can effectively be used to explore queer identity (Fraser & Waldman, 2004; Pelton-Sweet & Sherry, 2008; Wiggins, 2018) and provided an avenue into fostering curiosity about the false self, even though, during the sessions, it remained unconscious to myself and the participants. The artworks presented a concrete, tangible version of the false self that felt approachable, making the presence of the false self move from the unconscious to the conscious, where it can be acknowledged and engaged. Other art therapists and mental health practitioners could incorporate these learnings by utilising the insights and recommendations to inform their own practice with queer individuals and communities, ultimately leading to more inclusive and affirming therapeutic environments.

It would be remiss of me not to consider how the COVID-19 pandemic may have affected this intervention. After the pandemic, many people experienced a range of challenges related to readjusting to in-person interactions, including social anxiety and physical discomfort (Ni & Jia, 2023). A lack of participation in this group might also be related to this factor. Thus, it becomes important to prioritise a gradual and supportive transition to in-person sessions, allowing individuals to acclimate at their own pace and providing accommodations as needed. This approach of being gradual, supportive, and allowing individuals to work at their own pace could similarly be applied to working with the queer population and their protective false selves’.

Conclusion

This article presented a study that endeavoured to use art therapy to explore queer identity. Through the process of tracking the artworks made by two participants, I uncovered the important role that the false self plays in acting as a defence mechanism that protects the true self within queer identity. Herein lies the value of this research, as it highlights the importance of defence mechanisms in relation to queer identity. This aspect is limited in the literature about working with the queer population. Using art therapy proved to be an effective method that allowed the participant to make their unconscious false self visible in their artworks. Thus, mental health practitioners who work with

the queer community around identity must first bring the protective false self into consciousness for the client before engaging with the deeper work of exploring the multiple facets of queer identity. Further research studies around the function of the false self in queer identity and protocols around how to work with the false self in relation to queer identity would be crucial for this field of study.

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