

Revealing intergenerational traits and self-compassion through therapeutic creation

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Short bio

Elize-Helé Kieser is the Head of the Department of Visual Art in the Further Education and Training (FET) phase at SAHETI School. She has 17 years of teaching experience in creative and visual arts, technology, and life orientation. Kieser is currently completing her Master of Art Therapy at the University of Johannesburg. She completed her Baccalaureus Technologiae in Fine Art (*cum laude*) in 2006 and a BA Honours in Art Therapy (*cum laude*) in 2022.

Abstract

Community arts counsellors work in the complex socio-cultural landscape of mental health care in South Africa, providing vital support to under-resourced communities amidst a shortage of mental health workers. Initially, the article intended to showcase the impact of group narrative art therapy on community arts counsellor trainees' (CACTs) self-awareness and empathy, but the process quickly revealed self-compassion as integral in developing these qualities. I observed some CACTs' natural inclination towards self-compassion, while realising that others needed to allow self-compassion to emerge more gradually. Using a reflective lens helped me understand and appreciate that enhancing self-awareness and empathy may assist CACTs in supporting clients effectively while fostering a compassionate therapeutic environment. A qualitative, interpretive approach with six CACTs was used, employing thematic analysis of artwork and personal reflections to provide insights into participants' experiences during sessions. The group setting offered a shared experience, which enabled these CACTs to become aware of other perspectives, thereby improving self-awareness and empathy. Three case vignettes showcase moments where participants reflected on the creative process and expressed meaning through personal and familial narratives.

Keywords: Community arts counselling training, empathy, self-awareness, self-compassion

Introduction

The study forms part of my master’s dissertation and was conducted at Lefika La Phodiso,¹ where six community arts counsellor² trainees (CACTs) participated in four weekly one-hour narrative group art therapy sessions. The initial goal was to explore how participants’ self-perceptions about their personal and familial experiences were informed by traits that had been passed down from previous generations. The aim was to investigate the implementation of narrative group art therapy to enhance self-awareness and empathy through primary and familial caregiver narratives. However, my focus shifted to self-compassion after noticing aspects of the CACTs’ inner critical voice emerge in their reflections. While still within the context of engaging with intergenerational relationships, this shift highlighted that the CACTs’ self-worth and identity might be entangled in the histories of their lives.

Various creative processes³ and mediums were used in this study to explore possible intergenerational traits inherited by the CACTs. By examining inherited traits, individuals gained insights into their emotional responses and beliefs. The insights facilitated self-awareness, helping to identify possible negative traits they wanted to break. The group setting enabled CACTs to share their experiences while becoming aware of others’ perspectives, improving self-awareness and empathy.

Given that CACTs are trained to work with diverse populations, including marginalised adults and children, using creative and expressive arts in this way

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- 1 Lefika La Phodiso is a non-governmental organisation (NGO) based in Johannesburg, South Africa. The organisation offers various programs and workshops for children, youth and adults from diverse backgrounds from the inner city. Creative expression and therapeutic art approaches are used to empower individuals and strengthen communities.
 - 2 The community arts counsellor training programme was established by Lefika La Phodiso’s founder Hayley Berman (2017, p.1-2) “to make art [counselling] available to under resourced communities to deal with the effects of the HIV/ AIDS pandemic, the ramifications of multiple losses, as well as aspects relating to poverty, crime, violence, and trauma”. Community arts counsellor training is conducted in groups as community arts counsellors facilitate arts counselling in multi-cultural groups (Berman, 2017, p.1-2).
 - 3 The creative process involved CACTs using a range of art materials to explore their primary or familial caregivers’ narrative, expressing their interpretation of these experiences and corresponding emotions in a visual artwork.

provides valuable insight into how art counselling can be used to promote healing, growth, and social transformation. By learning to navigate their own intergenerational narratives, the CACTs can apply the knowledge gained through this journey to connect with and support others, fostering healthy coping styles and resilience.

The uniqueness of this research study lies in revealing self-compassion as a central component in the development of self-awareness and empathy through narrative group art therapy. This research provides insight into respecting multiple cultural backgrounds and understanding the historical impact of this group's intergenerational narratives in shaping individual identities. The research highlights the importance of integrating an intersectional and intergenerational lens to deepen understanding of self and enhance empathy while emphasising self-compassion and reflective practice in therapy. Furthermore, when reflecting on how these narratives have shaped them, CACTs may be better prepared to use compassion-focused approaches in their own work. The study also contributes to existing research by offering a new approach that integrates Neff's (2003, p. 86) concept of self-compassion and compassion-focused art therapy into mental health training programmes.

The article begins with a brief review of the literature on how self-compassion is linked to self-awareness and empathy. The literature considers the potential benefits of integrating self-compassion into one's practice of self-reflection and the implications for counselling work. The methodology section details the art processes used by participants to explore individual and familial narratives. The article presents three case vignettes from Session 3, where artworks depicting the transformation of a personal trait revealed aspects of self-compassion. The article concludes with a consideration of the implications for future CACTs understanding the importance of self-compassion in the South African context, where diverse narratives shape personal and collective identities.

Literature

Self-compassion, self-awareness, and empathy

Self-compassion was introduced in *Toward a Psychology of Being* by Maslow as an important component of "emotional maturity" (Neff, 2003) and has been expanded on by Kristin Neff (2003), Paul Gilbert (2009), and Christopher

Germer (2009). Their work emphasises “fostering nonjudgmental, forgiving, loving acceptance for oneself and others” (Neff, 2009). Neff’s (2009) approach is also based on Theravada Buddhism, which promotes the development of kindness and compassion while encouraging interconnection and empathy for others (Gilbert, 2010, p. 3; Tiloka, 2024, p. 3295). The Dalai Lama’s definition of compassion aligns with community arts counselling’s goal of reducing suffering by recognising and addressing personal distress (Gilbert, 2010).

Sidney J. Blatt (1995) emphasises integrating “concern for self and others” as essential for treating people with care and kindness. Enhancing CACTs and other mental healthcare providers’ self-compassion may foster healthier interpersonal relationships, thus encouraging the providers to interact as kind, generous individuals with fewer “self-critical tendencies”, as Neff (2003, p. 87) has suggested. Self-compassionate counsellors may also use their “presence to change how [individuals in the groups] think and feel about themselves” (Neff & Germer, 2019, p. 58).

CACTs may therefore enhance their effectiveness in group counselling spaces by incorporating the three main components of Neff’s (2003, p. 86) self-compassion approach, which is “self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness”. By modelling these components, certified community arts counsellors can help their clients integrate “respect, kindness, and empathy” (Gilbert, 2010, p. 3) into their own lives. This approach enables counselling to become a form of support and protection for the clients and others (Haeyen & Heijman, 2020, p. 4).

Self-compassion therapeutic models

Recent therapeutic models such as the mindful self-compassion (MSC) programme developed by Neff and Germer (2019, p. 358) and compassion-focused therapy (CFT) designed by Gilbert (2010), which uses cognitive behavioural therapy as its foundation, have incorporated mindfulness and self-compassion into psychological health treatments. These models demonstrate that self-compassion plays a significant role in mental health care when used to empower individuals to treat themselves with kindness and understanding while enhancing psychological well-being and resilience.

Despite their compassion-focused approach, these therapeutic models do not include aspects of art therapy. I did however come across two modified therapeutic interventions that incorporate art therapy to promote

compassion-focused work. The first was Sherry L. Beaumont (2012, p. 4), who adapted Gilbert’s compassion-focused therapy and introduced compassion-oriented art therapy (COAT). This therapy targets young adults facing challenges related to “self-criticism and shame” due to “experiencing gender variance”. COAT uses expressive art techniques such as guided imagery and mindfulness to assist individuals in recognising challenging emotions while being able to verbalise them in a compassionate way (Beaumont, 2012, p. 4). The second is the ONEBird model created by Patricia R. Williams (2018, p. 23), which combines aspects of mindful self-compassion training, compassion-focused therapy, art therapy, and mindfulness. Williams (2018, p. 24) believes that the inherent creative process in art therapy increases the possibility of developing self-compassion skills and other resources associated with the regulation of emotions.

Beaumont (2012) and Williams (2018) highlight creative expression as a therapeutic tool by illustrating that combining art therapy with compassion-focused approaches addresses emotional concerns, self-criticism, and shame while using mechanisms such as emotional regulation, self-acceptance, and resilience building. Recognising the role of emotional regulation in developing compassion for self was significant when considering the impact of interpersonal interactions on emotional regulation. Interpersonal emotion regulation (IER) emphasises the importance of regulating one’s own and others’ emotions through group interactions, resulting in a more supportive and empathetic environment.

Intersectionality and identity

The idea of intersectionality aligns closely with Savneet Talwar’s (2011, p. 15) and Lynn Weber’s (1998, p. 24) assertion that identity consists of complex sets of intersecting shifts and changes in various social structures. Intersectionality emphasises the importance of considering race, class, gender, and sexuality as they are interconnected.

In *Soul without shame: A guide to liberating yourself from the judge within*, Byron Brown (1999, p. 18, 26) speaks to the importance of bringing “attention to personal inner process – how you think and feel about yourself and your life – making you aware of forces that shape that process”. This awareness may help CACTs recognise their own “maladaptive patterns of thought, feeling,

and behaviours” (Brown, 1999, p. 20), providing crucial understanding in guiding others through their personal journeys.

Intergenerational narratives

Navigating complex cultural contexts and narratives is a significant component of a community arts counsellor’s role in providing mental health care in South Africa. Investigating intergenerational narratives becomes an important undertaking for individuals interested in being mental health practitioners. CACTs need to manage their personal and familial narratives in relation to the intergenerational narratives of those they may encounter. Sylvia Z. Hartowicz (2018, p. 218) acknowledges that “our realities have been constructed by the stories” passed down, impacting present and future generations, and thus I argue that making generational inquiries is important for understanding one’s story. Intergenerational storytelling involves sharing personal life experiences and exploring their connections to societal and cultural contexts (De Leeuw et al., 2017; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999). In addition, Brown (1999, p. 42, 65) points out that learning about yourself makes you more compassionate and grounded, as well as able to perceive reality while connecting with your experience.

Nathalie Rogers et al. (2012), Cathy Malchiodi (2005), and Sylvia Z. Hartowicz (2018, p. 70-71) underscore the use of various therapeutic approaches to bring intergenerational narratives to consciousness. They have established that art modalities and creativity promote awareness, support emotional development, and improve relationships with others. Patricia Leavy (2017) adds that making art benefits personal growth through emotional expression, communication, and self-reflection.

Conceptualising self-compassion in narrative group art therapy

The narrative group art therapy approach integrates the principles of narrative therapy with creative art therapy processes to express, reflect on, and reframe the CACTs’ experiences within the group setting. Shirley Riley (2001, p. 7) points to the importance of focusing on an individual’s interpretation of their artwork as significant for understanding the artmaker’s intention and experience. Creating visual images allows groups to explore intergenerational narratives related to ‘human existence’. This visual image creation empowers

CACTs to “accurately see and experience who they are” while acknowledging and moving beyond possible challenging experiences (Moon, 1995, p. 7-8). Cathy Malchiodi (2007, p. 54) and Pat Allen (1995, p. 22) highlight the importance of “finding personal meaning in one’s images”, offering “new perspective[s] as we begin to know ourselves”. Reflecting on their artworks within the group may assist CACTs in confronting and processing difficult emotions compassionately, enhancing collective understanding and empathy within the group. Finally, group dialogue leads to a “deeper, more intimate exchange” in which individuals in the group can “access emotions and thoughts that may not be within reach consciously” (McNiff, 2004).

Group dynamics and therapeutic impact

Catherine H. Moon (2002, p. 201, 214) highlights the significance of bearing witness in art therapy groups. Witnessing is a process where participants and therapists reflect on what they see, observe, and take note of during the session. Through this reflective activity, CACTs deepened their understanding by witnessing others’ stories, offering opportunities for greater self-awareness and self-compassion within the group. I observed how the process of being witnessed made participants feel seen and understood, validating their sense of belonging. This first-hand experience shows the benefits of the therapeutic alliance that may lead CACTs to the cultivation of important counselling skills related to group dynamics.

Riley (2001, p. 2) suggests that the group acts as a tool for change. Sophia Vinogradov and Irvin D. Yalom (1989, p. 1, 9) emphasise that interpersonal interactions in the group may be affected by the group’s dynamics. The group setting may therefore play a significant role as a therapeutic tool due to the impact of the interpersonal interactions on emotional development (Vinogradov and Yalom, 1989, p. 8). Riley (2001, p. 3-4) believes that groups become a microcosm of society as interactions within the group may recall lived experiences and emotions, as well as create connections between participants.

Methods

In this study, I employed a qualitative interpretivist framework as outlined by Joseph Ponterotto (2005, p. 129) to gain insight into the subjective experiences of the participants during their arts-based exploration of personal

and familial narratives. The interpretivist framework was helpful in developing an understanding of how reflectively applying Neff’s (2003) self-compassion approach and the compassion-focused art therapy approach enabled me to become aware of self-compassion during the study. This framework assisted in uncovering personal metaphors and meaning through the artmaking process. Ponterotto (2005, p. 129-131) asserts that interpretivism allows for in-depth exploration of how individuals construct and understand their realities. This process facilitated a rich, shared visual and verbal exploration of personal and intergenerational narratives.

As mentioned at the start of the article, I was unaware of the important role self-compassion plays in becoming more self-aware or empathetic. To better understand this finding, I used thematic analysis⁴ to identify Neff’s (2003) three key principles of self-compassion: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness, which were reflected in participants’ narratives and artwork. I subsequently also included some of the principles of the compassion-focused art therapy (CFAT) programme as an evaluation tool (Table 1).

Table 1: Compassion-focused art therapy (CFAT) components
Objective 1: Experiencing emotions in the present moment mindfully and with focused attention
Objective 2: Recognising and distinguishing one’s own emotion regulation systems
Objective 3: Expressing and regulating emotions constructively
Objective 4: Using improved self-compassion skills
I believe that the compassion-focused art therapy approach offered me a useful framework to use as a post-intervention analysis tool. This approach allowed reflection on the artworks and shared narratives of the CACTs who participated in the study.

The study employed purposive sampling, selecting participants from the 2020/2021 to 2024 community arts counselling training groups. Sessions comprised four two-hour group art narrative therapy sessions and one individual interview session. Four of the six CACTs were women, three identified as white, and one classified herself as brown. The other two CACTs were men and classified themselves as black. The CACTs’ ages ranged from 21 to 60. It is important to note that the sample lacked diversity, as not all South African demographics were represented.

4 Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method used to identify and analyse themes reflected in artwork and group discussions, providing insight into the CACTs experiences.

Each weekly in-person session was conducted at Lefika La Phodiso and lasted two hours. The arts-based and group narrative art therapy approach facilitated participants moving towards greater self-awareness across the four sessions. The open directives (Table 2) encouraged CACTs to create artworks that explored intergenerational traits, while the existing relationship between some CACTs promoted open discussions of personal and intergenerational dynamics.

Using various artistic mediums to immerse themselves in the creative process aligned with Shaun McNiff's (1998, p. 15) concept of finding a fulfilling path of inquiry to reflect creatively and tangibly on family narratives. This approach enabled CACTs to delve into aspects of their intergenerational narratives, gaining understanding through personal exploration (Tables 2, 3, and 4).

Table 2: Summary of the four sessions

Session 1: CACTs were welcomed and introduced to one another. We addressed ethical concerns and participants signed consent forms. At the start of the session, we briefly discussed aspects that would ensure a safe space for participants. The first directive was then introduced, inviting CACTs to create a visual genogram to depict significant people in their lives and their relationship to various individuals. Making the genogram led to a discussion by CACTs on how they are situated in their family structure. The second directive asked participants to create an artwork that represented their primary caregiver.

Session 2: CACTs were asked to do a brief check-in to say how they were feeling. The directive for this session invited participants to explore an aspect of themselves that they believe may have been passed down from their caregiver or someone in their family line.

Session 3: The session started with a brief check-in to discuss any key points that may have arisen from the previous week's exploration. I then introduced a two-part directive: The first was for participants to think about and depict a personal trait that they felt that they might want to shift (change). The second directive invited individuals to transform their original artwork in some way to demonstrate the shift they wanted to make.

Session 4: The final session's check-in encouraged participants to highlight an aspect of change that they had become aware of during the three weeks that had passed. The directive invited participants to create an artwork portraying one or more of the significant moments of self-awareness that they had experienced over the three previous sessions.

Table 3: Thematic analysis related to Neff's self-compassion components

CAC trainee	Self-kindness	Common humanity	Mindfulness
Ren�e	Depicted herself as a phoenix rising from ashes.	Struggle with self-worth linked to paternal and societal expectations.	Awareness of being in a "transitional space".
Dumisani	Challenged himself to use non-dominant hand linked to processing and expressing his emotions.	Insight into shared experiences. Understand that others face similar rejection.	Acknowledged feelings of fear and discomfort in navigating different spaces.
Lindiwe	Accepting her need to take her time.	Recognising that everyone navigates challenges while learning self-acceptance.	Reflective approach to her journey of self-discovery and acceptance.

Table 4: Thematic analysis related to compassion-focused art therapy

CAC trainee	Objective 1 (Awareness of emotions)	Objective 2 (Drive and resource seeking)	Objective 3 (Emotional regulation)	Objective 4 (Improved self-compassion skills)
Ren�e	Displayed variety of emotions - confusion and entanglement depicted.	Acceptance of termination of PhD, shift focus to health - diabetes.	Embracing her situation, transformation depicted in artwork.	Let go of societal pressures and transforming future aspirations.
Dumisani	Processed his anger and other emotions through art.	Enrolled in community arts counsellors training programme to find coping resources.	Regulated emotions through art, resulting in self-awareness and healing.	Visual exploration of suffering and growth demonstrated in artworks.
Lindiwe	Awareness of anxiety and acceptance in the moment - allowed herself to take her time.	Acceptance of her anxiety and process - using self-compassion as resource.	Emotional regulation through self-acceptance and acknowledgment to the group.	Recognise interconnected aspects of her life, promotes self-acceptance.

Reflective practice

CACTs were encouraged to reflect on their experiences during the four two-hour sessions that took place over four weeks. Session 3 specifically encouraged CACTs to explore traits they may not wish to pass on to the next generation. The creative and reflective approach in this session illuminated possible negative traits CACTs wanted to shift. This approach aligns with Carl Rogers (1959), who asserts that reflective practice facilitates an internal shift in focus, which is crucial for connecting group art therapy and narrative processes. As supported by Karen Machover (1949), reflective practice promotes meaning-making and self-compassion through self-reflection and critical conversation with oneself and others. Reflection provided CACTs with opportunities to analyse and evaluate their experiences, helping participants internalise their learning.

Individual interviews

The data collection and reflective process concluded with individual interviews that provided insight into each CACT's personal journey. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. Participants were asked 11 questions relating to their experiences, offering more detail about their journeys and possible shifts experienced. Although crucial for my dissertation, the interview data did not contribute to the concept of self-compassion and was excluded from the article.

Questions 1 to 10 provided CACTs with an opportunity to reflect on their experiences during the four-week therapy sessions. The questions enabled a comprehensive evaluation of the therapeutic process, highlighting areas of individual growth, recurring themes, and the impact of group dynamics. Additionally, the questions uncovered insights about individual experiences that CACTs may not have shared during the sessions.

Ethical considerations

Permission to conduct the research was obtained from Rozanne Myburgh, managing director of Lefika La Phodiso. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Johannesburg's Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture Higher Degrees Committee and the Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee (SEM 2-2023-017).

Written consent was obtained from all CAC trainees prior to commencing the research, with additional consent being provided for audio recordings and photographing artworks. To mitigate the impact of uncovering difficult intergenerational narratives, CAC trainees were offered additional support from Lefika La Phodiso's low-cost clinic.

Pseudonyms were used to protect individual identities. These were selected based on aspects that stood out in their personal reflections.

Changing perspectives

The three case vignettes discussed focus on Session 3, where I witnessed a greater degree of self-compassion exhibited by the CACTs. As previously stated, participants were given two directives. First, they spent 15 minutes creating an artwork that explored a personal trait they wanted to shift (change). The second directive encouraged and challenged CACTs to spend another 15 minutes transforming their first artwork in some way to embody the desired change visually. The visual representation encouraged CACTs to recognise aspects of themselves they wish to change, reflecting their external struggles.

Materials provided included various sheets of paper of different colours and sizes, cardboard, magazines, colouring pencils, oil and chalk pastels, watercolour paint, wool, and glue. The session concluded with CACTs sharing their experiences, emphasising their approach to transforming the artwork. Specific questions were asked to explore thoughts and feelings evoked throughout the process. It is important to note that several participants created a second artwork as they found it too challenging to work into and transform the first (Table 5).

Table 5: Sample questions asked during the session

Share the feelings you experienced while creating the first artwork.
 Reflect on how you felt when encouraged to transform the original artwork.
 Discuss the process of transformation. Did you choose to change the original artwork or create a new artwork. Explain how the two artworks relate to each other.
 Describe the trait you chose to present and how you envision shifting this part of yourself in your life.

Upon reflection, it became evident that the directives for Session 3 connected to Johanna Czamanski Cohen and Karen Weihs' (2016. p. 3) concept of

“widening [one’s] perspectives” using various art mediums. This approach allowed the CACTs to experience the transformation of their artwork tangibly, encouraging them to examine the alterations and to contemplate the changes they considered making in their lives. Pat B. Allen (1995, p. 3) expresses that “art is a way of knowing what we actually believe” while being willing to consider alternative perspectives that arise (Isserow, 2013, p. 130).

It also became clear that the act of creation required the CACTs to confront “[them]selves, [their] fears and [their] resistance to change” (Allen, 1995, p. 3), enabling them to identify and facilitate the transformation of traits that did not serve them. Allowing themselves to connect with their vulnerabilities through artmaking promoted “self-understanding” through “emotional expression” (Ponsford-Hill, 2018, p. 77). Reflecting on their experience revealed self-compassion as a key component in the process of connecting with self, as they had to be gentle with themselves while uncovering challenging information. Reflection also provided significant opportunities to establish interpersonal relationships and a degree of empathy within the group.

It is important to reflect on how the Session 3’s directives align with diverse South African socio-cultural and historical contexts, where values and narratives influence personal and collective identities. The transformative focus of these directives offered the CACTs an opportunity to explore their familial narratives in a deeply personal way. The group setting in turn ensured that they were exposed to the broader community’s narratives, fostering understanding and empathy among group members. In addition, reflecting on the visual shifts evident in some artworks offered many individuals a sense of agency and hope. However, it is important to acknowledge that not all the CACTs may have experienced the outcomes in the same way.

Case vignettes

This section presents an analysis of three of the six participants’ creative processes in which I observed aspects of both Neff’s (2003) components of self-compassion and the change objectives of the compassion-focused art therapy programme in their artwork and narratives. The findings highlight each of the CACTs’ individual exploration of specific art materials best suited to their artistic expression. Their artworks and articulation of their experiences revealed aspects of self-compassion needed before the CACTs were able to explore aspects of their lived experience in more depth. The required

aspects of self-compassion revealed in the artworks ultimately led to a richer understanding of self and other group members' lived experiences.

Renée "reborn"



Figure 1: Renée's first artwork, photograph by Renée, 2024



Figure 2: Renée's second artwork, photograph by Renée, 2024

Neff's (2003) principles of self-compassion are evident in several areas of Ren e's artwork and narrative. *Self-kindness* was reflected in Ren e's depiction of herself as a phoenix rising from ashes (Figure 1). Incorporating oil pastels, watercolour, and wool in her first artwork conveyed her complex feelings about the ending of her doctoral journey. The chaotic depiction symbolises her confusion and entanglement due to external expectations. Her "desire not to disappoint herself, [her father], [the] university, [or] colleagues" echoed the universal struggle of self-worth linked to *common humanity*.

Ren e's acknowledgement of loss and disappointment about the doctorate uncovered an intergenerational trait of seeking approval and validation from others, which may have influenced her self-worth and emotional responses. *Mindfulness* was shown in Ren e's awareness of being in a "transitory space" and recognition of inner confusion. She explained that "the phoenix [was] still very caught in the ash", adding that "I'm trying to find the phoenix but there's so much other stuff". Her mindful approach was further demonstrated by her subsequent release when explaining, "I chose to do a new page and I drew the phoenix out of the ashes [...] taking flight" (Figure 2). Transforming the phoenix in her second artwork demonstrated an acceptance of her efforts to overcome and move on from the situation.

Ren e's ability to be present with her thoughts and emotions, without judgement or resolution, reiterated her mindfulness. Ren e's difficulty in seeing a connection between the two artworks is highlighted in her statement, "I don't know how to get from one to the other". This component aligns with *Objective 1 (Awareness of emotions)* of compassion-focused art therapy, as Ren e's emotions manifested in that moment. Her reflection on the work also showed her ability to regulate her emotions at that time: to not become overwhelmed by the content, relating to *Objective 3 (Emotional regulation)*.

The process of self-compassion allowed Ren e space to process her feelings of "stuckness" and disappointment, leading to the possibility of letting go and transforming her future aspirations. This demonstration of self-compassion aligned with *Objective 4 (Improved self-compassion skills)*, as Ren e acknowledged that she was able to "let go of some of the pressure" related to her doctorate, allowing her to focus on her diabetes and contemplate what to do with her research and the five years before her retirement.

Reflecting on the way Ren e approached the directives exhibited a thoughtfulness to understanding her experiences of loss and formation of a

new identity during a process of transition. She used her artwork to reflect kindly on challenging aspects, assisting Ren e in visualising the shift she wants in her life more tangibly. Interpersonal emotion regulation was evident in discussing her narrative in the supportive group environment. Receiving empathetic feedback helped reinforce her self-compassion journey, signifying the importance of group dynamics (Figure 3).

Dumisani "to give thanks"

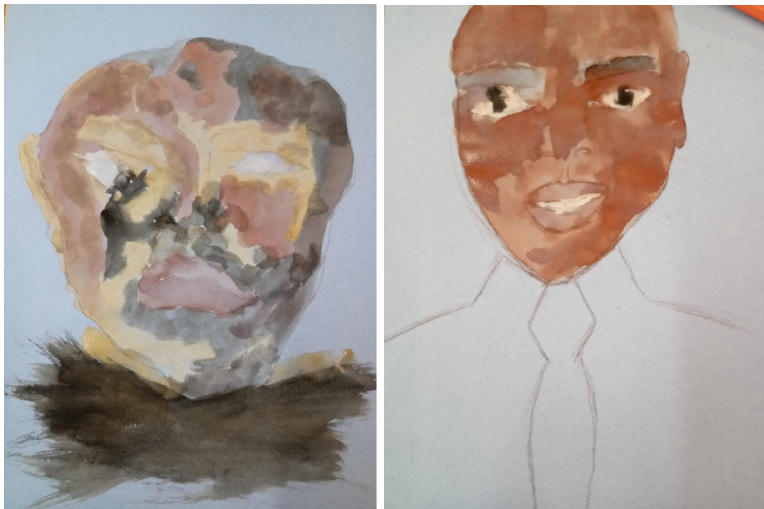


Figure 3: Dumisani's first and second artwork, photographs by Dumisani, 2024

Intergenerational traits became evident as Dumisani navigated complex family dynamics that have perpetuated rejection of his sexuality. Family dynamics often reveal deeply ingrained familial and societal beliefs passed down through generations. By addressing these issues through art and group sharing, Dumisani challenged the rejection narrative passed down through his family. He illustrated *self-kindness* by challenging himself to draw the image with his left hand, which showed his willingness to engage in art to process his emotions. Dumisani's exploration of the imperfect results from using a variety of watercolours and his non-dominant hand to paint the first artwork prioritised emotional expression over displaying technical ability. The first

work was more expressive and looser, capturing the rawness of his feelings and the complexity of his experiences (Figure 3, left).

Dumisani's awareness and acknowledgement of his emotional state and feelings were revealed in his personal narrative. By reflecting on and sharing his experience with the group in an accepting and non-judgemental way, he stated: "I wouldn't mind if it was the people from outside because I don't know them, and I wasn't going to take those things into my heart. But for the fact that I'm going to be insulted for who I am and not being aware that I did not choose this life for myself". This statement showed that he was trying to reduce the internalisation of derogatory comments by avoiding self-criticism. This awareness of his internalisations aligned with *Objective 1 (Awareness of emotions)*, as the artmaking process allowed Dumisani to experience and process feelings such as anger in that moment: "I've always tried to ignore it or to just let it go, but I can't. I have these bad thoughts in me. I can't even mention some of them".

Additionally, Dumisani's act of sharing his narrative and receiving empathetic feedback from the group demonstrated the importance of interpersonal emotion regulation. The combined support helped him process his feelings, reducing self-criticism and improving self-compassion. This process also helped him recognise *common humanity*, realising his experiences connect him to others facing similar rejection and judgement from family and community members. Art as a creative outlet provided validation and understanding, linking with *Objective 2 (Drive-seeking and resource-seeking)* as it demonstrated his drive towards finding resources for coping and healing by enrolling in the community arts counsellors training programme. Neff's (2003) concept of *mindfulness* was revealed when Dumisani voiced feelings of anger, fear, and discomfort with being in unsafe public spaces, stating that he sometimes experiences fear "when there [are] many males around". He stated that "[he is] not really comfortable around men, [he is] very scared" of what may happen to him if they find out about his sexuality. By choosing to express his feelings through art and discussion instead of suppressing them, Dumisani acknowledged his pain rather than letting it define him.

I observed *Objective 3 (Emotional regulation)* in Dumisani's approach to dealing with his emotions through art, indicating his ability to regulate his feelings in a way that promoted self-understanding and healing. Finally, *Objective 4 (Improved self-compassion)* became evident in his empathetic

approach to his visual exploration of suffering, from his first portrait featuring multiple earth tones and expressive brushstrokes to the second portrait incorporating fewer colours and more definition and detail. Speaking about his second work (Figure 3, right), Dumisani reflected on “safe spaces like Lefika [La Phodiso] where he is accepted and able to be himself”. The second image thus reflects a future “independent” version of himself where he “can find [his] own space to live [his] truthful life”. Dumisani demonstrated curiosity about his emotions while seeking, establishing, and accepting a deeper relationship with himself through his art, reflecting personal growth.

Lindiwe “finding my way”

The last case vignette explores Lindiwe’s parallel experience of self-compassion on her physical journey to the session. Although Lindiwe did not create artwork in the session due to arriving late, it is curious to note that her experience was similar to that of the CACTs who made artwork. Upon welcoming her to the session, I asked her for a short check-in. Lindiwe shared her experience, explaining that “the process for me [was] just taking my time”, which related to her family being known as “chronic latecomers”. She shared: “I just wanted to say to everybody it’s not out of disrespect that I’m late, it’s just I think for me when I wake up in the morning and prepare and the travelling to come here, that is part of my process. It is a lot about learning to take my time and to accept myself and allow myself to just be myself, exactly as I am”. Evidently, allowing herself time illustrated a gentle and accepting approach which reflected *self-kindness* and non-judgement, which she had experienced at times due to arriving late. This self-awareness relates to experiencing her emotions in the moment, aligning with *Objective 1 (Awareness of emotions)*. Lindiwe’s acknowledgement of her process and understanding that it is acceptable to take her time connects with Neff’s (2003) concept of *common humanity*, which reveals that everyone navigates challenges while learning to accept themselves.

Lindiwe’s awareness of her feelings, anxiety, and aspects of self-compassion also echoed her *mindful* approach when reflecting on her life experiences. Her journey of acceptance for who she is despite the pressure of fitting in is connected to *Objective 2 (Drive and resource seeking)*. Self-acceptance became evident when she spoke about the anxiety around trying to “do the right thing” and “allowing myself to just be myself, exactly as I am”.

Once Lindiwe concluded her story. I pointed out the parallel process to what the group members had experienced in the art therapy session. I highlighted how significant it was for her to show herself self-compassion in that moment and acknowledge it to the group, resulting in the group having a deeper understanding of her experience. The group reciprocated with interpersonal emotion regulation by responding empathetically, making Lindiwe feel understood and validated, and promoting self-acceptance.

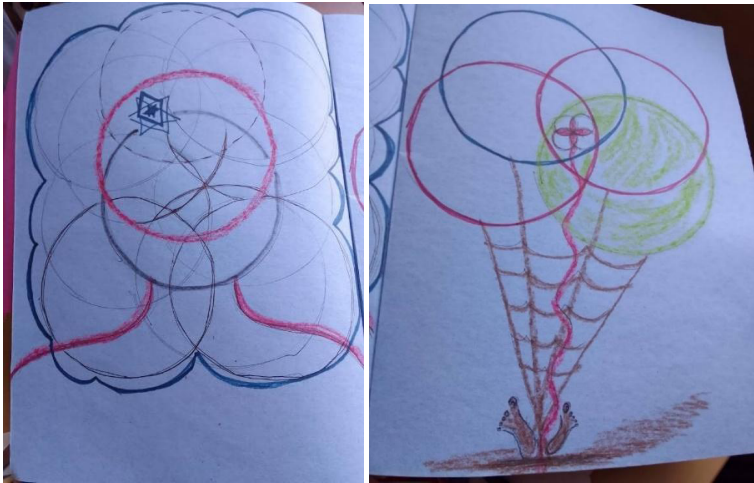


Figure 4: Lindiwe's first and second artwork (after completing the works at home, then shared with me), photographs by Lindiwe, 2024
Lindiwe's artworks reiterated the importance of "taking her time", linking it to the interconnected aspects of her life.

Limitations

The study focused on a small sample group, limiting the efficacy of the findings as they are based on the subjective experiences of the participants. My personal biases and those of the participants may have influenced how the CACTs' artworks and narratives were interpreted. Using the compassion-focused art therapy and self-compassion approaches as reflective tools instead of integrating them into the research design from the start may have prevented these methods from being used to their full potential. The study did not fully consider the impact of environmental factors such as family

dynamics, social support systems, or socio-economic situations. Furthermore, I did not fully consider how my personal style as a future therapist might have impacted the results.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates how Kristen Neff's (2003) self-compassion components and four change objectives of the compassion-focused art therapy programme were applied as evaluation tools for my research study. The programme also highlights the presence and development of self-compassion in the CACTs' experiences. This applicability of compassion-focused art therapy became particularly evident in the participants' articulation of the meaning of their artworks and how Session 3's directives challenged them to investigate intergenerational traits that they would like to shift (change). Using an arts-based approach allowed Ren e and Dumisani the freedom to select art materials they were comfortable with and that matched what they wanted to share. The materials assisted in the meaning-making process, enhancing the significance of each artwork in relation to their themes. This applicability of artwork is evident in Ren e's depiction of her struggle with seeking approval and validation and Dumisani embracing his true self despite the rejection from his family. Although Lindiwe's process in Session 3 differed from the rest of the group, her experience reflected similar outcomes to those experienced by the group. Ultimately, this proves that CACTs' self-perceptions and experiences were informed by traits that had been passed down from previous generations.

Future research should integrate Kristen Neff's (2003) self-compassion components, compassion-focused art therapy objectives and interpersonal emotion regulation from the onset of an investigation. This integration will provide opportunities for individuals to develop their understanding and use of self-compassion through both visual explorations and verbal reflections on their artworks.

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