

Images of Existential Solitude: Experience and Expression in Art Therapy

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ABSTRACT

Images of Existential Solitude: Experience and Expression in Art Therapy

Sora Davis

Existential solitude is one of the inevitable experiences of human existence, and may be an element of the existential questioning that many individuals bring to therapy. This exploratory study investigates how the use of art therapy research interviews, and through extrapolation, art therapy sessions themselves, may offer to the image-maker new insights that inform and transform her experience of the phenomenon of being alone in the world. It also looks at common themes that emerge from the verbal and visual descriptions of the participants. Four women who were concurrently involved in different expressive therapy groups participated in the research. Based primarily on the phenomenological method while drawing on hermeneutic inquiry, individual semi-structured and phenomenological art therapy research interviews were conducted along with a follow-up interview with each participant. Data was analyzed using a combination of qualitative approaches in order to extract themes. The findings of this pilot study showed that the use of art-making in the presence of a therapeutic other produced new insights into the experience of existential solitude for the participants, and applications of this approach are discussed.

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It is with love that I dedicate this paper to the memory of my mother, Ethel Segal Davis, who left this place on September 14, 2001 and whose vibrant essence lives on.

I want to express my gratitude to the four women who had the self-awareness and the faith in the process to look inside themselves and who generously shared their experiences with me. I would also like to recognize all of the clients with whom I have been privileged to walk for part of their journeys. All these people have opened up their worlds to me and have never failed to remind me of the wonders that therapy and art therapy offer and that, ultimately, life is full of delightful surprises.

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There are several friends, family members, classmates, teachers, supervisors, and colleagues who contributed by way of offering ideas, resources, personal experiences, questions, curiosity, encouragement, and excitement.

And my loving appreciation to Jerome who, all the way through, has demonstrated nothing but respect, moral and technical support, infinite patience with and understanding of my lack of availability, and who put up with my mess.

I am too alone in the world, and not alone enough
to make every minute holy.
I am too tiny in this world, and not tiny enough
just to lie before you like a thing,
shrewd and secretive.
I want my own will, and I want simply to be with my will,
as it goes toward action,
and in the silent, sometimes hardly moving times
when something is coming near,
I want to be with those who know secret things
or else alone.
I want to be a mirror for your whole body,
and I never want to be blind, or to be too old
to hold up your heavy and swaying picture.
I want to unfold.
I don't want to stay folded anywhere,
because where I am folded, there I am a lie.
And I want my grasp of things
true before you. I want to describe myself
like a painting that I looked at
closely for a long time,
like a saying that I finally understood,
like the pitcher I use every day,
like the face of my mother,
like a ship
that took me safely
through the wildest storm of all.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Existence is beyond the power of words to define: terms may be used but none of them is absolute.

Lao-tzu

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Solitude can be understood in a myriad of ways. It seems to cover a broad band of the emotional and experiential spectrum. It can be felt as a prevailing and devastating loneliness, a safe and sacred seclusion, a sad and gloomy aloneness, or a long-awaited and cherished isolation. A person can feel totally alone surrounded by people in a bustling urban environment or, alternately, while devoid of human companionship out in the wilderness. I am approaching this study in the spirit of considering aloneness as a universal experience. I am looking at solitude as one of the inevitable factors comprising the mosaic of human existence. It begins with the birth experience, which is the initial event of separation. Other separations inevitably follow in the course of one's journey through life, ending with death, the ultimate passage one navigates alone. The distinctive state of deep solitude is often a time of introspection, a time to meditate on the meaning of one's life. I have chosen, rather than to concentrate on a particular psychological disturbance or mental illness, to explore a life concern, one often brought to therapy, that many individuals confront in the course of traversing the journey of existence.

The underlying rationale for the choice of topic is based on the assumption that many people who come to therapy are in the midst of some form of existential questioning or conflict. That is to say, whatever arises as the initial issue which provokes the request for therapy or the referral to therapy, before long it becomes apparent that the individual is facing questions of existential concern, such as: "Who am I in relation to the rest of humanity or the universe? Why do I feel so alone? What is the meaning in my existence? How to I attain freedom and independence while being in meaningful relationship?" In psychotherapy and art therapy we often encounter individuals who are

confronted with their being-in-the-world (Betensky, 1995). Crises are often what bring people to therapy and it is often crises that provoke this deeply rooted kind of questioning (Van Deurzen-Smith, 1988). Art therapy may help to illuminate the path and provide a new perspective for individuals who are exploring these very profound issues.

Art-making is, in general, a very solitary act. The relationship that one has with one's imagery, both in the process of creating it and with the actual object, is a very personal and private experience. This process, however healing that it may be for an individual, is not necessarily therapeutic in and of itself. The elegance of art therapy is that it provides for the opportunity, within a predetermined framework, in a safe and respectful environment, and within a therapeutic relationship, to use visual imagery and expression for the particular purpose of a deepened understanding of self in the world. As so aptly expressed by Moon (1995), imagery, even if perceived as disturbing, is seen as enhancing life rather than as a threat. Art therapy can help people to discover, rediscover, and to explore the healthy part of being alone.

1.1 Definition of terms

The objective of this research paper is to explore the role that art therapy may play in addressing individuals' experiences of existential solitude. It is with intent that I have chosen to work with the terminology and experience of *existential solitude* rather than to use the term *loneliness*. Loneliness holds connotations of sadness or desolation. Webster's (2002) defines loneliness as, "the quality or state of being lonely" and, defines lonely as "being without company; cut off from others; sad from being alone; producing a feeling of bleakness or desolation" (p. 1080). The term isolation carries the subtle undertone of social implications. According to Webster's (2002) isolation is "the act of

isolating; the condition of being isolated” and an isolate is “an individual socially withdrawn and removed from society” (p. 979). Solitude is defined as, “the quality or state of being alone or remote from society” (Webster’s, 2002, p. 1753).

Rokach (1984) clarified the difference between loneliness and solitude with loneliness described as an unsettling and painful experience while solitude offers contentment and renewal. Solitude carries the implication of a state of being without an association of a negative emotional condition. Inherent in the notion of loneliness is a negative or disagreeable emotional state. It is assumed that many people would have difficulty perceiving their experiences of loneliness without associating a negative or unpleasant emotional side to it. Solitude, I believe, leaves more room for individual response. It can be a devastating experience; however, it can also be profoundly uplifting. It is for this reason that I have chosen a term that may invite a broader range of personal responses. I have also employed the term “aloneness” which carries a similar connotation of being an experience involving choice. In fact, Barrell (1988) pointed out that in existentialism aloneness and solitude are “viewed as an important source of creativity and personal growth” (p. 3).

Definition of the term *existential* is problematic. Different philosophers and theorists are wont to define it in different ways. Much of the writings of the leading existential thinkers are weighty, and a detailed analysis and presentation of them is beyond the scope of this paper. Simply stated, this particular viewpoint “embraces diverse doctrines” (Webster’s, 2002, p. 639) yet emphasizes the uniqueness and freedom of each individual’s experience (Webster’s, 1965) and the individual’s ultimate responsibility for acts of free will (Webster’s, 2002). The essential concepts are more

about uncovering than analyzing experience. This uncovering has to do with concerns of existence, concerns that most people face at some points in their lives. These concerns are often defined and looked at in terms of themes, such as, being, freedom, death, or isolation (Yalom, 1980).

Existential solitude is defined as an intrinsic reality of life in which there is both pain and triumph; an awareness of being fundamentally separated or isolated from other creatures and from the world; related more to a lack of religion or meaning in life than lack of interpersonal bonds (Moustakas, 1996; Perlman, 1989; Yalom, 1980). Barrell (1988) remarked that in existentialism, pleasurable experiences of aloneness are typically termed as solitude.

1.2 Research questions

This study explores the following: how does the act of image-making inform and transform a person's experience and meaning of being alone in the world? My interest is to investigate the ways that the creating of an image of the experience of existential solitude, when applied in a supportive and exploratory environment, may offer to the image-maker information and insights that were previously not available to consciousness. The subsidiary question is: what are the common themes that occur in the visual images and verbal narratives of individuals exploring the meaning of existential solitude? This question grows from my curiosity regarding what themes or experiences of existential solitude are shared by different individuals and, if there are common themes, how are these themes reflected in the imagery.

1.3 Phenomenological/hermeneutic approach and art therapy research

Phenomenology was founded by Edmund Husserl (1889-1938) for the purpose of developing “a science of phenomena that would clarify how it is that objects are experienced and present themselves to our consciousness” (Spinelli, 1989, p. 2). As a research method, phenomenological inquiry uses as data the phenomena of consciousness in order to construct meaning. It stresses the *noetic* stance, which looks at *how* we define unique individual experience (Spinelli, 1989).

Based on the lived world of experience, phenomenology gives importance to clear descriptions from research participants. The phenomenological researcher attempts to look at essential qualities of the phenomenon and its meaning as it unfolds on its own terms rather than to apply it to existing knowledge, predetermined hypotheses or extrinsic models and causations (Junge & Linesch, 1993; Linesch, 1995; Polkinghorne, 1989).

The phenomenological research method is compatible with research in art therapy. Like art therapy it is discovery-oriented and it provides access to various levels of understanding (Quail & Peavy, 1994). It looks at subjective data and involves listening to, watching, and understanding another person and the products of that person (Junge & Linesch, 1993). Phenomenological art therapy inquiry relies on verbal descriptions of the individuals along with the making and exploration of visual imagery. Phenomenologists look for patterns and structures of the phenomena in question. Art therapy provides images as an additional source and mode of data from which to discover patterns. McConville (1978) has pointed out that in the descriptive and integrative nature of phenomenology, the world emerges as meaningful by way of perception. This is congruent with art therapy in which perception, particularly visual perception, plays a

major role. Art therapy takes place in an interchange between therapist and client. The therapeutic relationship forms the basis for the work. In the phenomenological approach meaning does not exist on its own. It takes place in a dialectical relationship between participant and the physical and social world (McConville, 1978).

Betensky (1995) has presented a convincing claim for the fit between phenomenology and art therapy. She has affirmed the value for a client to be “guided by a therapist who has no predetermined meanings in mind” (p. xi). She put forward that art therapy may serve to guide a person in intentional perception. She has cited Merleau-Ponty’s statement that “to look at an object is to inhabit it and from this habitation to grasp all things” (p. 6), pointing to the intentionality of seeing that comes with art therapy.

Hermeneutics has been described as “the deliberate and systematic methodology of interpretation” (Tappan, 2001, p. 46). In this study, hermeneutical inquiry was involved along with the phenomenological as part of the art therapy segment of the interviews. The interpretation is founded on the subjective experience of a symbolic expression. As outlined by Tappan (2001), the participants interact with their own text, in order to increase their understanding of their own experience, in their own way, and then to describe it in their own words. The *hermeneutic circle* grows out of the “circularity of understanding” (Tappan, p. 50) in which the researcher’s understanding is continually shaped and revised in the interaction and exploration with each participant. This “relational activity” (p. 54) of researcher and participant comprises the interpretive community described by Tappan (2001). The role of investigator is not to interpret the

meanings in the imagery but to work with the participants in a phenomenological approach in order to glean their meanings of the work.

In relation to art therapy, Linesch (1994) and Franklin & Politsky (1992) advocated for interpretation as a collaboration between participant and interviewer. Linesch explained that hermeneutics, simply stated, is built on the theory that meanings of experiences are created by individuals in dialogue with others and with themselves. She argued for the value of intersubjectivity between the researcher and participant, that the client or participant is the expert and the researcher is the one without the knowledge of the participant's experience. Understanding grows from a circular dialect in an unending fashion in the form of a "hermeneutic spiral" (Linesch, 1994, p. 189). The adaptation of the hermeneutic spiral to this project will be presented in the description of the study.

1.4 Chapter summary

The review of the literature will take a brief look at the theories of loneliness followed by a more extensive review of the theories of existential solitude. Although the experience of loneliness is qualitatively different than that of solitude, as pointed out above, the literature on loneliness, per se, covers a broad range, including explorations from an existential perspective. Moustakas (1996) has conducted extensive research on the various experiences of solitude. Barrell's (1988) dissertation on the subject of feeling alone encompassed a wide range of experiences. Other writings to be explored along the lines of existential thought with a focus on solitude will be those by Yalom (1980), Moustakas (1966, 1990, 1994, 1996), and others. I will take a close look at what has been written about existential psychotherapy, from the viewpoint of existential solitude or

isolation starting with May (1953, 1958a, 1958b, 1967, 1969), Yalom (1980) and Van Deurzen-Smith (1988, 1997). The theory and practice of art therapy as it embraces an existential focus and exploration will be reviewed, using Moon's work (1995) as the starting point. Chapter 3 sets up the methodological foundations for the structures used in the interviews. This is followed by a detailed description of how the procedure of the study and the analysis was conceived and conducted. Chapter 4 goes into the findings of each of the interviews, delineating the individual themes and looking at common themes in terms of experiences of existential solitude and manifestation in and relationship to an art therapeutic context. The findings are then discussed in relation to the significance with regards to art therapy.

1.5 Limitations and delimitations of the study

This project only just initiates an inquiry of such immense breadth and depth. Four individuals, who were participating in group expressive therapies but not with the investigator, agreed to participate in the study. Art therapy interviews and verbal interviews which focussed specifically on the experience of existential solitude were conducted individually with each person. The project was limited by the actuality that the context of the investigation was conducted in a time-limited fashion, as well as, outside of the framework of an art therapeutic relationship. As such, it needs to be understood that any extrapolations that will be made regarding the relationship between art therapy and existential solitude must be viewed as no more than preliminary hypotheses. The dialogues that took place between each participant and her image, and between each participant and the investigator, can be seen to serve as an indicator or, perhaps, as a precursor, of what possibilities may exist in a longer-term therapeutic dialogue. This can

possibly be viewed as a pilot project that begins to look at how the exploration of issues of existential concern, as they appear in a therapeutic context, may interface with the use of art therapy. The issue of pathology and the role that mental illness may play in the questions and experiences explored here is not included in this enquiry.

It is important to point out, as well, my recognition of the intersubjective nature of such an inquiry, that in the dialectical nature of the interviews there is bound to be some influence on the participants. Phenomenology takes into account the importance of subjective experience and intersubjectivity (Moustakas, 1994; Spinelli, 1989). Towards the end of identifying, and bracketing out, as best I could, my own presumptions and leanings on the subject, I engaged in my own reflection by way of going through the steps of the interview myself. This helped me to recognize and to separate my own experiences from those of the participants and to understand, in a more profound way, their experiences.

The review of the literature will be limited in that I will be presenting only that which is germane to the participants' experiences as expressed in this study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

A presentation on the subject of existential solitude would be incomplete without an accompanying discussion on the theories of loneliness. Barrell (1988) has pointed out that a narrow focus on loneliness as a problematic state has often neglected the study of solitude or aloneness as a pleasurable experience. He also suggested that broadening the definition of the field of investigation beyond that of loneliness may broaden the area of understanding of the phenomenon of aloneness.

In my research into existential solitude, I have discovered that there is not a clear line between what may be deemed loneliness and that of existential solitude, and all that exists in between. The experiences appear along a continuum from loneliness to existential solitude.

Not only is it pertinent to examine the areas of divergence between the two experiences of loneliness and existential solitude but also to explore where similarities and overlaps are to be found. Along with the meeting points found in the concepts of loneliness and existential solitude comes a certain degree of muddiness. Yalom (1980) has made similar observations in attesting that interpersonal and intrapersonal isolation, or loneliness, share a common boundary with existential isolation and that they may often feel and appear to be the same. Moustakas (1966) has affirmed that loneliness and solitude are different but related experiences.

Due to the subjective quality of the experience of loneliness, many interpretations abound, along with the different ways of labeling the experience. For the sake of simplicity I use the term *loneliness*; however, I tended to follow the terminology of the authors whose works I will be presenting.

Theories of existential solitude are to be found throughout the literature on loneliness, existential thought, and existential psychotherapy. Like loneliness, it has many names. Although, I have adopted the term *existential solitude*, I also use the terminology presented by the authors, in presenting their contributions.

2.1 Overview of the theories of loneliness

Loneliness has been referred to as various forms of solitude, isolation, alienation, estrangement, and meaninglessness (Andersson, 1986). It has been looked at as a psychopathological or a psychotic state, as a symptom of neurotic adjustment, as a disruption of object relationships or of repressed unconscious needs and has been linked with depression and anxiety (Barrell, 1988). The element of relationships, or lack thereof, as a qualifying factor appears to be present in most theories of loneliness.

Barrell (1988) depicted four themes of feeling alone. Three of these themes are more connected to descriptions of loneliness. There is the theme of Missing, in which one feels the absence of and yearns for a particular or a meaningful relationship or in which one focuses on the emptiness which is present while one is alone. With the Barrier theme one feels as if there were an obstacle between the self and others. This barrier is due to differences in ways of thinking, for instance, or to an attitude of indifference on the part of the individual or of others. In the theme of Vulnerability there is the desire to avoid threats to one's physical or emotional being. These perceived threats come by way of feeling lack of support from others or by feeling exposed.

Rokach's (1984) findings concluded that loneliness is caused, in part, by a significant loss, past experiences of painful interactions, and the lack of close, intimate relationships.

Loneliness is often distinguished by the classifications of *social* and *emotional* loneliness. Social loneliness is more interpersonal in nature and usually carries the implication of meaninglessness, boredom, aimlessness, and marginality. Emotional loneliness, which tends towards being intrapersonal in nature, has been suggested to be characterized by a sense of complete aloneness accompanied by oversensitivity and anxiety (Weiss, cited by Andersson, 1986). Rokach (1984) referred to Weiss who presented that loneliness, rather than being an integral part of human existence, is a response to an absence of intimate relationships. Emotional loneliness emerges in the absence of close emotional bonding, and social loneliness comes into being from a lack of social involvements. Emotional loneliness, according to Weiss is characterized by anxiety and apprehension while social loneliness is dominated by feelings of boredom and exclusion.

Interpersonal isolation is how Yalom (1980) has characterized what is generally experienced as loneliness. He posited that it signifies isolation from other individuals. There are factors which contribute to the absence of gratifying social relationships. These factors may be geographic distance, the lack of social skills, problems with intimacy, or a problematic personality style. Intrapersonal isolation plays a part in loneliness in that one shuts off or isolates from parts of oneself.

Moustakas (1996) distinguished loneliness as *loneliness anxiety*. This is similar in quality to Weiss' emotional loneliness. Loneliness anxiety, he wrote, is aroused by the search for safety, order, and an anxiety-free state in an effort to master the events of one's life. There is a yearning for an authentic relatedness to self and others.

According to Moustakas (1996) loneliness evolves out of childhood development and experiences. When a child does not have fulfilled the basic needs of appropriate adult presence then loneliness results. The child deals with these intense feelings of separation by engaging in a rich fantasy life, he wrote.

2.2 Existential solitude

Yalom (1980) has written about the four ultimate concerns of life that form a dynamic of existential conflict. These concerns are death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness. He described existential isolation as being distinct from interpersonal and intrapersonal isolation in that it is a fundamental isolation that reaches beyond the other kinds of isolation or loneliness. He refers to this as “separation from the world” or an “unbridgeable gap” (p. 355) that is due to the fact that we enter and leave this existence alone. The conflict is the tension that is formed between our consciousness of our complete aloneness and our yearning to be protected and to be connected to a larger whole.

In Barrell’s (1988) themes of feeling alone, the fourth theme of Freedom contains the quality of existential solitude; in fact, the author stated that solitude is an appropriate label for this experience. This theme entails the positive desire for the freedom to make one’s own choices alone and the desire for absence from limitations, in the state of being alone. This sense of freedom coming from feeling alone can be present while being by oneself or with others.

Gaev, as reviewed by Rokach (1984), sees existential loneliness as being a universal experience shared by human beings, including birth, growing up, separation, and death. This is seen as distinct from what he calls pathological loneliness.

Moustakas' (1996) existential loneliness is an essential condition of existence. Citing Wolfe, he presented that the profound experiences of grief and despair of utter aloneness are a precondition for creativity. To face with openness and to accept the inevitable existential loneliness of life, is a healthy condition. His theory is that the solution to loneliness is to "accept it, face it, live with it, and let it be" (p. 48). It is a condition of existence from which new images, symbols, and ideas emanate, leading to a more profound and sensitive awareness of one's own being. In "creative loneliness" (p. 50) there is an aspect of utter aloneness that resides alongside a relatedness to nature and to life itself. A connectedness to the universe is sustained.

The theme of creative loneliness has been raised by Frankl (1978) as a way of dealing with the loneliness prevalent in modern society. By making use of what he called "existential privacy" (p. 73), people can turn the negative experience of the absence of others into a positive experience of taking the opportunity to meditate. From this comes the courage to be alone.

Not only is loneliness of the existential kind essential, it is also inevitable. It "exists in its own right as a source of both pain and power, as a source of darkness and light" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 92). It is often through a genuine encounter with nature that one can find the courage and strength with which to face profound feelings of alienation. In communion with nature one may come face to face with creation and make possible new levels of personal discovery.

One of the ways that certain individuals deal with the conflict of the isolation of existence is through a form of fusion, in which "one softens one's ego boundaries"

(Yalom, 1980, p. 378) in relation to another person or group. This creates an illusion of not being alone. The feeling of isolation is abolished by obscuring self-awareness.

Andersson (1986) described existential loneliness as stemming from the human awareness of finiteness, separateness, and death. He wrote that the feeling of existential loneliness may be the result of having experienced a sense of meaninglessness or a dramatic loss, separation, or crisis. Moustakas (1966) has also written that it is often when a severe shock or jolt occurs that one becomes aware of the nature of one's existence, when one is faced with one's ultimate aloneness. This experience often leaves a person without words to describe it; however, it leaves one with a rich and vivid inner encounter.

Anxiety is often very much a part of existential solitude. May (1958b) differentiated between fear and anxiety. He wrote that anxiety is ontological in character, that the experience of it is an important part of one's sense of being. Anxiety, according to May, "strikes at the center core" (p. 51) of one's sense of self. Fear, on the other hand, is not ontological, and is an affect, existing on the "periphery" (p. 51) of existence. Tillich (1952) wrote that fear and anxiety are of the same ontological origin but manifest differently. Fear has a definite object, which makes acting upon it that much more clear. Anxiety, having no object, holds more of a threat of the unknown, which ultimately implies a threat to the core of one's being.

Yalom (1980) cited Fromm's contention that the most basic human concern is existential isolation and that the primary source of anxiety is the awareness of this isolation. There is a helplessness inherent in this experience, a state of "thrownness" (p. 358), a term taken from Heidegger, in which one loses a sense of familiarity with the

world one knows. The anxiety arises out of the “nothingness” (p. 359) that is felt, in which nothing or no one can help us. Yalom asserts that in this moment, we experience existential isolation in its completeness.

Van Deurzen-Smith (1997) has deduced from Kierkegaard’s reflections that anxiety helps one to reflect upon and deal with the tensions between nothingness and the eternal. Anxiety is a fundamental experience of existence and the cost of avoiding anxiety is to be overwhelmed by it or to lose touch with living life.

Moustakas (1996) talked about the sharing of this deep state of aloneness. He wrote that it can often be shared in a communal way in silence. At times when it is most intense, one can relate to others experiencing the same solitude. It may not be able to be communicated or understood, but it can be shared. He added that it could only be recognized and appreciated by individuals who were open to and aware of their own experiences (Moustakas, 1990).

Yalom (1980) presented the interplay between relationship and existential isolation. He based his discussion on, firstly, his observations that the clinical manifestations of existential isolation center on interpersonal relationships and, secondly, on references to the writings of Buber, Frankl, Maslow, and Fromm. His belief was that our ability to acknowledge and face our isolated existences in life better equips us to enter into intimate and loving relationships.

An interesting consideration offered by Brennan (1982) is that existential loneliness appears to emerge during adolescence, with all the accompanying new-found self-consciousness and recognition of the self as a distinct and separate being. This is consistent with what Yalom (1980) has written about the growth experience and its role

in the evolution of existential solitude. As we grow up and separate from our dependence on the mother figure, giving up the state of interpersonal fusion, we encounter existential isolation. The issue of attachment-separation is the major task of existential development.

An important consideration offered by Moustakas (1966) is that the truly solitary process cannot be defined or quantified. As soon as it is studied, it changes and becomes something other than the original, spontaneous experience.

Finally, I believe it is fitting to include a statement made by Nietzsche as cited by Van Deurzen-Smith (1997): “what doesn’t kill me makes me stronger” (p.30).

2.3 Existential psychotherapy

Existential psychotherapy grew out of the writings of philosophers and phenomenologists and more specifically from the works of Binswanger, Kuhn, Boss, May, Yalom, Frankl, and Laing along with several others. Selecting from their work, I have referred to the notions that have specific relevance to this study. The lack of mention of certain of these major contributors to the field is not a reflection of the value of what they have offered.

Finding a succinct definition for existential psychotherapy is a challenging task and Yalom (1980) has stated that the existential analysts are not seen as a cohesive ideological school. He has offered the following: “Existential psychotherapy is a dynamic approach to therapy which focuses on concerns that are rooted in the individual’s existence” (p. 5). The conflicts that are explored within the psychodynamics of existential psychotherapy are those that flow “from the individual’s confrontation with the givens of existence” (p. 8). Isolation is one of the concerns at the core of this dynamic conflict.

May (1958a) has pointed out that the term *existence* derives from the root *ex-sistere* which means *to stand out, to emerge*. He wrote that the existential approach is a dynamic one in that it portrays individuals as “emerging and becoming” (p. 12) beings rather than as static ones. People are looked at in terms of how they exist at a given moment in time and space. He said that the existential approach to psychology is one that deals with rediscovering the being of the person who is experiencing existence in the context of modern Western culture rather than with looking at isolated psychological reactions. The individual is regarded while in the act of becoming and transitioning. Existentialism is an attempt to grasp reality. Like psychotherapy, it delves into and evolves out of the individual’s anxiety, estrangement, and conflicts which are derived from Western society. May said simply that existential analysis concerns itself with “*ontology*, the science of being, and with *Dasein*, the existence of this particular being sitting opposite the psychotherapist” (p. 37).

Van Deurzen-Smith (1997) explained that the objective of existential psychotherapy is to understand the human situation by way of exploration, description, and clarification rather than to cure and to explain it. It aims to empower individuals to face the conflicts or tensions of life in the context of the world in which they live.

May (1958a) has reminded us that, as therapists, we encounter individuals in an existential context on a daily basis. Clients present us with their *beings* in our moment-to-moment interaction with them; we are involved in an experience with individuals which allows us to grasp their essences or experiences in ways that may be quite different from what we already know about them. Yalom (1980) brought this one step further to assert

his conviction that most experienced therapists make use of existential insights, notwithstanding their theoretical and clinical orientation.

Kierkegaard, who is credited with originating the formal school of existentialism, reasoned that rather than to strive for making life easier, it is important to examine what is difficult in existing (Yalom, 1980). The seminal contribution of Kierkegaard's "formulation of truth-as-relationship" to dynamic psychology was put forth by May (1958a, p. 25). Simply stated, this refers to the question of truth as it relates to the subjective reality of the individual's relationship to it, or "relational truth" (p. 26). In this, the subject is not separated from the object that is being studied. One must embrace the relationship between the person and the experience.

Alongside dealing with *Dasein*, the state of being, existential psychotherapy explores the threat of the state of *non-being*. This comes from the most obvious threat to being which is that of death. A basic tenet of existential psychotherapy is that the confronting of the inevitability of death gives more positive meaning to life itself (May, 1958a). Part of the ability to confront non-being is the aptitude to tolerate and to use constructively, anxiety, among other states. An existential approach begins with awareness and fear (Yalom, 1980).

May (1958a) wrote about the awkwardness of the meaning of words in the English language, how the meaning for *anxiety* has been watered down. He endorsed its use in the ontological sense, meaning that "it is an experience of threat which carries both anguish and dread, indeed the most painful and basic threat which any being can suffer, for it is the threat of loss of existence itself" (p. 52).

May (1958a) reviewed the contributions of scholars of existentialism to the awareness of the presence of the symptoms of alienation and isolation in the modern world. There are some points mentioned that are particularly relevant to this study. One of the points made is that alienation is not solely a symptom of a pathological condition. Innumerable individuals who are part of the general population face experiences of isolation, alienation, and loneliness. The sources of existential stress are not the sole territory of the psychologically troubled (Yalom, 1980). May further added that not only is this alienation one of lack of connection with other people but also an alienation from nature, or the natural world. He made the point that this isolation calls for a fundamental existential focus, rather than simply a rearrangement of ideas.

Van Deurzen-Smith (1997) posited that individuals must be studied in the context of a network of human relationships, that people are who they are in terms of a dynamic interplay with others and the environment. A number of the clinical manifestations of existential isolation center on interpersonal relationships (Yalom, 1980). The focus that Yalom takes is to regard relationships from a perspective of how they moderate fundamental and universal isolation. Isolation is not removed by relationships, for each individual exists alone; however, our ability to share lovingly with others is enhanced by the extent to which we inhabit our aloneness.

One of the ways that difficulties that can arise in striving to be an individual while struggling with relationship is for fusion to develop (Yalom, 1980). This relaxing of ego boundaries by becoming part of another individual or a group results as a way of dealing with the conflict that arises from a frightening sense of isolation.

Lantz (2002) suggested that the practice of existential psychotherapy includes, as the primary components, for one, the provision of an “adequate holding environment” (p. 28) in which the therapist is willing and able to look at, listen to, understand, process, master and honour the pain of the clients, together with them. From this, the pain moves from an internal awareness to an external one, to be looked at in greater detail and depth as an interactional experience.

With regards to existential psychotherapeutic technique, May (1958a) asserted that technique is not necessarily an apt approach. The main task of the therapist, he wrote, is to seek to understand the individual as a being in his world. Technique must be secondary to this understanding from which the groundwork is laid. What is important is the context of the therapy, the questions that would illuminate for the client, based on the issues brought forward to therapy, where the client is in the world at this moment in time. The therapist must enter the client’s world of experience phenomenologically, without presuppositions (Yalom, 1980). Various techniques are used among existential therapists, May wrote, and the vital point is that what is needed is a definite rationale for any technique used with a particular client. What approach is taken within this flexibility, and how it is used at a given point, needs to be chosen on the basis of the question, “What will best reveal the existence of this particular patient at this moment in history? What will best illuminate his being-in-the-world?” (p. 78). Yalom simply stated that the method of discovering the nature of the particulars of existence is through deep personal reflection which is carried out in conditions of “solitude, silence, time, and the freedom from everyday distractions” (p. 8).

2.4 Art therapy and existential exploration

Moon (1995) wrote of the four ultimate concerns of existentialism from which necessary anxieties derive, these concerns being death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness. He furthered this with the notion that existential art therapy, being a dynamic approach which uses imagery and creative processes, strives to address individuals' encounters with these realities. He referred to a circular formula. By engaging the clients in a creative struggle with these ultimate concerns, they are led to a state of mindfulness, which in turn leads to creative anxiety, then to change and action, which supports expression which in turn deepens mindfulness.

Concurring with May (1958a) and Yalom (1980), Moon (1995) stated that art therapy is most often initiated when an individual's life is in crisis and that the common themes that recur are the ultimate concerns of existence. The fit between art therapy and existential concerns is a natural one in that the arts have traditionally focused on the ultimate concerns of existence. Wadeson (1973) appeared to be on the same wavelength when she wrote that people often seek psychotherapy when they are having difficulty in dealing with a troubled existence. She had framed this as the pain of an awareness of separateness and the reaching out for psychotherapy is a way to come to terms with this separateness.

Some of the symptoms of existential emptiness are boredom, despair, and fears (Moon, 1995). In facing contradictions and inconsistencies, conflict is inevitable. As in existential psychotherapy, in existential art therapy it is perceived that disturbing imagery presents an opportunity for enhancing or transforming life rather than being a threat. By honouring pain and by using the image as a vehicle for expression of inner conflicts,

meaning is brought to life. "The purpose of art at its deepest level is to transform the scars of life" (Moon, 1990, p. 53). The goal is not to relieve pain but to face and to interact with it. Contrary to western society's emphasis on avoiding pain at all costs, one of the primary tasks of existential art therapy is to honour the pain of the client, "to discover the deeper gift of their feeling bad" (Moon, 1995, p. 58). Inherent in the creative process of art therapy is the therapist supporting the individual in embracing this process.

Moon (1995) clearly presented the position that existential emptiness can only be filled through relationship with others, that purpose can only be realized through relationship, and that the image can be construed as *the other* with which the artist is in relationship. This relationship is also extended to the one between the client and art therapist. Moon stressed that meaning grows from interaction and interplay. More succinctly, he asserted that no matter what genre of artist one is, one "has a deep urge to have the work seen and embraced by others" (Moon, 1990, p. 90-91). At the same time, within this context of relationship, the clients alone must make decisions about the meaning and responsibilities in their own lives. Wadeson's (1973) contribution to this concept is that a very basic sense of existence of self is reliant on affirmation from another. Although we must each come to our own terms with our inevitable separateness, image-making is an attempt to bridge that painful separateness. She wrote, "the sharing of images in the therapeutic relationship can be a very important and meaningful bridge. Through picture-making an individual can express aspects of his own unique visual and emotional perceptions to another" (p 133).

May (1958a) has suggested that modern art reveals most clearly the meaning of existentialism. Part of this is due to the fact that the significance is conveyed in symbolic

language rather than in self-conscious verbalization of thought. In existential art therapy, interpretations are made by the client rather than the therapist. The metaphors in the images guide the clients to seek and to explore themselves, finding their own meanings in the metaphors (Moon, 1990). It is the visual image that holds the essence of meaning. The art therapist's job is to engage clients in the metaphor of the journey in making their own self-discoveries. The art ritual helps individuals to go inward.

Chapter 3: The Study

3.1 Methodology

This research project sets out to look at the phenomenon of existential solitude and builds upon how the experience of it is understood by individuals who are living it and how it is expressed in the images that they create. It will explore how the participants' perceptions of the experience might be affected by the process of creating the images. The study will further investigate if there are any common themes emerging from the different visual and verbal accounts. The approaches used for the study are primarily the phenomenological method while drawing on hermeneutic inquiry in the process of meaning-making..

The hermeneutic spiral (Linesch, 1994) was tailored to this research project. This spiral, in the context of research, involves the establishing of a connection, the open-ended questions of the research interview, visual and verbal responses, internal reactions, responses deepened by dialogue, and finally, joint constructions of meanings and contributions to knowledge. The adapted hermeneutic spiral consisted of the following:

- The researcher establishing a connection with each participant by way of, firstly, the initial telephone contact and, then the actual introduction during the interview itself.
- The participant's creation of the visual image.
- The semi-structured interview.
- The participant's visual and verbal responses with regard to the image.
- Responses deepened by dialogue, primarily organized in a reflective manner, and further deepening questions.

- Analysis of data.
- The second interview which reviewed the analysis of data and joint constructions of articulating participants' meanings and contributions.

3.2 Participants

The study was conducted at a community-based therapy center which offers a variety of expressive therapies, mostly in a group format. The criteria for the selection of participants included that those involved in the interviews be engaged in therapy at the center at the time that the interviews were to take place. This was to ensure that in the event that any deeper unresolved issues might arise as a result of the interviews then the participants would have the appropriate therapeutic support. Those selected, as well, were to be sufficiently emotionally stable to handle such a process of inquiry. It was also important that the participants not be clients with whom I was working as part of my art therapy internship at the center. I felt that it was critical that I did not blur the line between therapy and the research study. Another criterion was that the individuals involved participate by choice, have experience with what they understand to be existential solitude, and that they be able to articulate their experiences of the phenomenon (Colaizzi, 1978).

I presented a brief overview of the project to the therapists engaged at the center which they in turn presented to the members of the therapy groups. In some cases, the therapists chose to speak to specific members individually rather than to address the whole group. Members were invited to put their names forward if they had an interest in participating in the study. Members of the center all function independently in the community; however, they comprise a diverse group along the continuum of mental

health. For this reason the therapists first screened the prospective volunteers for emotional stability, depression, ego strength, and facility for abstract thinking before recommending them for the project. I then spoke with each volunteer by telephone, provided each one with more detailed information on the nature and structure of the study, and confirmed their interest and understanding of the topic. Of the five individuals who expressed an interest in participating, one chose not to continue after my preliminary telephone interview.

The four remaining participants were female and between the ages of 40 and 51. At the time of the interviews they were each involved in one of the following group therapies: drama therapy, art therapy for survivors of sexual abuse, yoga relaxation therapy, and verbal psychotherapy. All but the woman who was participating in verbal psychotherapy had had past experience with art therapy. Two of the participants were married and two were divorced. Educational level ranged from having completed Secondary V to having completed Masters level study. One participant was a full-time homemaker, another was on leave from her profession as a teacher, and the other two were employed full-time outside the home — one as a social worker and the other as a travel agent. The interviews were conducted in English, but for two of the participants, French was their first language. As a result, they would, a few times during the interviews, use French expressions to relate their meaning.

3.3 Generation of data

Each participant took part in an individual primary interview and then was given an opportunity at a subsequent interview to confirm and to offer additional insights to the summarization of the primary interview. This confirmation feedback loop also enhances

the credibility of the findings. All interviews were audio-taped and images photographed with the written consent of the participants (see Appendix).

3.3.1 Primary interview

The first meeting encompassed the creation of an image, a semi-structured interview, and a phenomenological art therapy interview as means of data collection. In order to ensure that all participants received consistent information, I read the following description of existential solitude at the beginning of each interview:

I am interested in learning more about the experience that people have of being alone in the world. This is often referred to as “existential solitude”. Existential solitude is a basic and universal human experience, which is experienced in different ways by different people. It comes to awareness at different times in our lives, often when we are questioning the meaning of our existence, or why we are here. The experience that I am exploring is not the same as a social or emotional kind of loneliness or isolation that happens when we feel out of contact with people, that we have no friends, when we lose someone dear to us, or even cut off from parts of ourselves. The experience that I am looking at seems to run deeper than that, it occurs when we have an awareness of being fundamentally separate from other beings and from the world. What I am interested in is how you live this experience.

At this point the participants were asked to create an image that would illustrate how they experience being alone in the world. Art supplies that were available to them included a variety of sizes and colours of paper, water colour and tempera paint, oil and chalk pastels, pencil crayons, felt marking pens, and collage materials. The completed

images were then temporarily laid aside and the semi-structured and art therapy interviews were carried out.

3.3.1.1 Semi-structured interview

Generally, phenomenological interviews are minimally structured and open-ended and must allow for sufficient time for full and thoughtful exploration of the topic. In contrast to survey or questionnaire interviews, which utilize a stimulus-response interface and which use exactly the same wording and order for each interview, the phenomenological interview is conducted as a dialogue. The interviewer needs to be able to follow the interviewee and to discern and tease out vital points yet at the same time have the discipline to stay on track with the topic. The framing of questions is key to the process.

There is general agreement in the literature (Khanna, 1989; Mishler, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1989; Smith, 1995; Spinelli, 1989) that the dialogical or semi-structured interview is best suited to the qualitative research inquiry. Engaged in interpersonal interaction with the participant in the face-to-face interview, the interviewer must remain alert to nuances and to new elements that emerge, which allow the shape of the interview and the themes to show themselves. With the aim of extracting themes and meanings of experience in the form of descriptions as opposed to explanations, the interviewer is responsible for seeking clarification for any statements that may be ambiguous.

Khanna (1989) pointed out that the dialogical research interview allows participants to produce what they themselves find to be significant as opposed to the more structured format of questions and answers. She highlighted that in the dialogical encounter, descriptions not previously considered by either party often emerge.

Smith (1995) indicated that the method of semi-structured interviewing allows for the researcher to pursue interesting possibilities that emerge and for the respondent to provide a more broadly explored reply. It provides more flexibility for going beyond the boundaries of a structured interview in discovering the significance of meaning in the respondent's relationship to the world, producing richer data. What the researcher forfeits by way of this kind of interviewing is a certain amount of control over the process, and it is more time consuming in terms of data collection and analysis. Smith offered guidelines for arranging semi-structured interviews. He has suggested that the investigator produce a schedule beforehand that determines the overall issue and themes to cover, discern the most suitable sequence of questions, and think about possible prompts to use in following possible answers. In terms of constructing questions he suggested the following: use neutral questions, avoid jargon, and use open-ended questions. As for the interview itself, it is advised to begin by putting the interviewee at ease. The questions should start in the general format of the schedule while allowing the respondent a strong role in determining the direction of the interview. It is also important to give the respondent time to finish, allow for entering into interesting areas, ask one question at a time, and for ethical reasons, monitor the effect on the interviewee.

Mishler (1986) talked about the joint construction of meaning in the discourse between interviewer and participant. This happens as meanings emerge during the course of an interview, in the ways that the participants frame their responses and how the interviewer reformulates the questions. This means that semi-structured interviews allow for the participants to interpret questions in ways that speak to their own unique experiences and for the interviewer to allow for such eventualities and to use them to add

depth, breadth, and texture to the process. It can be thought of as a circular process from which interviewer and participant draw meaning, not unlike Linesch's hermeneutic spiral (1994). Mishler referred to this as mutual reformulation and specification of questions.

A central theme taken up by Mishler (1986) is that meaning is grounded in context. From this he argued that the ways that interviews are framed within the participant's contextual perspective will have an impact on the ways that they perceive and, thus, express themselves in relating their experiences. He emphasized that interviews are not neutral, that the form and content of interviews affect how interviewees respond. Central to this is the idea of the potential power differential inherent in standard interviewing methods, i.e. survey-style interviews. Employing a hierarchic structure of the interview relationship has the potential to "obscure relations between events and experiences and to disrupt individuals' attempts to make coherent sense of what is happening to them" (p. 120).

In the form of the semi-structured interviews employed for this study, I have used the guiding questions as a basic structure and from there have attempted to follow the narratives of the participants, gently refocusing on the central themes, when necessary. It was important for me to make the assumption and to portray my belief that the participants were the experts holding the knowledge that I sought.

Polkinghorne (1989) cited Colaizzi's suggestions for devising a procedure for the generation of interview questions. The first step is to engage in self-reflection on the topic. In preparation for the study I first went through the steps of the interview myself. To start, I drew an image of what my experience of existential solitude meant to me. Following this, I journalled responses to my proposed guiding questions. In going

through this process I got a sense of the depth and the power of the process. In creating the image more meaning was opened up to me. I became more conscious of what I sensed, intuited, and knew about existential solitude yet had not been cognizant of to that point. I became aware of key issues in my life that affect and are affected by being alone in the world. It became clearer to me how there are places in my experience in which there may be some overlap between the experiences of social or emotional loneliness and of existential solitude, and that I had to experience the former in order to understand and appreciate the latter. It seemed that it had to unfold in a progressive fashion. I discovered that to confront and value my feelings, reactions, and responses to being alone in the world, ultimately transformed my feelings, attitudes and experience of loneliness. In addition, it also came to my awareness that an exercise such as this one might not be a wise choice for someone who is struggling with depression and has not the resources nor the tools with which to deal constructively with the thoughts and feelings that could possibly surface.

The second recommendation made by Colaizzi as cited by Polkinghorne (1989) was to conduct some initial interviews by way of a pilot study. As a way to incorporate this suggestion I accepted the offers of two friends who had expressed interest and curiosity in experiencing the interview. This gave me the opportunity to go through a dry run of the process, albeit somewhat modified by the nature of the personal relationships. This provided me with an increased sense of ease when I did the “real thing”. The feedback that I received helped me to refine the guiding questions and to modify those that may have been unclear or difficult to interpret or to apply broadly to individuals’ experiences. In these rehearsals I also got the opportunity to practice or role-play and,

thus, move from my familiar position as therapist to that of research interviewer. I found that it required of me a different kind of focus in order to remain in the role of information seeker and to set aside my impulse to explore further or to delve into what could have been rich therapeutic inquiries.

Finally, I took into consideration Polkinghorne's (1989) reminder about the aspect of phenomenological reduction in the epistemology of phenomenological philosophy, of the descriptions of actual experience, not that which exists outside of it and the ensuing need to direct participants' awareness to focus on their own experience. Within this, I kept in mind that it was important for me to be aware of and bracket out, as much as possible, any thoughts, feelings, and beliefs that I held about the subject.

There were three parts to the interview: the individual's experience of being alone in the world, how the experience or meaning of existential solitude is expressed in the image, and how the image and the process of creating it may have served to inform or deepen her relationship with aloneness. I kept in mind the following guiding questions for the semi-structured interview. For the first part of the interview:

- Please tell me what it has been like for you to experience being alone in the world or what may be referred to as existential solitude.
- Can you describe a time when you were aware of experiencing this?
- How did you first experience existential solitude?
- How has this experience evolved over time for you?
- How has this experience affected your approach to life?
- How has this experience been different from social loneliness?
- What gives your life meaning?

For the second part which began the art interview:

- How does your image illustrate the experience of existential solitude?

And for the third and final part:

- What have you learned from creating this image?
- Looking at the image now, what do you see in it?
- Does the image tell you anything about your experience that you were not previously aware of?
- How does it expand upon that you already knew?

3.3.1.2 Phenomenological art therapy interview

It appears that there is a broad range of flexibility and much room in which to move in the way that phenomenological art therapy research is conducted at this stage in its evolution. Betensky's writings focus on phenomenological art therapy rather than on the research aspect of it; however, I find the features to be applicable to a research perspective. Borrowing from and adapting Betensky's phenomenological approach to art therapy (1987, 1995), I used a phenomenological approach to the art therapy research interview. It was, in a sense, a semi-structured art therapy interview and flowed smoothly from the first part of the process.

The art therapy interview consisted of the following parts:

1. The instructions

As already stated the participants were asked to create an image that would illustrate how they experience existential solitude or being alone in the world.

2. The experiencing of the materials

Betensky (1987) included a stage of orienting to the materials. An essential element in the art interview is the easy accessibility of art materials. Most of all, they furnish the vocabulary for the participant and foster the relational aspect with the topic in question or the experience. Betensky advocated for providing an opportunity for the client to freely experiment with the materials as an introduction to the therapeutic experience. As this was set in an exploratory research context, I did not offer so extensive an introduction to materials. A variety of art supplies were laid out on the table at which the participant and I sat. This included papers of different sizes and colours, water-based paints, chalk and oil pastels, pencil crayons, scissors, and glue. Collage materials – magazines, fabric scraps, etc. were situated on shelves close to the table.

3. The process of artwork - creating the phenomenon

The participant engaged in the art making in the presence of the investigator.

4. Phenomenological observation

This stage involved the process of looking at the image after the first part of the semi-structured interview had been completed.

- a. The image was *displayed* where the participant and the investigator were able to view it.
- b. This was followed by *distancing*, in which some physical distance was placed between viewers and object. This allows for more objectivity,

as the image becomes part of the world. Any strong emotions or thoughts associated with the image can be regarded with a certain degree of detachment.

- c. The final part of the observation stage was *intentional looking* when I invited the participant to take a long look at the object, to take in all that can be seen, and to commune with it, in a sense, to receive the messages from the phenomenon that was just created. New discoveries are given the space to surface during this phase. Betensky advises the investigator to allow for and respect silence during this part of the process.

5. Phenomenological description

Betensky (1987) headed this procedure with the title “What-do-you-see”(p. 158). True to the phenomenological perspective, this puts the emphasis on the participant’s unique perception and underlines the importance of that person’s reality. At this point, by way of open-ended questions, I guided the participant to notice specific structural elements in the piece and to relate what meanings those elements might hold. This is very much congruent with the semi-structured interview and could be construed as a semi-structured art therapy research interview. As suggested by Betensky, what was explored was the relationship of one element to another, the organization of the composition, and the relationship of the components of content.

6. Phenomenological unfolding

In this phase I guided the participant in unfolding the meanings based on what had emerged from the previous phases. This constituted the third part of the semi-structured interview. Although Betensky advised that looking at elements of content, which tends to cover up levels of symbolization, would be less productive from a phenomenological perspective than following structural elements, which represent more accurately the inner reality of the individual, I did not discourage participants from doing so in the event that their discovery process took them there.

All of the interviews filled close to the full two hours allocated for them, including the making of the images. The shortest time taken to create the images was less than 5 minutes, the longest was 30 minutes. Three participants made the image in silence, then took part in the verbal interview. One individual, the only participant with no previous experience with art therapy or art expression, expressed that she felt uncomfortable creating the image first. After some preliminary discussion about what the experience of the phenomenon meant to her, she made her image on the paper. She followed this up by adding to the image during the phenomenological art therapy segment of the interview.

3.4 Follow-up interview

To enhance the validity of the research findings, follow-up interviews were conducted with each of the four participants between one and three months subsequent to the initial interviews. I formulated summaries from the first interviews and presented my findings in the following manner: firstly, the main issues, experiences, and feelings to

which the experience of existential solitude was linked and secondly the themes that emerged throughout the transcripts. I then asked the participants if my synopsis was true to their experiences and if I had omitted anything from their experiences (Colaizzi, 1978). I presented questions that I felt had been left unanswered or that emerged from the analysis. Finally, I gave them the opportunity to include further reflections on the images or any other additional thoughts about the experience of existential solitude.

3.5 Analysis of Data

Borrowing from several approaches, I analyzed the data in accordance with the following five methodological steps:

1. The first steps of analysis began during the interviews when I paraphrased, condensed, and reflected back meanings to the participants, as pointed out by Kvale (1996) in his six step approach to interview analysis. This helped me, and the participants, to clarify different and, possibly, contradictory understandings of themes as they used this feedback to refine their conceptions.
2. After each interview was completed, I produced a written transcript from the audiotape of each interview. Typing the transcriptions, which required that I replay the tapes repeatedly in order to clearly hear and decipher the verbal descriptions, helped me to become very familiar with the data. I initially read each interview several times (Colaizzi, 1978; Giorgi, 1985) in order to achieve a sense of the themes that were woven through it and to get a sense of each participant's experience. As I did this, I kept in my awareness the results of my own experience with the phenomenon and with my own process, as well as what I had already read on the topic, in an effort to bracket out any external data.

3. Smith (1995) advised those new to qualitative analysis to look in detail at one transcript before moving along to the others. This worked best for me and I worked with each transcript and met with the corresponding participant individually to present and review my analysis before proceeding to the next.
4. Maykut & Morehouse (1994) described in their *constant comparative* method a complex procedure of manipulating the physical copies of the material in order to group data sets into corresponding themes. I found that, for a study as small as this one, to identify the emerging themes by writing notes in the margins of the transcripts (Smith, 1995) was sufficient for easy identification. I came to these extracted themes (Colaizzi, 1978) or *meaning units* (Giorgi, 1985) by a process of *unitizing* (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). In this part of the process I distilled meaning from the raw data. These smaller units of meaning, which were stated as simply as possible and expressed in short descriptors or long paragraphs, needed to be able to stand by themselves. During this stage, I scrutinized the meaning units in terms of the specific focus of the study (Giorgi, 1985). In adherence to the questions posed by the study, I organized and categorized the units of themes according to their relationship to what the experience of existential solitude was linked in participants' lives. I looked at (a) the themes related to what existential solitude meant to them, (b) how the themes were woven through their expressions, (c) how these themes emerged through the images and, (d) how the experience of creating the visual image affected their meaning of being alone in the world. Finally, I tied together themes into descriptive statements which I later used to define larger categories of meaning.

5. After compiling the themes, I summarized or shortened the meanings expressed by interviewees into shorter compositions by way of *condensation of meaning* (Kvale, 1996, citing Giorgi). The statements were rendered into shorter accounts, reducing the interview text. Any relevant data which surfaced in the second interviews were worked into the final text (Colaizzi, 1978). As much as possible, I used language and wording that was true to what was expressed in the accounts of the participants and in their own words.

With each interview, I began the process anew. Finally, I consolidated the clusters of themes of the four interviews in order to review and present how individuals' experiences may have had overlap or divergence. Common themes and clear disparities are presented.

Chapter 4: Findings

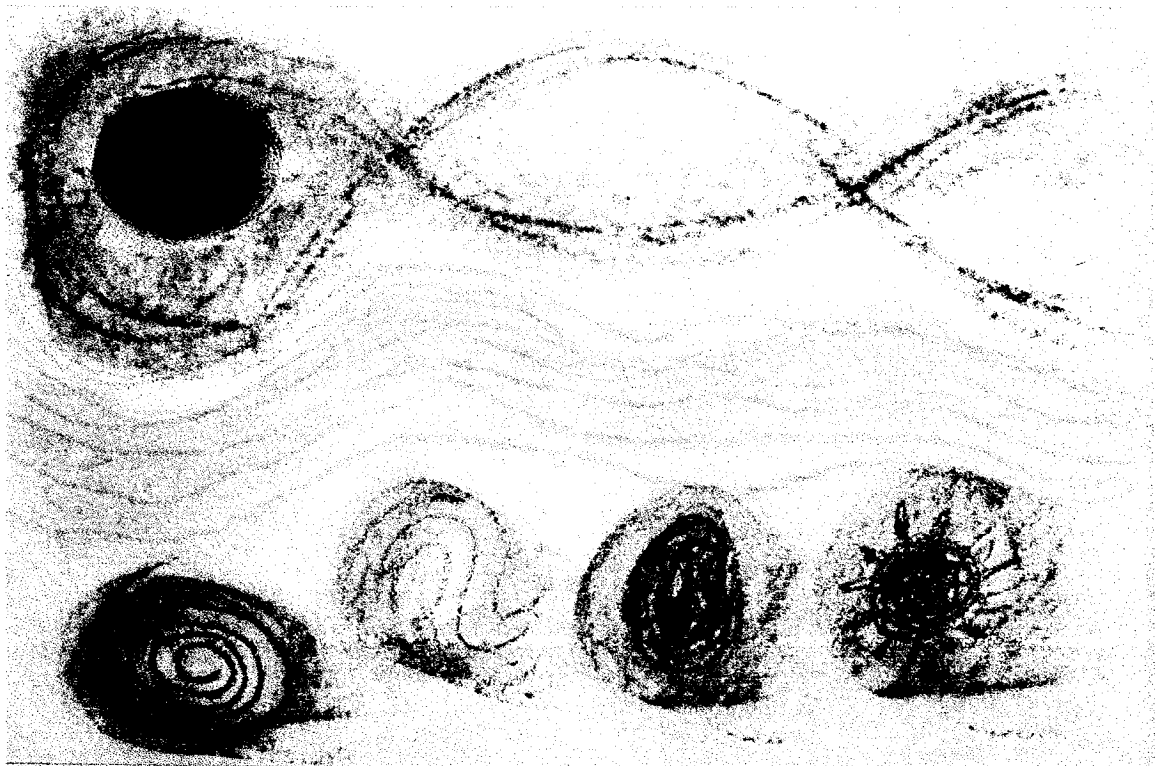
The findings are grouped according to individual participants' interviews. They are presented in this way in order to maintain the sense and the integrity of each participant's experiences and are submitted in the order in which they occurred. This will be followed by a discussion of common themes that presented themselves among participants.

4.1. Participant 1

4.1.1 The making of the image

Participant 1 went without hesitation into the image-making after the directions

Figure 1



were given. She started with chalk pastels and incorporated some oil pastels into it, as well, on white paper. She began with the round black shape in the top left corner of the paper and worked her way across the paper with the green crayon, filled the middle section with the peach and blue coloured flowing lines, and continued with the four shapes on the bottom of the page. She drew in silence and explained her process during the art therapy research interview.

4.1.2 The semi-structured interview

Participant 1 linked the experience of existential solitude to the following two experiences: 1 – childhood abuse and the ensuing fear and escape mechanism; and 2 – curiosity and learning.

The themes emerging from the semi-structured interview were as follows:

- Shame – Her sense of being alone in the world grew out of feelings of shame stemming from the abuse she suffered as a child. “There was nobody for me in the world. There is only me.”
- Childhood responsibilities – Also contributing to an existential aloneness was having been burdened with adult responsibilities at a young age due to being the oldest of several children.
- Adult responsibilities of parenting and lack of communication with spouse – She feels unacknowledged, alone, and isolated in her primary relationship. She feels that, although she is living with the father of her children, she is parenting on her own. She sometimes feels guilty for having these feelings.
- Escape – Escape through reading and watching television helped her to deal with feeling alone in the world.

- Learning and curiosity – Her sense of aloneness as a child led her to spend a lot of time reading. This in turn fostered in her a curiosity and a thirst for knowledge which she feels has nurtured her experience of existential solitude, as it grew in the environment of her feeling all alone in the world.
- Fear of the unknown/facing the fear – She has dealt with and continues to face many fears: fear of new situations, fear to look inside, which got in the way of connecting with herself. This has evolved into experiencing looking inside and working with the fear as a positive encounter.
- Turning negatives into positives – Working with the fear reinforces the “positiveness”. “Essentially we are alone” is a positive statement for her. Depression led to therapy and meditation which led to taking back a sense of control.
- Self-responsibility – Her inner life is her own. “You are responsible for your own life”.
- Letting go – Letting go leads to security. Not letting go leads to loneliness, fear, and negativity.

The following two topics came as responses to my expressly raising the last two questions from the first part of the interview:

- Loneliness – Loneliness differs from existential solitude in that loneliness involves the experience of boredom for this participant.
- Life meaning – Being alive gives her life meaning.

4.1.3 The art therapy research interview

The themes that emerged from the making of the image were the following, according to the description of the participant as we processed it together in the art therapy research interview:

- Hope – The flowing colour green represents hope for her and keeps her going. The shape of an egg, new life, as she reported, means that she has hope that something new will happen in her relationship with her spouse while she also realizes that she has to look to herself and that is the difficult part for her. There is “hope in the unknown” (green in the question marks and in the egg) and “hope contributes some meaning to the existential self”.
- Fear of the unknown – The participant found this to be expressed by the question marks and the egg, which had started as a circle.
- Feeling lost – The black void, she stated, relates to how she felt as a lost child and portrays the heaviness of existential solitude.
- The positive in life – The peach colour in the midsection of the image represents to this participant the positive and warmth.
- Serenity – The blue colour that runs with the peach is “like letting go”. This participant said that this part of the image is “the living of life”; it denotes the flow, the serenity of her experience of existential solitude.
- Strength – Red means strong feelings to her and “feeling strong about myself”.
- Metaphor for life – She stated that she started with the fear of the aloneness and the unknown, indicated by the black void and moved towards the positive.

When she works with the fear, then it does not stop her. The spiral on the bottom left is “like the turmoils of life, but it’s not all bad”.

- Questions/answers – Some questions, she believes, are not meant to have answers, such as, “Why am I on earth?”. Learning never stops. This is indicated by the question marks in the second image from the right, on the bottom.
- Joy – This participant declared that there is curiosity and joy in learning.
- Nature – The outdoors and nature, signified by the colour green, play an important role in her experience of existential solitude. She explained that the seasons contribute to the sense of aloneness. The sun, portrayed at the bottom right, helps her to meditate and to feel less cut off.

4.1.4 Interface of the interviews

Some themes from the semi-structured interview of Participant 1’s experience of existential solitude carried through to her description of the experience through the image. The connection of *learning and curiosity* to her experience of existential solitude was expressed in the verbal interview and came up during the interview about her image, under the themes of *questions/answers* and *joy*. The theme of *letting go* emerged in the first part of the interview and was reflected in the image under the theme of *serenity*. The fears she has encountered represented under the theme of *turning negatives into positives* was woven through the themes emanating from the art therapy interview but most succinctly under the themes of *metaphor for life* and in *fear of the unknown*.

Some themes not expressed in the semi-structured interview came forward in the art therapy research interview. The theme of hope was a revelation that came to her while

exploring her image. This participant expressed surprise and delight when she discovered that there is hope in the unknown, “there’s hope that, in some way, [the unknown] is going to contribute some meaning to the existential self”. While exploring the black void, expressive of the theme of *feeling lost*, she made the realization of the connection with having felt like a lost child and that she still feels like that child: “I think it’s still scary for me, because I didn’t have a childhood. I lost it.” The significant role that her relationship to *nature* has to her experience of being alone in the world came out through the exploration of the image. Her feeling of *strength* was expressed through the image in a way that did not come forward in the first part of the interview.

The themes of *escape*, *shame*, *childhood responsibilities*, *adult responsibilities*, and *self-responsibility* were conveyed in the semi-structured interview and did not appear in the image, however, one of them took on an interesting role during the art therapy research interview. The absence of the theme of *escape* in relation to the image came as a surprise to this participant. When she realized this she remarked that in response to feeling all alone in the world, the need to escape was very intense when she was younger. Although, not entirely missing, it is much less so now and not a priority.

4.1.5 Art making, meaning, and experience of existential solitude

For Participant 1, the art therapy research interview seemed to encourage a more dynamic relationship to the experience of existential solitude in that it emerged more as a positive experience. It appears that this participant’s experience of existential solitude was relatively loosely described in the semi-structured interview, in the sense that she was articulating her understanding of the experience by way of the interview.

TABLE 1 – PARTICIPANT 1

THEMES	SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW	ART THERAPY RESEARCH INTERVIEW	MEANING INFORMED/ TRANSFORMED THROUGH ART PROCESS
• Turning negatives into positives	✓	✓	
• Fear of the unknown/facing the fear	✓	✓	
• The positive in life	✓	✓	
• Metaphor for life	✓	✓	
• Letting go	✓	✓	
• Serenity	✓	✓	
• Learning and curiosity	✓	✓	
• Questions/answers	✓	✓	
• Joy	✓	✓	
• Escape	✓		✓
• Shame	✓		
• Childhood responsibilities	✓		
• Adult responsibilities...	✓		
• Self-responsibility	✓		
• Hope		✓	✓
• Strength		✓	
• Nature		✓	
• Feeling lost		✓	✓

Consequently, it was through the making and very much through the subsequent dialectical exploration of her image that particular insights took shape. She was given a vehicle through which she could more succinctly articulate what it meant to her and she made some insights of which she was not previously aware.

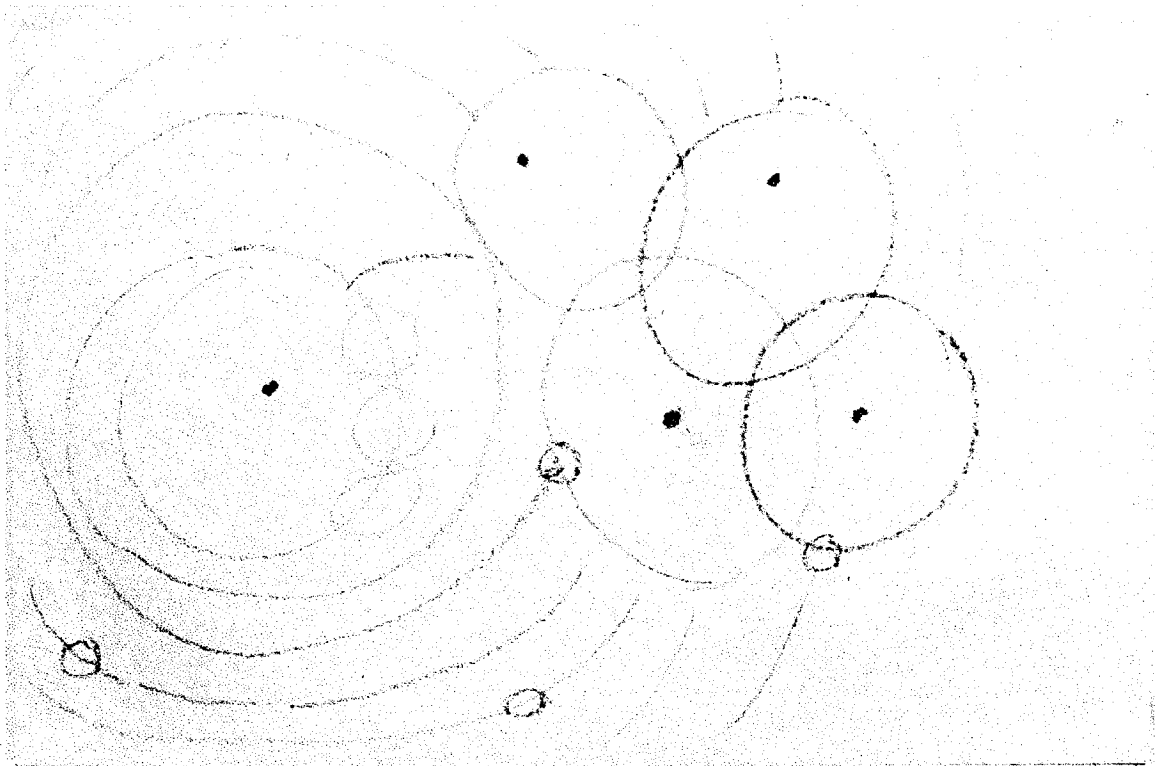
4.2 Participant 2

4.2.1 The making of the image

Participant 2, the one interviewee who had no previous experience with art therapy, stated that she was more comfortable with words than with images and as a

result her image was created in stages while she was exploring what existential solitude meant to her. After some preliminary discussion and stating that she was not an artist

Figure 2



and was not feeling inspired she took the plunge and in placing the green dot on the left side of paper, said that it depicted her. She added the red dots and said those were the people around her and that there was no connection between them. At that point, noting her discomfort with my prescribed structure, I offered some options, such as, that we could talk about her experiences first and that she may add to the image at different points. She chose to read my description of existential solitude and we discussed her interpretations further for a few minutes. She then added the concentric lines and red circles around the dots as she was speaking.

4.2.2 The semi-structured interview

This participant was uncomfortable with my description of existential solitude. She said that it left her with a sense that the person feeling as the statement described would be someone who is very devastated, depressed, and would have no reason to live. Because of her strong reaction, at the second interview I solicited from her a definition of her own creation. She defined existential solitude as the following:

You're living in the world, you're living in community, many busy things can be happening all around but there's not the sense of connection and sharing. With the world around you but even within yourself, too, not connecting to your emotions...it's a very devastating thing to really be in a shell. And there's been sadness...the sense of pervading sadness that I feel so often...I guess there's a sadness of being so lost in things...there's a period of life...I've just, kind of, been passing through life, the whole area of existing, existential. It's just been going through the motions and viewing life around me but not really being in my skin, yes, existential solitude... There's been a loss of connection with myself...Part of something very important and eventually I think I'll do this, is find out what's meaningful for me because again it's still eluding me. I still don't know myself!

This participant's experience with existential solitude seemed to have connections to 1 – emotional and psychological loneliness involving intense fear and sadness and longing; and 2 – self-nourishing and taking care of herself which involved an openness to learning and reading and an awareness of self.

The themes that arose from the semi-structured interview were:

- Loneliness – There seemed to not be a clear distinction for her between loneliness and the experience of being alone in the world in existential solitude. Being alone in the world gave her a strong sense of devastation, which she equated with depression.
- Connection/disconnection with self and others – She felt that she is meant to be living in connection with others, has a longing for that connection and sharing which she has sought through family and religion. For her this sense of connection involves a feeling of belonging and gives hope. In existential solitude there is, for her, a loss of connection with self and others.
- Disillusionment – Disillusionments in her life have lead to a sense of aloneness. With each experience of disillusionment there was a closing off of a part of her self.
- Fear – She expressed feeling “terrified of being alone with me [herself]” and “being depressed”.
- Self-acceptance – Subsequent to the disillusionment experiences she has discovered that understanding has grown from allowing her emotions to be, “accepting myself as I am now”, including her maternal instincts. She experiences an acceptance of her own self-definition and of her expectations.
- Lack of intimate connections – She finds that she is living her life in parallel with others, particularly her spouse, where there is a lack of deep intimacy or connection. This contributes to her sense of being alone in the world.
- Early life experiences – Her sense of aloneness originated at a young age in her family of origin. She feels that this social isolation that she encountered in

her family carries over into her current life in that she is not very social and is more oriented towards being productive.

- Self-responsibility – The need to value herself and do things for herself supports her in being alone in the world.
- Coping – She coped with existential solitude by losing herself. She did this through her work in which her professional identity became an extremely important part of her, by living for others in her church and then in her own family, and by keeping busy.
- Providence – Her belief is that providence has played a significant role in her life and has affected how her life has unfolded including how she deals with aloneness.
- Life event as catalyst – A major life event, involving her husband's speaking of leaving the marriage, served as a catalyst which caused her to look at herself, her situation, and to begin to take care of her own emotional needs. She expressed that this particular circumstance "liberated" her.

The following topic came as responses to my expressly raising the question from the first part of the interview:

- Life meaning – What gives her life meaning is self-worth and acceptance. There is a spiritual aspect and hope to a meaningful life. Along with this she feels that her mind is very alive when she is learning.

4.2.3 The art therapy research interview

The themes that surfaced by way of the art therapy interview were:

- Lack of connection – There are people around her but she feels a lack of connection. There is a feeling of touching but not penetrating in relationships other than some in relationship with her children. She said that the green dot was her and the red dots were the others around her.
- Reaching out – She said that she initiates some reaching out to others, indicated by the lines arcing out from the depiction of herself, “I’m trying to achieve certain things or I’m trying to touch certain people”.
- Intimate relationship with her children – The horizontal arc was drawn in later on in the interview and was indicated by to represent her connection to her children whom she portrayed as the three small green circles close to herself.
- Self-preservation – She situated herself in the image as standing on her own. She learned self-preservation early on in her family of origin, which she described as not being a loving environment, “So there is a little bit of self there...this environment is not giving me what I need...so, even though it’s a very dark and scary thing, I am going to take my chances”.
- Providence – towards the end of the interview she added providence to the image in the form of some smaller circles scattered along the arcs emanating out, “And then providence, I could put providence in my picture. I’m not sure where it would be just because I’m making a contact here. Maybe this is providence, getting a job. Maybe this is providence, you know, finding an answer, reading a book. Just along the way...”
- Professional arena – She stated that she experiences a blockage in connecting in her professional field, shown by the spaces between her and the other dots

in the image. She feels isolated from her colleagues, “somehow they’re keeping me shut out or I keep myself shut out”.

- Disillusionment – The four red circles in the drawing signify four areas of disillusionment which were major occurrences at different periods during her life: withdrawal from her family of origin, withdrawal from church life, losing herself in her relationship with her husband, and professional disillusionment.

Participant 2 brought in this insight at the follow-up interview.

4.2.4 Interface of the interviews

As stated earlier, the structure for the interview with Participant 2 took on more of an organic form. The making of the image, the semi-structured interview, and the art therapy interview became interwoven with one another. The working out of the themes and how they appeared in the different parts of the interviews is not as clearly defined as in the other interviews.

Certain of the themes of Participant 2’s experience of existential solitude carried through in her description of the experience through the image. What she spoke of in terms of *connection/disconnection with self and others* and *lack of intimate connections* came up in her image via the theme of *lack of connection* and *professional arena*. Her description of her *early life experiences* and how they influenced her sense of aloneness in the world and those of *coping* and *self-responsibility* have a connection to the theme of *self-preservation* rendered in the image. *Providence* had a clear place in the image and, finally, there is a clear association between her verbal and visual descriptions of *disillusionment*.

The themes not expressed in the semi-structured interview that came forward in the description of the image were those of *reaching out* and *intimate relationship with her children*.

The themes that were conveyed in the semi-structured interview and did not appear in the image were *fear*, *self-acceptance*, and *a catalytic life event*. *Loneliness* was not explicitly mentioned in the reference to the image but the sense of the experience is clearly evident in the image and this participant's description of it.

TABLE 2 – PARTICIPANT 2

THEMES	SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW	ART THERAPY RESEARCH INTERVIEW	MEANING INFORMED/ TRANSFORMED THROUGH ART PROCESS
• Loneliness	✓		
• Connection/ disconnection with self and others	✓	✓	
• Lack of connection	✓	✓	
• Professional arena	✓	✓	
• Lack of intimate connections	✓	✓	
• Reaching out		✓	
• Intimate relationship with her children		✓	
• Disillusionment	✓	✓	✓
• Fear	✓		
• Self-acceptance	✓		
• Early life experiences	✓	✓	
• Self-responsibility	✓	✓	
• Coping	✓	✓	
• Self-preservation	✓	✓	
• Providence	✓	✓	
• Life event as catalyst	✓		

4.2.5 Art making, meaning, and experience of existential solitude

This participant, at the first interview, did not feel that she learned anything by doing the drawing. She felt that she had trouble being clear in portraying what she was

understanding. She expressed that it was more of a diagrammatic representation than “truly good art”. However, at the follow-up interview she added the further insight about the significance of the four circles in relation to disillusionment. It seemed that in the time and distance provided between the interviews, which was three months in her case, her understanding of what her images represented was extended and deepened. However, in respecting the participant’s own perception and expression of the relationship between the experience of creating the image and the meaning of the phenomenon, it would have to be stated that there was no relationship between the two things.

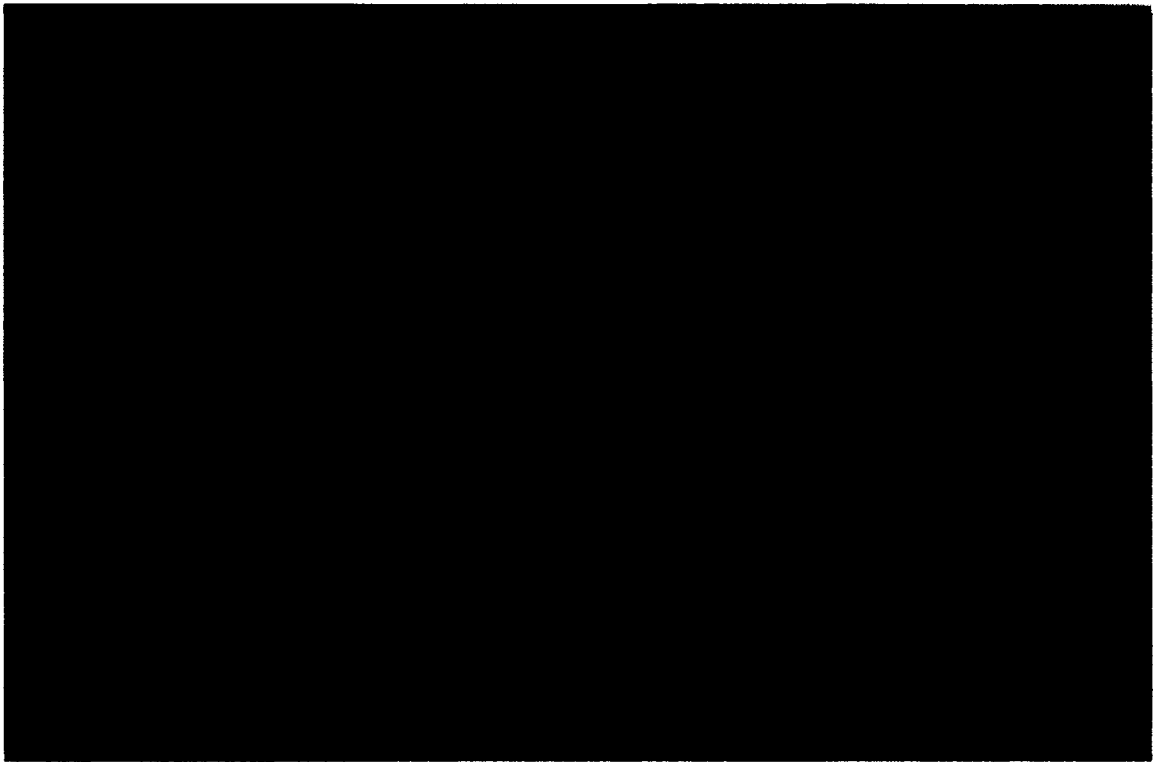
4.3 Participant 3

4.3.1 The making of the image

Participant 3 spent 20 minutes silently drawing her image on brown construction paper. She started with the central figure with the purple outline. She then drew the small green figure on the right, the large yellow figure with some overlap on the left, and finally, the small yellow figure overlapping the central figure on the right. She drew the figures from the outside in, starting with the outlines.

4.3.2 The semi-structured interview

For Participant 3 the phenomenon of existential solitude was linked to two contrasting experiences: 1- that of pain, struggle, and agony, including physical illness and being physically alone, which occurs when there is a “collapse” or crisis in life circumstances or when her needs have not been met in a relationship and 2 - happy moments, while gardening or in the wilderness.

Figure 3

The themes that emerged through the semi-structured interview were the following:

- Evolution over time – Her relationship to existential solitude is something that is ever evolving over time. It is a continuous process.
- Self-responsibility/sense of self – “It comes back to *me*”. Staying with the pain, facing the pain of aloneness, facing innermost fears, taking responsibility for her own needs, allows her to then come out of the pain and to have “a richer sense of who I am”. Along with growing more aware of her being alone in the world comes a more authentic experience, the diminishing of pretence, “fluffing over”, or distancing from herself.

- Being in the moment – Being “in oneness” fosters the flow of being open to herself. This includes staying with the pain and agony, both physical and psychic, which she finds forces her to be in the moment. Creative acts help her to be in the moment.
- Relationships with others – Her learning to be alone in the world, which grows out of therapy and meditation, to a certain extent, enhances her relationships with others. As she knows herself more and judges herself less, it affects how she feels about others.
- Choice – The element of choice to come back to herself is involved at times and at other times is lacking.
- Worrying and obsessing – Obsessive worrying fills a void, deals with the edginess of feeling that something is missing from her life; however, it also acts as an obstacle to connecting to her inner core.
- Cannot be shared – There is a depth to the very private experience of being alone in the world. The deepest points cannot be shared and nobody can take away the feeling.

The following two topics came as responses to my expressly raising the last two questions from the first part of the interview:

- Loneliness – Loneliness, as opposed to existential solitude, is linked to feeling blocked and to obsessive worrying.
- Life meaning – What gives her life meaning are the rich moments of feeling in harmony, oneness, peacefulness, of being in the moment rather than in the future or in the past.

4.3.3 The art therapy research interview

The themes that emerged from the making of the image were the following:

- Groundedness – This participant expressed that the choice of brown coloured paper relates to feeling grounded when in solitude. There is a sense of comfort in it.
- Flowers/nature – During the art therapy research interview, the figures came to the participant's awareness as images of flowers, being a representation of existential solitude. This ties in with the earthiness of the colour brown, wildflowers, wilderness, awe, nature, and peacefulness. "I am".
- Non-attachment – She realized during this part of the interview that the flowers had no stems and, so, signify non-attachment, "which is, I guess, the same as me, as well. I mean really, that I'm not attached to anything. I'm sort of my own entity."
- Relationships – Participant 3 explained that the inclusion of more than one element shows that other people play an important role in her life. The central figure with the purple outline signifies the participant herself. The layers show that through the years she has worked through her layers with the outer one being her "outward shell". She described the red core inside going through everything that she is and the pink layer around that core is her vulnerability. She gave the other figures less intense colour "because I'm more aware of my own layers". The smaller green figure on the right "was just, basically, somebody different from me, you know, other people around me who, they have different colours but they all have that red centre, I know they all have

inside, you know, their feelings, their vulnerabilities, their areas that they protect that only they are aware of". The large yellow figure to the left of the page symbolizes a close friend, "hand-in-hand". The small yellow figure signifies, in part, her youngest son, who is a young adult living with her.

- Boundaries – She began the drawing of each element with its outline. She expressed having done this as a delineation of what she is and then she goes to the inside. The awareness of the inside came as a later step. The outlines or boundaries represent her outer shell and serve to protect the vulnerabilities and are related to solitude within her self. The variation in the quality of the lines from defined to blurry signify the varying definitions of boundaries existing in her relationships. This also relates to the theme of evolution over time. It is a process that started slowly. Earlier on in her life she had been more oriented on the outside and was not aware of her boundaries, which were blurred or almost did not exist. In drawing, she started the image with the boundaries and realized that others permeate these boundaries. The outlines and areas of overlap show that some parts are shared with others *and* she also has her own solitude. Working from the outside in is also how the therapeutic process goes for her.
- Silence – This participant noted that silence is a part of the experience of existential solitude. The importance of silence was revealed to her while drawing. Sitting peacefully and reflecting on her aloneness during the art making affirmed to her that this is her own experience, not something from a book, for example.

- Being in the moment – There is no time element in existential solitude, according to this participant. In existential solitude, time does not exist. When she is being creative, as in drawing, she is in the moment. She also referred to not knowing in advance what she was going to draw and how that reinforces the ongoing nature of discovery and that she expected that other “flashes of light” would come to her when she is not necessarily looking at the image, that her discovery of existential solitude is an continuous process.
- The act of making art – The physical motion of drawing focused her inward, she stated. It brought her more to the now, to her inner self.
- Alone/not alone – This participant discovered that creating the image in my presence served as a metaphor for the experience of existential solitude. “I can be with people and fully with myself”. She discovered that her experience of being alone in the world is not necessarily incumbent on the presence or absence of others. That it is within her to achieve that sense rather than based on external circumstances. Being conscious of being observed during the interview served to remind her to stay on her own track.

4.3.4 Interface of the interviews

Some of the themes from the semi-structured interview of Participant 3’s experience of existential solitude were expressed in her description of the experience through the image. *Being in the moment* and *relationships* were integral to both.

Several themes not expressed in the semi-structured interview came forward in the art therapy research interview. The sense of *groundedness* this participant experiences while in solitude, *flowers* and her ties to *nature*, *non-attachment* to anything, *boundaries*

between her and others , *silence*, and *the act of making art* were all developed in the art-making portion of the interview.

The themes: *evolution over time*, *self-responsibility* (for her own needs) and her *sense of self*, her *choice* in being self-responsible or not, *worrying and obsessing* as an obstacle to self-connection, and the element that the experience of existential solitude *cannot be shared*, that were conveyed in the semi-structured interview did not appear in the description of the image itself. However, *evolution over time*, *choice*, and *cannot be shared* were highlighted and developed during the art therapy research interview.

TABLE 3 – PARTICIPANT 3

THEMES	SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW	ART THERAPY RESEARCH INTERVIEW	MEANING INFORMED/ TRANSFORMED THROUGH ART PROCESS
• Evolution over time	✓		✓
• Self-responsibility/sense of self	✓		
• Being in the moment	✓	✓	✓
• Relationships with others	✓	✓	✓
• Choice	✓		✓
• Worrying and obsessing	✓		
• Cannot be shared	✓		✓
• Groundedness		✓	
• Flowers/nature		✓	✓
• Non-attachment		✓	✓
• Boundaries		✓	✓
• Silence		✓	✓
• The act of making art		✓	✓
• Alone/not alone		✓	✓

4.3.5 Art making, meaning, and experience of existential solitude

For Participant 3 it appeared that the art making broadened her exploration of the meaning of her experience of existential solitude. She expressed having learned some things from creating and exploring the image.

She saw that the “overlaps” that she drew between the individual elements are important to her. She spoke of those rare and close moments that she shares with a friend, when she almost has the same thought at the same time, “when you almost, sort of, touched, but those are rare, almost. You can never, sort of, just totally overlap and merge.”

She touched on the richness of being alone with her self and what she learned about how she works through her layers to get to her core, how it helps her to “be aware of it and feel it”.

The importance of silence was revealed to her. Sitting peacefully and reflecting on her aloneness during the art making affirmed to her that this is her own experience. The unplanned nature of the exercise, along with the continual and spontaneous nature of the emerging insights, contributed to her understanding of the continuous process of discovery in existential solitude.

One particular insight is most succinctly expressed in the theme of “Alone/not alone”, that her experience of being alone in the world is not necessarily incumbent on the presence or absence of others. The fact that I was observing her during the art therapy interview brought to her awareness that it was her own internal perception, rather than external circumstances, that contributes most richly to her experience.

4.4 Participant 4

For this participant the experience of existential solitude was associated with the following: 1 – a deep connection with self and 2 – fear and being in touch with the fear. This happens in a process of “unwinding”. It was important for her to add that this is true

when she is experiencing a level of awareness, that there are times when she is disconnected and not wanting to be aware.

4.4.1 The making of the image

Participant 4 started by exploring what collage materials were available on the shelves and on the table. She chose some magazine images, fabric scraps, yarn, and plastic bubble wrap. She worked by alternately applying her chosen materials and drawing with dark blue felt pen, completing the image by winding the white yarn round and round the image. She spent 30 minutes creating the image.

Figure 4



4.4.2 The semi-structured interview

The themes that came to light through the semi-structured interview were as follows:

- Fear/peace – Going deeper and making contact with the fear and giving it space brings peace, and a happiness in being with herself. Along with this awareness come gains and losses. It is like shedding: trusting nature's renewal, changes in the body, and letting go. Natural or difficult events occur and she has to adapt or transform. Eventually, the losses become gains. The losses have their other side, "the feeling of being alone. I avoid it and...being in contact with that feeling the fear, not knowing... I found peace and deep...after a while I'm more happy and I lost that part of that fear, alone in the world... I found slowly, it's okay, I'm happy to be with myself."
- Sharing – Sharing her experiences helps her to understand herself. Coming to and participating in the interview was part of that "unwinding path" for her. Averting social isolation keeps her from being cut off from reality. When she is not in touch with all her emotions and not sharing as deeply as she can, then she experiences some isolation. There is a fear of the feelings.
- The unknown – Fear of the unknown, not letting go of the old, keeps her away from herself.
- Permission – She has learned that it is okay to be alone, to not know, and to feel the fear. Acceptance and allowing, living those feelings and "passing them". There is a "letting go of the numbness" and, "there's always moments through that aloneness when I feel like it's okay not knowing and not... and I started to learn to accept and not letting the fear overcome thinking the whole part of myself."

- Dualities – There was woven through her experience the theme of a dichotomy of the experience of existential solitude being very much tied in with sharing authentically and emotional expression; that is to say, the experience was most true for her and most easily expressed when in connection not only with her self but with others, as well. The contradiction was also expressed in what she experiences with regards to being alone in the world: she wants the aloneness and she wants to run away from the aloneness, the running away has to do with clinging to her old ways for no reason except for fear of the unknown, fear of what *could* happen. “It’s funny, fear is what I deeply want in myself, deep alone in myself. It’s like a contradiction of, well that’s what I really want but that’s what I’m really running away from.”
- Motherhood – Having a child helped to bring her back to herself and the responsibility to herself, along with responsibility to her child: “I needed to have a child to realize because I was escaping my own self”.
- Sadness – There is a sadness associated with being disconnected, sadness of what was missing in the past, “I’ve become more aware, that I wasn’t aware. There’s parts that bring joy and parts that bring sadness of things...times that I was so far from my true self...but if I start thinking of the past of, things that I missed, that side that makes me feel...[sadness]”.

The following two topics came as responses to my expressly raising the last two questions from the first part of the interview:

- Life meaning – What gives her life meaning is the exploring of it and sharing it. She felt that real contacts with people, animals, beings, and nature individualize it, help her to express it in her own personal, unique fashion.
- Loneliness – The difference in the experience of loneliness as opposed to existential solitude is that in loneliness she is more isolated from external reality.

4.4.3 The art therapy research interview

Themes that emerged from the image-making were:

- Unwinding – Unwinding, illustrated by the white yarn circling out from the centre of the image, emerged as a critical theme for this participant. She described that she is on a journey of unwinding of her true self, starting from her centre and exploring. “It illustrates...an experience of being in the womb, in the centre, it’s around me, and there’s an unwinding...and I’m at the center of it and that I’m on, let’s say, a journey, and it feels like there’s lots of current and flow, many directions...safe to be, in a sense...I’m at the centre, my self, my true self, the winding...unwinding of my life...to explore...my path is unwinding, it’s not, like, going around in circles, but more unwinding itself towards...the outer, outer...of myself...there’s all kinds of avenues, directions I can do, I can explore...I don’t know, unwind, like a spiral.”
- Sharing – Emotional expression plays an important role, according to this participant. There is contentment, sometimes mixed with joy, in sharing the images of the fear. The experience of sharing the image she has created helps to deepen the experience of existential solitude.

- Hope/Image-making – Having hope and visualizing or imagining helps for her to see the experience of existential solitude in different ways. Losing touch with a “goal” means for her a loss of meaning. As she described it, having the possibility to create, provides inspiration to continue, seeing there is something more amazing to discover. Making images ties in with hope. It helps her to accept the experience as a whole and to experience the joy in sharing them.
- The journey – The colour blue represents for her movement, the flow of her journey, like the river. She found the wooly texture of the materials rewarding. “The texture is comforting when you know you’re on the path”. It is vital for her to “*garder le fil*”, to keep the thread.
- Love – For this participant, white is love, thus the white paper for the background.
- Dualities – Once again dichotomies, which take on several meanings, revealed themselves by way of the image. Firstly, fear and peace exist together for her, “*côté-à-côté*”. The peace is a deep, deep feeling, and a deeper, contented kind of joy. Peace and the unknown, the fear of the unknown, make a whole. It is not all one or other. The central circle of the image is divided in two by an image of a bird cage, of which, she said, she feels like she’s in a cage, “it’s open, like in the middle and there’s like two sides of me.” Then, another apparent paradox presented itself in that the aloneness for her is a rich experience and then along with it there is the *sharing with another* the phenomenon of aloneness that has an enriching effect on the aloneness itself.

As part of the collage image she used some transparent plastic wrap. She articulated this part of the work as projecting two sides to the transparency: she wants to be seen *and* to be protected. It makes a whole, being authentic and not exposing her self, preserving her true self, exposed yet protected. Finally, she expressed that the creating of the image is like the experience of existential solitude in that both experiences can be looked at in different, sometimes dichotomous, ways.

4.4.4 Interface of the interviews

Some themes from the semi-structured interview of Participant 1's experience of existential solitude carried through to her description of the experience through the image. *Dualities* and *sharing* were expressed as prominent themes throughout the interviews.

The themes of *hope*, *love*, and *the journey* were not expressed in the semi-structured interview and came forward in the art therapy research interview. However, the concept of *the journey*, while not being specifically referred to as such, came through in this participant's description of the development of her learning about her relationship with existential solitude came as a process of discovery, which is thematically similar to what she had said about *the journey*.

The themes of *motherhood*, *the unknown*, and *permission* were conveyed in the semi-structured interview and did not as appear thematically significant in the image. *Sadness* and *fear/peace* did not emerge as themes but came up at different points in the description.

TABLE 4 – PARTICIPANT 4

THEMES	SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW	ART THERAPY RESEARCH INTERVIEW	MEANING INFORMED/ TRANSFORMED THROUGH ART PROCESS
• Fear/peace	✓		✓
• Sharing	✓	✓	✓
• The unknown	✓		
• Permission	✓		
• Motherhood	✓		
• Sadness	✓	✓	
• Unwinding		✓	
• Hope/Image-making		✓	✓
• The journey	✓	✓	✓
• Love		✓	
• Dualities	✓	✓	✓

4.4.5 Art making, meaning, and experience of existential solitude

The experience of creating, sharing, and exploring the image by way of the art therapy interview process offered to this participant certain insights with regards to existential solitude. She felt that it gave her more trust in herself to be alone and in the process of being alone with herself, and more faith in exploring it and sharing it. She said that in the process of creating the image, at the beginning she did not know where it was to take her. Then in having it materialize it brought confidence in herself and in her journey, even though she was aware of having some doubts inside. She also expressed in the follow-up interview that the process of discovery was still happening, that the image existed for her on more than the physical plane and that mental imagery was helpful, as well.

4.5 Common themes

Despite the unique relationship and experience that each participant had with existential solitude, there was some overlap expressed by them that materialized in either the semi-structured interviews or the art interviews. These areas of common ground will be presented here. However, it was this uniqueness of the individual experience in the creation of images, particularly of a small sample, such as in this study, that made it challenging to unearth common themes in the imagery. Nonetheless, there appeared across the works of the participants a common element of structure which is presented, as well.¹

4.5.1 The experience of existential solitude is informed by one's relationships with others

For all the participants some aspect of their experiences of existential solitude was associated to the context of relationships with others. One way in which this appeared was in a disconnection or a relationship lacking in intimacy with spouse or family origin, which left them feeling all alone in the world and confronted with facing themselves at a very deep level, as it was for Participants 1 and 2. The other respect in which relationships came forward was in learning to be alone in the world, Participant 3 learned to know herself more intimately in aloneness and that, in turn, enhanced her relationships with others. In addition, it was in the aloneness that ensued after a relationship had ended that she became more intimately aware of her existential solitude. Participant 4 found that

¹ Another shared form that appeared in three of the participants' images was that of a spiral shape. Cooper (1978) commented that "on the metaphysical plane [the spiral] symbolizes the realms of existence, the various modalities of a being, and the wanderings of the soul in manifestation and its ultimate return to the Centre" (p. 156). However, there were no apparent thematic commonalities in the meanings attributed to this shape by the participants. It is for this reason that I have chosen not to include it as a common theme.

relationships and deep sharing with others with regards to her experiences, including that of existential solitude, helped her to better understand herself and to deepen her experience of the phenomenon.

The images of participants 2 and 3 included portrayals of self alone and in relationship to others, the former in the depiction of self and others as dots or circles, separated and connected by other lines and the latter in the different coloured figures, separate yet overlapping in places.

4.5.2 States of existence portrayed as contained forms

All participants depicted in their images, states of being in some structure of contained or encapsulated form, in most cases, circular. Participant 1 included in her image a round black “void” which represented to her a state of feeling “bad”, like a “lost child”, and fear. Surrounding this black shape were flowing green lines which, to her, meant hope, as did the ovate shape, an egg symbolizing new life. Another circular form was the sun, symbolizing feeling “connected” and meditating. The four red circles drawn by Participant 2 were explained by her to represent states of disillusionment she had experienced up until this point in her life resulting in her withdrawal from her family of origin, withdrawal from the church, sense of losing herself in her husband, and losing herself in her profession. Participant 3’s enclosed figures tended to be more all-inclusive portrayals of Self and others, along with accompanying states of being. The states were explained as being various layers of Self, which include the state of solitude and separateness versus sharing or “overlap”. Subsequently viewed by this participant as flowers, she described that they were “my expression of some energy consumed in my form...delineating what is me”. Participant 4 described herself as being in the centre, like

“an experience of being in a womb”. She said there was a sense of wholeness or being part of a whole.

4.5.3 Fear is an element one is challenged to confront as part of the experience of existential solitude

The element of fear came up in some context for all participants. For Participant 1, fear served as a challenge, in a way, for her to turn negatives into positives. The fear originated from childhood abuse and resulted in her learning to escape as a coping mechanism. As an adult, and by way of different therapies, she discovered that the fear keeps her from connecting with her self and her way to deal with it is to look inside and to face the fear. Similarly, Participant 3 found that in facing the pain of aloneness and her innermost fears, she comes out of the pain with a richer sense of herself. It is not scary for her anymore. Participant 4 experienced that going deeper into her fear brings a sense of peace and happiness with herself. How fear played into Participant 2’s encounter with existential solitude was that she was “terrified” to be alone with herself.²

Participant 1 drew the “black void” to describe her fear of being alone. For Participant 4, the signification of fear is somewhat more obscure yet present nonetheless in her illustration of the dualities of her experience of existential solitude, of fear and peace existing “*coté-à-coté*” in the two parts of the image and in the use of transparency.

² In all but a few instances, the participants framed this part of the experience in terms of “fear”, rather than as “anxiety”, however, their descriptions of the experience were more ontological in character than that of affect. I have maintained consistency with the participants’ use of the term “fear” while acknowledging that there were elements of anxiety in their experiences.

4.5.4 Existential solitude heightens one's awareness of self-responsibility

Each participant spoke of how some facet of being alone in the world brought to essentially we are alone, she felt that her inner life was her own and that she and no one her awareness the need to be responsible for herself. As Participant 1 put it, because else was responsible for it. It was in facing being utterly alone that Participant 3 came to the realization of her ultimate self-responsibility, that it all came back to her. Participant 2 expressed that in going through a "healthier stage" in her life and in understanding her experience of aloneness she realized the importance of taking care of herself. Another way that this seemed to manifest for her was in what she called "self-preservation". At different points in her life, such as when she left home at the age of 16 and when she left the church in her late twenties, it became clear to her that she had to make a change in order to survive and she acted on that realization. For Participant 4 self-responsibility came to the fore when she had her child and she realized that she was responsible for another human being. Having a child helped to bring her back to herself.

This theme did not emerge in the images of any of the participants.

4.5.5 The experience of existential solitude is one that involves a flow, journey, or evolution over time

For Participants 1, 3, and 4 the experience of existential solitude seemed to contain the element of movement, of evolution over time. Each spoke of how her relationship with the phenomenon has unfolded and continues to unfold over time.

For Participants 1 and 4, the flow of life or the journey was shown by a blue flowing line. For Participant 1 it signified the serenity in the experience of existential solitude for her over time and for Participant 4 the blue was like the flow of the river.

Participant 3's demonstration of the aspect of evolution over time was less blatant. She showed this by the variation of quality of line in the boundaries of the figures, how things grow to become less "blurry" in her experience of the phenomenon.

4.5.6 Existential solitude involves being "in the moment"

While there emerged a temporal unfolding in participants' describing of the phenomenon as an evolving experience, alongside this was expressed the characteristic of living in the moment. Participants 1 and 3 articulated that an element of the experience of the quality of existential solitude involved the facility to "remain in the moment", that is, to lay aside concerns of the past or the future, as well as, external circumstances. It also involved centering and focusing inward.

For all participants the act of image-making during the interview contained an element of being in the moment, for each one had not known in advance what her image was going to ultimately contain. Participant 3 stated expressly that when she looks at flowers or draws them in nature, then that is the perfect moment for her, and this came forth during the art therapy research interview when she saw the figures in her drawing as flowers.

4.5.7 Being connected to nature deepens one's experience of existential solitude

Participants 1 and 3 felt a strong connection with nature in their relationship with existential solitude. Being in nature, whether it is in the wilderness, in a garden, or sitting in a park deepened their connection to themselves.

The colour green was chosen by Participant 1 because she associated that particular colour to nature, which is where she has often felt connected to her existential

self. Participant 3 came to the awareness during the art therapy research interview that the figures in her image looked like flowers which represent existential solitude. The choice of brown paper conveyed the “earthiness” of the experience in its connection to nature.

4.5.8 Existential solitude is an experience of dualities

For Participants 1,3, and 4 existential solitude presented a somewhat dichotomous experience, although, not explicitly expressed as such in all cases. There seemed to be two sides of the phenomenon in which pain, shame, fear, disconnectedness, struggle, illness, or losses characterized their experience. In allowing themselves to stay with, learn from, and work through those emotions they would then experience the joy, peace, self-acceptance, groundedness, creativity, or hopefulness of existential solitude. What seemed to be the common theme for them is that the two aspects were very much part of the experience and of one another. This was expressed, albeit perhaps somewhat more obliquely by Participant 2. She expressed having discovered that in allowing her emotions, including the uncomfortable ones, she benefits from a greater self-acceptance.

It was only in the image of Participant 4 that the experience of dualities was conveyed. This was shown by her dividing of the image in the center and in the use of the transparency to express the two sides of wanting and not wanting to be seen.

4.5.9 Existential solitude is related to but different from loneliness

For all but Participant 2, loneliness and existential solitude were distinctly different experiences. These three participants each explained a different experience of loneliness, however, the common thread seemed to be that loneliness came first, and then in facing the pain and other difficult emotions associated with the loneliness, they came to a deeper and more satisfying sense of existential solitude.

4.6 Discussion

Once again, it needs to be pointed out that the interviews were not conducted as part of a therapeutic relationship and were limited by the degree of depth that was possible to explore in the shorter-term framework and context of the study. However, they were conducted in a therapeutic setting and the participants were aware that the exploration was taking place in the interest of art therapy research and with an art therapist. For this reason I will say that the art making took place *in the presence of a therapeutic other*.

The particular insights that the individual participants came upon as a result of the art making and the art therapy interviews are quite unique and distinct. However, the outcomes of the experiences had certain commonalities. The process of creating the image provided insights of which they had previously been unaware. It brought what was inside to the outside, to a different level of consciousness. It gave them a deepened sense of self-awareness and acceptance. This seemed to take place for all of them, although it may not have been articulated as such. For all of them there was a quality of the unknown. Each of the participants started her image without a clear picture of how it was going to evolve. She started with the first line or form and did not know where it was going to go. Along with this, the insights and effects of thinking about the interview seemed to evolve over time, whether the process continued during the interview and after it took place or if it set the wheels in motion prior to the interview, in the mental preparation for it.

For three of the participants it was apparent that they gained new insights during the process of the art interview. One woman was very explicit about the fact that the

element of sharing about her experiences of existential solitude, including her images of it, had much to do how she experienced the phenomenon. Again, I make note that one participant stated during the art therapy interview that the making of the image neither transformed nor informed her awareness of the experience of existential solitude.

Elaborating on the commonalities, I will include the following insights that, although expressed by individuals, can be seen to hold some legitimacy for all the participants' experiences. According to Participant 1, art making in the presence of a therapeutic other helped her to recognize the progress she has made since when she was younger; it has facilitated her in creating a shift in previously held perceptions. For Participant 2, some new perceptions in regards to her experiences in terms of relationships, one of the major themes shaping her experience of existential solitude, surfaced, during the exploration of her image. Participant 3 expressed having experienced a deepening of her understanding of the phenomenon through participating in the interview. In particular, the significance of a therapeutic other was succinctly expressed by her in the insights that came to her awareness while she was making art in my witnessing presence. For Participant 4, art making in the presence of a therapeutic other embodied the importance of sharing, a vital component of her understanding of existential solitude, and brought her more confidence in herself in relation to the experience.

Chapter 5: The Relationship of the Findings to Existing Research and Theory

5.1 Existential solitude and existential psychotherapy

There were noteworthy parallels in what the literature spoke of and what was borne out of the data of the study. One aspect in particular was obvious throughout and that had to do with the relationships and diversities between loneliness and existential solitude. Certainly, in the descriptions from the participants, the seeds of existential solitude were sowed in experiences of loneliness. It appeared that the depth and richness of existential solitude grew from the initial experience of loneliness. This came through in the verbal segments of the interviews and by way of the images. This finding was congruent with what I found in the literature, that there is not a clear line between loneliness and existential solitude and that the experience of existential solitude often evolves along a continuum, beginning with utter loneliness as a starting point and then expanding and deepening further into a fertile experience. In addition, Moustakas (1996) and Brennan (1982) had written that loneliness evolves out of childhood or adolescent experience, an occurrence shared by Participants 1 and 2.

Further on the theories of loneliness that were reflected in the findings, was the role that personal and intimate relationships play in the evolution of one's association with existential solitude (Yalom, 1980). Relationships seemed to take on a central role for all the participants. Participant 2 spoke of a longing for deep connection with others that corresponds to what Barrell (1988) referred to in the theme of Missing, when one yearns for a meaningful relationship. The descriptions and images of Participants 1, 2, and 3, which viewed that painful relationships or significant loss of or lack of close, intimate

relationships played a role in the experience of loneliness echoed the findings of Andersson (1986), Moustakas (1966), and Rokach (1984).

The image of Participant 3 spoke very much about the evolution of her relationship with existential solitude and with her personal boundaries. This was also a topic of concern for Yalom (1980) who wrote about one navigates the conflict of existential solitude by way of the softening of ego boundaries.

The experiences of existential solitude of Participants 1, 3, and 4 were described as one in which they felt compelled to face being alone in the world as an inevitable albeit healthy condition of living and one through which they gained a richer self-awareness. This was not unlike what was presented in the literature, that existential solitude is an essential experience that reaches beyond interpersonal and intrapersonal loneliness to embody a broader, universal experience shared by human beings, one that lends itself to a sense of freedom and creativity (Moustakas, 1996, Rokach, 1984, and Yalom, 1980).

Participants 1 and 3 stated clearly in their verbal interviews and in their images that nature had a clear role to play in the essence of how they lived with existential solitude. Moustakas (1996) had written about very much the same phenomenon, in which one's relationship to nature sustains a connectedness to the universe.

Frankl (1978) wrote about how people creatively find positive opportunities in the negative experience of being alone. Participant 1 articulated very clearly on how the theme of existential solitude, for her, had much to do with the capacity of turning negatives into positives. Likewise, the experience of Participant 4, expressed verbally and in her image, of the duality of her living of existential solitude is borne out in the

writing of Moustakas (1990) who hypothesized that the phenomenon exists as a source of both power and pain, of darkness and light.

All the participants expressed that some aspect of fear or anxiety is an integral part of how they travel through the experience of existential solitude. This element was very much reflected in the philosophical writings of May (1958b), Tillich (1952), Van Duerszen-Smith (1997), and Yalom (1980).

5.2 Art therapy

Yalom (1980) theorized that conditions of “solitude, silence, time, and the freedom from everyday distractions” (p. 8) are necessary to allow for deep personal exploration in discovering the finer points of existence, and Lantz (2002) noted the need for providing a safe container in which the client’s pain is honoured. The typical art therapy milieu grants such an environment, and this was verbalized by Participant 3 as a quality contributing to her ability to go inward, to make discoveries, and to express herself.

Some of the participants spoke about the anxiety and nervousness that they felt in coming to the interviews and how the creative act of image-making helped them through those feelings. Moon (1995) has written that by engaging clients’ existential conflicts in a creative act of image-making they are helped to reach a deepened state of mindfulness and then to a state of change, which involves a sort of creative anxiety.

During the art therapy interviews, all of the participants interacted with their images and in none of the cases was the relationship with the image a static one. Along with this, as has already been stated here, relationship with others was a critical component of each participant’s connection with existential solitude, and was depicted in

some of the images. Moon's (1995) position that existential emptiness can be filled only through relationship – with others, with their images, and with the therapist – was evinced in the study. However, while it may be regarded as somewhat of an amplification to consider the interaction with the interviewer to be a “relationship”, there was a rapport established between interviewer and participants and, certainly, a degree of relating and affirmation occurred in the process of exploration. Wadeson (1973) contributed the idea that while clients alone must come to their own meanings, which is the way in which the interviews were designed to elicit data, the sharing of a person's unique image-making is an attempt to bridge one's separateness. Three of the participants came to new awareness of their sense of aloneness through the art therapy interview and the other brought her revised awareness to the follow-up interview.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The primary aim of this study was to explore the relationships between image-making in a therapeutic setting and the individual experience and meaning of existential solitude. The secondary concern was to determine if there were to be an occurrence of common themes in the visual and verbal narratives of participants.

6.1 Research and clinical implications

The findings showed that the exploration of the images conducted from a phenomenological perspective and an art-therapeutic stance produced new insights into the experience of existential solitude for the participants. Each interview took on its own shape, determined very much by each individual's shaping of the meanings of their experiences and how they related to the task. The organic nature of the interviews made it problematic to remain true to the predetermined structure. For example, the art therapy research interview would often lead participants to follow the tangents of their thoughts on the theory of existential solitude or loneliness, or even the details of their personal lives with which they were struggling. This may have led participants to significant insights but it also made for a challenging task of sorting through the data, for analyzing and identifying meaning units or themes, and for presenting the data in a uniform and consistent way.

Despite my extrapolation of what I perceived as insights gleaned from Participant 2's experience of the interviews, I am compelled to return to her assertion that the making of the image did not affect her experience and meaning of the phenomenon of existential solitude. There are several important contributions that her input has made to the study. Firstly, there was the experience that she had with the image-making, her expressed lack

of art and art therapy background which made her uncomfortable with the art making process. This presents implications that highlight the importance of Betensky's (1987) stage of orientation to the materials. The brief nature of the interviewing situation did not take into account the condition offered in a true therapeutic relationship with regards to affording clients the time and space to become comfortable with art materials and to externalize and share deep internal encounters in visual form. This also highlights the clinical importance of taking into consideration the infinite range of the efficacy of various approaches with which different individuals can relate. It is valuable to remember that for some individuals, art therapy may not be a therapeutic modality with which they easily identify and that, as art therapists, we must be flexible in our approach and have access to other means of eliciting deep self-understanding for our clients or for creating a bridge between talk therapy and art therapy.

Another factor is this participant's experience of existential solitude as having somewhat of a "distressing" aspect, which might imply certain things. Some of her descriptions of her experience at the second interview suggested that she may have been beginning to open more to the experience. As was discovered in the literature and in the findings of this study, the deepening experience of existential solitude may grow along a continuum, often beginning in the depths of loneliness. Is it possible that she was at a different stage of discovery, one that the others had described as having experienced earlier on? However, true to the tenets of phenomenological psychology, the experience of the participant is what is sought and I have to resist the temptation to fit her experience into what I understand it to be or into the prevailing wisdom. Moreover, in being sensitive to the ways in which the dynamics of a person's very individual concerns may

be mirrored in the therapeutic situation, I would venture to assert that this participant's discomfort with the materials could have been reflective of her discomfort with her own experience of existential solitude.

Finally, I want to underline what has become notably clear in the process of this research. The essence of *being alone in the world* is ostensibly a complex notion to put to words. The issue of *relationship*, in all its facets, was an integral part of the experience for all of the participants, as, I believe, it is a concern for all individuals. As pointed out by Moon (1995) and Wadeson (1973), art therapy is about relationship, on several levels. Art therapy has the power to invite the clients to enter an inquiry into their sense of self in relation to existence in the world, and intertwined with that is one's sense of being alone in the world.

It is critical to note, as suggested by May (1958a), that feelings of separateness, such as alienation, are not necessarily symptoms of a pathological state. It is helpful, while maintaining a realistic awareness of emotional disturbance, to sustain a regard and approach with clients that sees beyond pathology to the vital conflicts and relationships that are brought to light by simply existing in the world. The medical model, of which diagnosis and categorization of mental states and mental illness is an integral part, most certainly is fundamental to mental health treatment. However, it is possible that this systematic method might, perhaps, eclipse discoveries that may be offered by an existential and phenomenological approach. It is my contention that a phenomenological art therapy approach is a powerful instrument which can be used both outside of the systems of the medical model and in concert with it. Phenomenological and existential art therapy has the potential to offer original and basic insights into some of the conflicts

faced by all individuals, including those who are challenged by mental illness, such as, schizophrenia or bipolar disorder. It offers us and, more pertinently, our clients the option of learning about the self in the broader context of their essential existence in the world, without being confined by the limitations of viewing internal conflicts as, necessarily, pathology. For those with mental health diagnoses, it can help them to explore beyond the boundaries of their “illness”.

As art therapists, it is our responsibility to retain an awareness of and an openness to the broader picture and to remain attuned to circumstances in which clients present issues of existential concern. An art therapeutic approach provides a unique opportunity and a rich ground for exploring such significant relationships.

6.2 Suggestions for future research

The current study involved an exploration of the use of art therapy as an instrument to help better understand and cultivate the experience of existential solitude. The scope and context of the inquiry was such that the study took place in a relatively narrow time frame with participants who were not involved in a therapeutic relationship with the researcher. Thus, the project was, functionally, a pilot project on the topic.

Overall, the findings demonstrated that art therapy has the potential to enlighten and enhance individuals’ experiences of existential phenomena. Studies entailing a longer-term investigation situated in a therapeutic context would offer a more comprehensive and enriched exploration of individuals’ relationships with the existential phenomenon in question and of their relationships with their images. That a single interview provided the insights that it did for the participants, indicates the potential wealth of meaning to be mined from a deeper investigation. Inherent in existential theory

is a profound and fertile ground in which one's sense of meaning in the world can be explored. The framework and philosophy of art therapy has shown itself to be particularly well-suited to existential inquiry, something with which many people involve themselves. The subject of art therapy conducted with an existential focus is one that is blatantly scarce in the literature.

Furthermore, the aspect of the relationship between therapist and client, a cornerstone of the therapeutic process, was clearly, yet necessarily, absent from this study. Research conducted over a longer term in a clinical context could include a inquiry into the complex facets of the therapeutic relationship. A study taking place in a therapeutic framework would also allow for participants to develop their own relationships with the materials and with the modality of art therapy should these things be unfamiliar to them.

As for common themes having presented themselves across the interviews, it is apparent that this occurred with regards to experiences and meanings of existential solitude woven in with the very individual aspects of it. Concerning the issue of common elements in the visual productions, the art images were very much a personal and unique statement for each participant, with each individual communicating by way of her own symbolic and visual language. Within this clearly individualized expression a common structure seemed to occur: that of the contained form. The contained form can be linked to Jung's theories of mandala symbolism, in which he talked about the symbolism of the circle or variations of the basic identifiable circle shape manifesting as an expression of the Self (Jung, 1972). He stated that internal existence is inextricably linked to external existence or the environment. He also theorized that the circle conveys the entirety of the

psyche, including one's relationship with nature (Jung & Franz, 1968). Observations congruent with this theory were expressed by the participants in relation to their contained forms. It would be problematic to generalize from so small a sample and future research would certainly warrant a closer look into the relationship of images of existential solitude to Jungian theory on mandala symbolism or the relationship of Self as portrayed in an existential perspective to a larger cultural or archetypal context.

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APPENDIX CONSENT INFORMATION FORM

Art Therapy Student: Sora Davis
Concordia University
1455 de Maisonneuve O.
Montreal, QC H3G 2J2

Supervisor:

Background Information:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study on existential loneliness and art therapy. As a student in the Master's in Creative Arts Therapies at Concordia University I am required to write a research paper. The long-term goal is to better help individuals who engage in art therapy in the future.

There will be two interviews. The first one, which will involve the making of the image followed by a discussion, may take up to two hours. The second interview will require about one hour and will take place approximately one month following the first. At this time I will present to you my observations of the initial experience in order to verify with you its truth to your experience and it will also be an opportunity for you to add any further thoughts.

Permission:

I am asking you for permission to photograph the artwork that you produce in this interview and to write about the process. A copy of the research paper will be bound and kept in the Concordia University Library, and another in the Programme's Resource Room. This paper may also be presented in educational settings in the future.

I will also be audio taping our sessions. These tapes will be for my use only and I will destroy them after I have transcribed them to paper.

Confidentiality:

Because this information is of a personal nature, it is understood that your confidentiality will be respected in every way possible. Neither your name nor, the name _____, nor any identifying information will appear in the research paper or on your artwork.

Advantages and Disadvantages to Your Consent

To my knowledge, this permission will not cause you any personal inconvenience. Possible benefits to participants may be that they gain a better self-understanding, as well as, a sense that they are contributing to the developing field of art therapy and human experience.

Whether or not you give your consent will have no effect on your involvement at _____. As well, you may withdraw your consent at any time before the research paper is completed with no consequences and without giving any explanation.

To do this, or if you have any questions, you may contact my supervisor

**APPENDIX
CONSENT FORM**

Authorization for photography, audio recordings, and the use of session material related.

I, the undersigned _____
Address _____
Phone number _____

Authorize Sora Davis to take any photographs, audio recordings, and session material and to utilize and publish them for educational purposes, provided that reasonable precautions are taken to conserve confidentiality.

However, I make the following restrictions:

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Guarantor

Date

Witness to Signature

Date