

## ATOL: Art Therapy Online

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# Editorial: The Power and Potential of Case Studies in Art Therapy

The ATOL Editorial Board

## Thank you and goodbye to Philippa Brown

As we share this volume of ATOL, we sadly bid farewell to Philippa Brown who is leaving the editorial board as she turns her focus to new pathways. Philippa has been an enormous inspiration and driving force of precision during her time on the ATOL editorial board. We would like to express our heartfelt thanks for her dedication, leadership and contributions. She will be dearly missed.

## Why a case study issue?

This volume explores the case study — a close companion to our training, teaching, professional practice, and reflective supervision. Writing clinical case studies was one of the earliest forms of psychotherapy research, beginning with Freud and his colleagues in the 1890s. Freud's well-known cases — such as Dora, the Wolf Man, and Little Hans — were written to share his pioneering ideas about the unconscious and its complex mechanisms. These accounts combined session notes with his reflections, interpretations, and theoretical insights.

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Yet this way of working also carries risks of bias, errors and misinterpretation. A therapist's perspective is inevitably shaped by their own lens, assumptions, limitations, and their understanding of a client's experience may never be complete. To address this issue, including the client's voice has been an important agenda. Moreover, writing about clients involves sensitive ethical considerations and complex power dynamics. It can have long-term consequences and, in some cases, may even cause harm to the people whose stories are shared. For these reasons, although writing case studies remains a requirement in many training programmes — as it continues to help trainees make sense of the therapeutic relationship, process their experiences, reflect on their practice, and develop deeper insights — it has received criticism and has not been a mainstream research method in recent years.

This ongoing controversy around case studies has sparked many conversations and debates within the editorial team. On the other hand, we also reflected on our personal connection to the case study and its role in our professional development: What do we recall of our first encounters with case study material? Was it early in a first semester at the start of our training, or perhaps before? What challenges have we located as our academic, placement and professional practices developed? Perhaps many of us remember a particular case study; what was it about that piece that lingers as our work progresses? Or was it the way a case study helped us to understand a complex theoretical approach? As members of the editorial board also involved in teaching, we reflect on the joys and challenges of supporting students as they engage with their own case study materials, connecting our roles as therapists, educators, and supervisors to this enduring aspect of our practice. For one of us, the case studies of Edith Kramer came to mind. Reading Kramer's work as a student, it was possible to feel immersed in the narrative, as if standing alongside her, witnessing the therapeutic journey unfold. Her writing brought theoretical concepts to life, igniting inspiration long before placement work. Similarly, in preparation for a placement in a setting for individuals experiencing homelessness, Marian Liebmann's writing offered a compelling vision of art therapy's possibilities in this context. Liebmann's depiction of a drop-in group setting, grounded in respect and dignity for participants' strengths and experiences, presented a collective "case study" that profoundly shaped an approach to the placement, fostering flexibility in the use of space and responsiveness to clients' wisdom and wishes.

On the one hand, there are valid criticisms of the case study. On the other, we recognise our own deep connection to it. These mixed feelings inspired us to create this special issue, inviting perspectives and reflections from the art therapy community on this enduring and contested form of writing. We are pleased to present contributions from across three continents, including the UK, Germany, Taiwan, Australia, and Austria. The case studies take us into diverse settings: a town recovering after an earthquake in Taiwan, a school in Glasgow, a residential care home for young people in Germany, a women's prison in the UK, online art therapy in Australia, and more. In this volume, we hear from people speaking in their own "languages": from newly qualified therapists, from experienced practitioners, from the client's perspective, and from academics. These voices are expressed through different languages, communication styles, and academic writing experiences. We are delighted to include several studies published in the authors' native languages alongside their English translations. We sincerely hope readers will approach this collection with curiosity about the opportunities offered by such diverse authorship.

### **Including the client's voice in case study**

In *The Case for Case Studies: Art Psychotherapy as a Feminist Methodology with Women in Prison*, Jessica Collier argues for the ongoing relevance and significance of case studies as a vital research method in art psychotherapy. She challenges the dominance of positivist, quantitative research approaches — which often dismiss case studies as "less rigorous" — by proposing a feminist methodology that places listening, embodiment, relationality, reflexivity, emotion, and intersectionality at its centre. A valuable personal reflection from a criminalised individual on her art therapy experience is included, adding depth to Collier's argument and offering a compelling theoretical lens on the role of case studies today.

As art therapy is a reciprocal process between therapist and client, the client's voice plays a crucial role in understanding the therapeutic relationship. We are particularly honoured and pleased to include the representation of a client's perspective, voice and experience in this volume. In *Painting My Heart Songs: My Journey with an Art Therapist*, "Jac" shares her experiences of accessing art therapy online from a regional town in Australia. Her account vividly illustrates the ways in which the therapeutic relationship, materials and processes accompanied her navigation through some

significantly adverse life challenges, compounded by systemic issues of power, abuse, trust, and fear. Illustrating a journey to access creative expression, Jac's heuristic case study offers rich qualitative evidence of this modality's transformative potential for individuals living with the legacy of complex childhood trauma, while highlighting challenges within the online therapeutic space. In this piece, we have an important opportunity to hear a client's experience of their own art therapy journey; a piece where art therapy itself becomes the case study, told by a client engaged with it, in her own words.

The attempts to include the voices of art therapy service users have been an effort by the art therapy community to address and challenge the ethical issues and power imbalances surrounding case studies and research. As this has been discussed extensively by the editorial board, we have included an extended reflective piece from editorial member Helen Omand. In *On the Difficulty of Writing Anything About Anybody: Navigating Alternatives to Case Studies*, she shares her experience of co-writing and explores alternative possibilities to the formal case study as she reflects on the work and rich material emerging from a therapeutic arts studio.

### **Exploring the complex interplay within a single case**

Alongside the co-creation that takes place between art therapists and their clients, we also have the classic case studies, which offer us glimpse into the therapeutic process. One of the distinctive strengths of the case study is its capacity to scrutinise and reflect on the complex interplay of factors within a single case. Art therapy sessions often hold many layers at once, and the act of writing a case study enables the therapist to recall and immerse themselves in the experience, to reflect on transference and countertransference, aesthetics, institutional and political influences, and more. Writing a case study could be an attempt to move closer to understanding the person in front of them.

In this light, Anaïs Héraud presents *Minna's Gift: A Case Study of Art Therapy with a 16-Year-Old Adolescent in Residential Care*. Her motivation for writing about Minna arose from a desire to explore more deeply — and make sense of — Minna's consistent act of giving away the artworks she created during art therapy sessions. Anaïs vividly documents this dynamic on multiple levels, including within the therapy

itself, in Minna's relationships with others, and within the institutional context. For Anaïs, writing this case study provided an opportunity to reflect on her understanding of Minna's therapeutic journey, their evolving relationship, and the intricate interplay between Minna's inner experiences and the external challenges she faced. This paper reads like a gift from Anaïs to Minna.

*PEEKABOO! In Search of the Elephant in the Rubble: A Case Study of Art Psychotherapy with a Child Earthquake Survivor* by Yi-chun Ho is another intriguing example of a classic case study. Yi-chun vividly portrays the art-making and symbolic repetitive play of a seven-year-old girl who chose to call herself "Elephant." Elephant had been buried under the rubble of a collapsed building during a 6.6-magnitude earthquake. Her art therapy process seemed to mirror a search for her true self beneath both the physical debris and the many layers of early childhood trauma. Interestingly, Yi-chun's writing process reflected a kind of parallel journey. Her first draft read like a detailed collection of session notes — full of rich, fascinating material, yet at times overwhelming. Through several major rewrites and editorial revisions, the underlying patterns and themes in Elephant's art and play gradually emerged. In many ways, the process of writing a case study resembles clearing away rubble — patiently uncovering what has been buried and revealing the possible deeper meanings beneath.

Marcela Andrade del Corro's contribution transports us to the outskirts of Glasgow. As an art therapist working in Scotland and originating in Mexico, Marcela shares her work in a school supporting children navigating poverty and systemic oppression. Her case study underscores the role of art therapy in fostering relationships, pride and engagement within a school community through a whole-school approach. Marcella employs an observational gaze onto the experiences she was immersed in within a somewhat familiar yet completely awakening social context into which her work and her clients were situated. Case vignettes are employed to discuss the approach taken within a school in which adversity was experienced by most.

As case study can tell compelling stories, they hold the power to move our hearts and make an impact. However, for the very same reason, organisations have often used case studies for many purposes such as promoting service, fundraising, publicity and

more. Ange Morgan from the editorial board provides an extended reflective piece to explore the line we try to balance between ethics and consent, asking: Is autonomous consent within a therapeutic relationship possible? This piece offers shared perspectives from their work in the community and not-for-profit sector in Australia, with: *Ethics in practice: The use of client narratives and creative outputs in community and not-for-profit art therapy settings*.

### **Case studies that explore theoretical perspectives**

Traditionally, case studies have been employed to explore and reflect on the experience of therapy. Case studies, in spite of addressing a single case or a - usually small - cohort of cases, can also provide cumulative evidence and add to theory building by proposing ideas derived from this particular process to the larger scene of theory. Because of its microscopic focus, the case study's voice is quite distinct from positivist research for its depth, detail, and focus on the human individual. It is this strength of the method that some contributions to this issue highlight in particular.

Anette Kuhn's article considers how bringing together mentalisation and psychodynamic art therapy are a good fit to understand her client's development. The heart of the article is a detailed case study in the traditional sense, which tells the story of her clients' development through his vivid artworks over time. The case study is framed with theoretical framing about the overlap of psychodynamic art therapy and the underlying principles of mentalisation.

A jointly written study from Austria by Monika Andergassen, Katrin Reiter and Friederike Wiesinger refers to the particular philosophical and psychological model of the Vienna School of Art Therapy; it merges various paradigms from Buddhism, Mindfulness and other approaches, and the authors investigate the model's feasibility by comparing three case studies on art therapy with diverse clients in different settings that they had undertaken separately and previously. Their case study reminds us that Art Therapy and its underlying theories, methods and approaches is a broad church and, depending on cultures, histories and contexts, continues to offer fresh insights and points for discussion.

## Visual representation pieces

Two short presentations link this current issue of ATOL to its previous 2024 issue of Visual Presentations in Response to Art Therapy Practice: Christin Herm from Germany presents artworks from school art therapy with two clients. Both works, titled 'Wound' and 'Br**OK**en', address the theme of vulnerability. Christin scrutinizes her brief, immediate and subjective response to them and leaves it to the reader to explore their own thoughts, feelings and ideas as they arise from observing the works; and in *Beyond the Ashtray*, Alkistis Karouli, also from Germany, presents us with an all too familiar, yet seldomly discussed object in art therapy. Produced by one of her clients in a clinic for people with addictions, it is part of a larger collection of similar items in her department. Along with showing the object and against the backdrop of psychodynamic theory, Alkistis offers her reflections on this notorious receptacle and its role in art therapy.

In a nutshell, both short pieces illustrate and pinpoint two key components that can also be observed in the case study: the art therapist's subjective, aesthetic and personal involvement with the client's aesthetic productions, and the turn to theory as a tool for contextualisation and reflection beyond the raw and immediate encounter with the artwork.

## Conclusion

The papers of this volume illustrate how the landscape of Art Therapy and the approach to the case study method have evolved in their own way in different cultures and geographic parts of the world. Therefore, this volume celebrates the rich tapestry of themes related to and arising from the case study and the diverse takes on it. It also illustrates how the case study, as a reflective tool, is interpreted and utilised in different manners, with different theoretical paradigms and to different outcomes according to the historic and cultural backdrop of practitioners and clients around the globe. The volume also addresses the ethical issues, power relations and subjectivity that have been associated with the case study method. However, it seems important to note that these issues are not tied to the method, but to the very process and profession of Art Therapy. The case study therefore pinpoints the issue and brings it to the fore, rather than shying away from it. The same set of responsibilities that are tied to being a therapist can be traced when trying to write about it. We hope these narratives, and

their philosophical and methodological differences, spark curiosity, reflection and renewed motivation for practitioners, service users, researchers, teachers and scholars alike.

These aspects, and many more that must remain unaddressed in this issue, will continue to spark our interest and will hopefully materialise in future issues of ATOL.