

Exploring Therapeutic Factors: A Philosophical Inquiry into Art Therapy's Role in Healing
Attachment Insecurity in an Adult Population

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ABSTRACT

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Attachment Insecurity in an Adult Population

Alexandra Berberi

Attachment insecurity in adulthood has been linked to emotion dysregulation, maladaptive relational patterns, and vulnerability to psychopathology. While several attachment-informed therapeutic models exist, few are tailored to address attachment insecurity through nonverbal, sensory-based modalities. This thesis examines the therapeutic potential of art therapy for addressing attachment insecurity in adulthood, employing philosophical inquiry to synthesize theoretical and empirical literature. Drawing on attachment theory, neurobiology, and art therapy frameworks, three core therapeutic factors are examined: sensory and tactile engagement, imagery and concretization, and therapist attunement within the triangular relationship. Findings suggest that the multisensory, embodied, and relational nature of art therapy aligns closely with the mechanisms of attachment formation and regulation, offering an alternative pathway for clients who struggle with traditional talk therapies. These therapeutic factors support emotional regulation, promote reflective functioning, and provide corrective emotional experiences, particularly for individuals who are high in attachment avoidance or have limited verbal access to emotional material. This study highlights the relevance of art therapy as an attachment-informed modality and advocates for its further integration and empirical investigation within adult mental health treatment.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Attachment theory has long served as a core framework for understanding how early caregiving relationships shape emotional development and regulation across the lifespan. Originating from the work of John Bowlby (1980), attachment is now viewed not only as a behavioural system rooted in evolutionary biology but also as a regulatory system, as proposed by Schore and Schore (2008), who describe it as the synchronization of physiological and emotional processes between the child and caregiver. Secure attachment relationships promote affect regulation, self-coherence, and resilience, whereas insecure attachment—characterized by anxiety and/or avoidance—has been associated with emotion dysregulation, maladaptive coping strategies, and increased vulnerability to psychopathology (Schore, 2003; Simpson et al., 2011; Cheche Hoover & Jackson, 2021).

Despite the growing body of research linking attachment insecurity in adulthood to mental health issues and relationship problems, limited attention has been given to how these patterns can be directly addressed in therapy using nonverbal and creative approaches. Although some literature exists on using art therapy to assess attachment representations (e.g., Bird's Nest Drawing; Goldner, 2014), few studies examine how art therapy might help heal attachment insecurity in adults. Most existing attachment research focuses on parent-child dyads, leaving a significant gap in the literature regarding individual adult clients.

Relevance to Art Therapy

Art therapy's multisensory, symbolic, and relational qualities make it a uniquely promising intervention for attachment work. Franklin (2010) highlights the importance of therapist attunement in art therapy, especially through the use of "third-hand" techniques—where the therapist engages in the creative process without taking control—originally described by Kramer (1986). These practices encourage co-regulation and emotional expression, providing a nonverbal channel that is particularly effective for clients with strong defenses or difficulty verbalizing emotion (Sholt & Gavron, 2006). This closely aligns with the fundamental mechanisms of attachment, which develop through preverbal sensory experiences such as eye contact, tone, rhythm, and gesture (Schore, 2003).

Schore (2012) also emphasises how therapeutic relationships characterised by emotional availability can create the conditions for coregulatory healing, especially for clients with unresolved attachment wounds. In the context of art therapy, relational attunement is further

enriched through the triangular relationship between client, therapist, and artwork. Armstrong and Ross (2022) found that collaborative art-making not only facilitated the expression of self but also supported clients in navigating interpersonal dynamics within the therapeutic space. These findings suggest that, when art therapy is guided by an interpersonal focus, it holds strong potential as a treatment modality for attachment-related difficulties.

From this perspective, art therapy may serve not only as a space for creative exploration but also as a reparative environment where adults with insecure attachment patterns can experience new relational possibilities and greater emotional integration. Given the lack of empirical and theoretical frameworks that specifically link adult attachment healing with art therapy, this research aims to conceptualize how art therapy can meaningfully support this population.

Statement of Purpose

Art therapy may serve as a viable alternative treatment to foster healing of attachment insecurity in adulthood. The objective of this research is to demonstrate the significance of employing an attachment-based approach to art therapy for addressing attachment insecurity among adults by exposing its mechanisms of change. These mechanisms encompass sensory and tactile engagement with materials, the utilization of imagery and concretization, and the therapist's attunement within the triangular relationship. The purpose is to theoretically establish these elements within attachment theory and regulation science to enhance the articulation of art therapy's potential in this domain. This investigation is particularly significant as it could expand the spectrum of therapeutic options available to adult clients seeking to resolve attachment issues, especially those who have not benefited from traditional talk therapy.

Key Terms

Therapeutic factors: defined here as the foundational mechanisms or “building blocks” that enable therapeutic change and support attachment healing—such as attunement, art-making, emotion regulation, and imagery (Czamanski-Cohen & Weihs, 2016; de Witte et al., 2021).

Attachment insecurity: refers to maladaptive patterns of attachment-related behaviors, thoughts, and expectations, rooted in early caregiving experiences, which negatively affect emotional regulation and interpersonal relationships in adulthood (Adams et al., 2018; Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Cassidy & Shaver, 2016).

Attachment avoidance: involves discomfort with closeness, a preference for self-reliance, and suppression of attachment-related emotions (Adams et al., 2018; Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Cassidy & Shaver, 2016).

Attachment anxiety: involves hyperactivation of the attachment system, fear of abandonment, and heightened emotional sensitivity to perceived rejection (Adams et al., 2018; Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Cassidy & Shaver, 2016).

Research Questions

Primary research question: Which therapeutic factors of art therapy contribute to the healing of mental health difficulties brought by attachment insecurity in adults?

Subsidiary research questions:

1. What is attachment insecurity, and why is it important to consider in adult mental health?
2. How do the sensory and tactile qualities of art therapy, the ability of art to bypass defenses through imagery, and its nonverbal relational nature (triangular relationship) interact to support the healing process of attachment insecurity in individuals undergoing art therapy?

Chapter Summaries

Following this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 provides a review of the relevant literature, including the development of attachment theory, current therapeutic approaches for adult attachment insecurity, and the neurobiology of attachment and emotion regulation. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology of philosophical inquiry used in this study, detailing its alignment with the theoretical nature of the research question. Chapter 4 presents the main findings of the inquiry, organized around three key therapeutic factors: sensory and tactile engagement, imagery and concretization, and attunement within the triangular relationship. Chapter 5 discusses these findings in relation to existing literature and theory, followed by a conclusion, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This section examines the theoretical foundations and clinical implications of attachment theory, focusing on its relevance to adult emotional regulation, mental health, and therapeutic intervention. Originating from John Bowlby's work, attachment theory has expanded across developmental, neurobiological, and psychotherapeutic fields, providing a framework for understanding how early caregiving relationships have a lasting impact. The review discusses how insecure attachment in adulthood contributes to various psychological problems and highlights current therapeutic methods, including emerging approaches like Emotionally Focused Individual Therapy (EFIT) and Attachment-Based Family Therapy (ABFT). Special focus is given to art therapy as a potential, yet under-researched, modality—laying the groundwork for the present study, which investigates how art therapy could be a promising treatment for attachment issues in adults.

Foundations of Attachment Theory

Attachment theory, pioneered by John Bowlby, originated in developmental psychology and emphasizes the critical role of an infant's bond with their primary caregiver in shaping their emotional and psychological development. If an infant's biological, physiological, psychological and emotional needs are answered in times of distress, an internal model representing safety will develop (Bowlby, 1980; Siegel, 2012). This mental prototype of the relationship, according to Bowlby, serves as a reflective reservoir of an individual's sense of self and their relationships, and is carried with the individual throughout their lifetime (Siegel, 2012).

Classification of attachment styles involves acknowledging the existence of various attachment patterns, which serve to categorize different behavioural tendencies. Providing essential empirical evidence supporting Bowlby's theory, Mary Ainsworth distinguished between distinct attachment styles through her implementation of the "Strange Situation Procedure," documenting their respective influence on the infant's ability to utilize the mother as a 'secure base' for exploration (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Subsequently, Bartholomew and Horowitz's attachment models incorporated two critical variables: the positive or negative perception of the self and of others. This integration introduced classifications such as secure, preoccupied, dismissing, and fearful, which correspond to secure, anxious-ambivalent, anxious-avoidant, and disorganized styles as identified by Ainsworth (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Decades later, the original hypotheses proposed by Bowlby remain compelling, now bolstered by findings from neuroscience research (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016).

Neurobiology of attachment and its impact on regulation. This framework influences how individuals regulate their emotions later in life. In investigating the effects of attachment on human development, numerous neuroscience researchers have expanded upon Bowlby's foundational theory and emphasized the neuroanatomical organizational properties of attachment that affect regulation. Attachment can be understood as the outcome of the child's biological predisposition to attach interacting with their environment, including their parents' own regulatory systems (Schoore, 2003). Consequently, attachment shapes the early development of the right brain, which is the neurobiological core of the human unconscious involved in emotional regulation (Schoore, 2003; Rees, 2007). Building upon this, Stephen Porges (2011) identified the neurobiological mechanisms of social engagement, neuroception, and self-regulation through his polyvagal theory as crucial modulators of an individual's capacity to form attachment relationships. The vagus nerve, a central element of polyvagal theory, is described as "a complex bidirectional system that regulates homeostasis and associated social engagement responses to environmental challenges (i.e., stress)" (Cherland, 2012). These findings, based on the foundation of social engagement and attachment, connect neurophysiological responses to behavioral reactions, thereby grounding and situating essential components of communication, empathy, and connectedness within an individual's nervous system (Porges, 2011; Manzotti et al., 2024). Building upon Bowlby's original propositions, contemporary attachment theory presents compelling neurobiological evidence that not only supports his initial assertions about attachment fostering a sense of safety but also reinforces the critical role of attachment in the development of neurobiological mechanisms necessary for emotional regulation throughout the lifespan.

The Impact of Attachment Insecurity on Adult Relationships and Well-being

The impact of attachment models includes a wide range of observable phenomena, including overt behavior, interpersonal communication, emotional regulation, autobiographical memory, and narrative processes (Siegel, 2012; Poole Heller, 2019; Fonagy & Target, 2002). Attachment insecurity in adulthood is associated with poorer emotional regulation abilities (Cheche Hoover & Jackson, 2021; Pooler Heller, 2019), greater difficulties in perceiving their partner's emotions, as well as more hostile and defensive behaviors when dealing with negative emotions in their romantic relationship (Overall et al., 2015; Simpson et al., 2011).

Emotional Regulation and Mental Health. Attachment significantly influences adults' emotional regulation and mental health. Individuals with impaired social engagement systems from attachment trauma are more likely to experience emotional overwhelm from an unmitigated visceral feedback system (Porges, 2011; Manzotti et al., 2024). Consequently, such individuals may suppress sensory feedback from their bodies and perceive their experiences as bland and devoid of meaning, considering their internal regulatory mechanisms fail to provide adequate protection and emotional engagement (Porges, 2011). Along this line, Wang et al. (2022) sampled 245 individuals spanning from 18 to 80 years old to investigate the relationship between attachment security, alexithymia and meaning in life. The researchers concluded that securely-attached adults experienced greater meaning in life, with this association being compounded when higher emotion regulation abilities were present (Wang et al., 2022).

Adult attachment styles further influence regulation strategies, with anxious and avoidant individuals displaying distinct patterns. Assessing longitudinal data from the Minnesota Longitudinal Study of Risk and Adaptation, Girme et al. (2021) found a link between infants' attachment insecurity at 12 to 18 months old and distinct emotion regulation strategies within romantic relationships 20-35 years later. Individuals high in attachment anxiety are prone to rumination and using a self-focused orientation during interpersonal conflicts (hyper-regulation strategies), which tend to intensify distress rather than alleviate it (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2016; Girme et al., 2021). In contrast, those high on the attachment avoidance dimension adopt cognitive or behavioral distancing strategies when experiencing emotional overwhelm, often excluding painful memories or distressing material from conscious awareness (hypo-regulating strategies) (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002; Girme et al., 2021).

Similarly, Richardson et al. (2022) demonstrated that being highly avoidant predicted the use of defensive isolation, while those high on attachment-anxiety uniquely predicted defenses splitting, projective identification, anticipation, acting out, passive-aggression, reaction formation, and undoing. This "defensive exclusion" mechanism, similar to defensive isolation, as described by Bowlby and others, creates segregated mental systems that inhibit emotional processing (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2016). Additionally, insecurely attached individuals report experiencing less positive emotions (Park et al., 2022). When they do experience these feelings, anxious individuals are more likely to perceive them as potential threats, considering past positive experiences may have led to adverse outcomes (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2016). This

tendency to link positive states with painful memories can trigger a cascade of negative associations, obstructing flexible, adaptive cognitive processing and limiting their emotional resilience (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002).

Early attachment relationships are essential for developing the capacity for mentalization, the ability to understand that one's mind shapes personal experience. Mentalization, or "reflective function," involves recognizing and distinguishing between internal mental states and external reality, as well as differentiating one's own emotions from those of others (Fonagy et al., 2002; Lorenzini & Fonagy, 2013). This capacity, fostered through attuned caregiving, is not innate but developed through early interactions (Fonagy et al., 2002). By supporting the child's understanding of their own and others' mental states, early attachment lays the groundwork for effective emotional regulation, social functioning, and empathy in adulthood.

Psychopathology. The significance of resolving attachment insecurity in adulthood relies partly upon the psychological distress experienced from the development of psychopathologies in adulthood. Han et al. (2022) identified from a sample of US female university students ($N=271$) an indirect link between adult attachment insecurity and bulimia via maladaptive perfectionism and self-esteem. In individuals prone to paranoia, insecure attachment, regardless of attachment styles, heightens the likelihood of psychosis via negative beliefs about self and others, cognitive fusions, and use of maladaptive emotion regulation strategies (Sood et al., 2022). Adult attachment insecurity has been identified as a mediator for, or a mechanism sustaining, various psychopathologies such as depression (Cortés-García et al., 2022) and eating disorders (Rossi et al., 2022; Tasca et al., 2013; Illing et al., 2012).

A distinct pattern between attachment anxiety and avoidance. The impact of attachment on adult psychopathology is also related to the likelihood of developing internalizing or externalizing disorders (Stovall-McClough & Dozier, 2016). In a meta-analysis of studies spanning 25 years and involving over 10,000 participants from both clinical and non-clinical populations, Bakermans-Kranenburg and Van IJzendoorn (2009), as cited in Stovall-McClough and Dozier's (2016) review, found that adults with preoccupied attachment styles are more likely to experience heightened anxiety. This anxiety may manifest as generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) or as phobic disorders (Stovall-McClough & Dozier, 2016) and has also been found to mediate the link between interpersonal trauma and features of CPTSD (Sandberg & Refreá, 2022). These individuals are often preoccupied with past attachment experiences, resulting in a

heightened sensitivity to perceived relational threats, which may predispose them to internalizing disorders such as borderline personality disorder (Stovall-McClough & Dozier, 2016).

Conversely, dismissing attachment states are correlated with externalizing disorders. Individuals exhibiting dismissing states of mind typically tend to minimize the importance of attachment relationships. They may encounter difficulties with emotional intimacy, and this detachment has been associated with disorders characterized by externalizing behaviors, including conduct disorder and antisocial personality disorder (Stovall-McClough & Dozier, 2016).

A pattern linked with forms of violence has also been discerned in Bakermans-Kranenburg and Van IJzendoorn's (2009) meta-analysis (Stovall-McClough & Dozier, 2016) where preoccupied states of mind are associated with violence directed toward family members. Contrarywise, dismissing states of mind are linked to violence against society (as seen in criminal behaviors) and violence against oneself (such as drug abuse and eating disorders) (Stovall-McClough & Dozier, 2016).

Attachment insecurity in adulthood significantly impacts emotional regulation, mental health, and interpersonal relationships, thereby contributing to various psychopathologies such as depression, anxiety, and eating disorders. It is associated with specific emotional regulation strategies, differing use of defenses, and capacity for mentalization, all of which undermine emotional resilience and overall well-being. This particular vulnerability linked to attachment insecurity highlights the importance of expanding treatment options and underscores the necessity of addressing attachment issues to prevent mental health difficulties.

Current approaches to treating attachment insecurity

Limited research exists regarding attachment-based approaches, and presently, no established gold standard treatment is established for individual adults with insecure attachment styles (Taylor et al., 2015). To the best of the researcher's knowledge, much of the scholarly literature regards attachment insecurity less as a direct target of intervention and more as a trait predisposition or contextual factor to consider during treatment planning in individual therapy (Briere & Scott, 2014; Cheche Hoover & Jackson, 2021; Jacobsen et al., 2024; Knox et al., 2024; Levy et al., 2018; Overall et al., 2015; Simpson et al., 2011). Attachment-Based Family Therapy (ABFT) is available as a manualized and empirically supported intervention designed for adolescents experiencing suicidal ideations and depression, as well as their families. Certain

adaptations have been made to target young adults with unresolved anger and strained familial relationships; however, research findings on these modifications remain limited (Diamond & Levy, 2016). Emotion-Focused Therapy, originally developed for couples, has been expanded into Emotion-Focused Individual Therapy (EFIT) to incorporate core principles from EFT within the context of individual therapy. EFIT distinguishes itself from traditional emotion-focused approaches by explicitly integrating an attachment perspective (Brubacher, 2017). EFIT conceptualizes emotion dysregulation not solely as an intrapersonal issue but also as rooted in disrupted attachment bonds (Brubacher, 2017). Both ABFT and EFIT share fundamental core principles that emphasize emotion identification and regulation, corrective emotional experiences, and the recreation of a safe haven and secure base through attunement (Brubacher, 2017; Diamond & Levy, 2016).

While the aforementioned methods adopt a specific attachment lens, other practitioners hold that attachment healing is not approach-specific. Taylor et al. (2015) found that improvements in attachment representations in adult populations receiving psychotherapy improved regardless of the therapeutic approach employed (CBT, transference-focused therapy, Enactment-Based therapy, couples therapy, psychodynamic therapy) and across settings: inpatient versus outpatient, individual versus group therapy. This suggests that a variety of therapeutic approaches can effectively address the same presenting problem related to attachment. Some researchers have indicated that long-term therapy, which requires a state of deep connectedness, is necessary to heal relational trauma or more severe attachment wounds, noting that longer-term therapy was associated with greater increases in secure therapeutic attachment (Jakobsen et al., 2024; Briere, 2014), compared to shorter-term therapy for milder attachment wounds (Brubacher, 2017).

Art therapy and attachment

Attunement facilitates the cultivation of a positive self-image in children. In adulthood, this same process can be employed to mend broken object relations resulting from early attachment deficiencies (Hamilton, 1989). Referencing Adler (2002), Schore (2012) observes that “the therapeutic relationship – the interaction between the patient’s emotional vulnerability and the doctor’s [or therapist’s] emotional availability – serves as a prime example of how individuals in an empathic relationship co-regulate each other’s autonomic activity (p. 102). Incorporating attachment theory within an art therapy framework for an adult population

experiencing unresolved attachment insecurity may be beneficial in repairing dysfunctional emotional regulation, which is likely to induce distress. Indeed, Schore (2012) emphasizes that therapeutic efforts aimed at enhancing the regulation of emotional arousal not only expand the range of accessible emotions but also increase awareness and tolerance of affect, thereby fostering an improved capacity to regulate and express affect.

Franklin (2010) suggests that art therapy possesses the capacity to regulate emotions associated with attachment and emphasizes a specific type of empathetically attuned artwork created during therapy sessions using "third-hand" techniques developed by Edith Kramer (Kramer, 1986 as cited in Franklin, 2010). This methodology aids clients in managing their emotions and fostering the ability to relate to others. Considering that a fundamental challenge for adults with insecure attachment patterns is effective emotional regulation (Cherche Hoover & Jackson, 2021), "third-hand" techniques or similar art therapy interventions appear to be promising. Furthermore, it can be noted that a difficulty associated with insecure attachment patterns includes the ability to recognize needs, request that needs be met, and accept support—all of which are facilitated through the "third-hand" approach.

In a similar vein, Schore (2003) elaborates that a state of resonance occurs when the therapist's internal state is empathetically aligned with that of the patient. Given that infancy lacks verbal communication, the majority of attachment interactions transpire through gestures, touch, vocal intonation, scent, and eye contact (Schore, 2003). Regarding the therapeutic qualities of clay work in art therapy and psychotherapy, Sholt and Gavron (2006) emphasize how the non-verbal nature of art therapy facilitates emotional expression for individuals with strong defenses who find verbal expression more challenging. Rastogi et al. (2022) additionally highlight how engagement in art-making contributes to increased self-efficacy or a sense of mastery by encouraging clients to engage with novelty.

Armstrong and Ross (2022) further emphasize that the ability to examine aspects of both the relationship and the self within that relationship, in conjunction with engaging in meaningful interactions during collaborative drawing exercises, is essential to therapeutic practice in art therapy. The researchers demonstrate through home-based art therapy interventions that, when adopting an interpersonal focus, art therapy can serve as a pertinent alternative treatment for attachment insecurity (Armstrong and Ross, 2022).

The reviewed literature demonstrates that adult attachment insecurity is closely linked to emotion regulation difficulties, psychological distress, and maladaptive relational patterns. While evidence-based interventions such as EFIT and ABFT incorporate attachment principles into treatment, no established gold standard currently exists for addressing attachment insecurity in individual adult therapy. Art therapy, through its sensory and nonverbal processes, appears particularly well-suited to access and reshape early attachment-related experiences, although empirical research in this domain remains limited. This review emphasizes the necessity for further investigation into art therapy's potential to facilitate attachment healing in adults, thereby informing the rationale and direction of the present research project.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter describes the use of philosophical inquiry to explore how art therapy can support the healing of attachment insecurity in adulthood. It outlines the rationale for selecting this theoretical methodology, along with the procedures for data collection and analysis. The chapter also summarizes how key concepts were identified, organized, and interpreted to develop a conceptual framework grounded in both attachment theory and art therapy literature.

Design

Philosophical inquiry is defined by Aigen (2005) as a methodology concerned with the analysis and contextualization of theory, research, and practice within the history of ideas. Given that the present research question investigates the theoretical foundations of attachment and art therapy, employing philosophical inquiry emerges as the most pertinent approach. The constraints imposed by the time framework of this master's program and the inability to include participants in this study further restrict the scope of this project to a theoretical framework. Specifically, the central focus of this inquiry also encompasses the ideological domain, as it explores the theoretical underpinnings of both attachment theory and art therapy. This was accomplished through philosophical procedures aimed at elucidating the conceptual and foundational alignments of these theories. Anglo-American philosophy primarily involves clarifying terms, exposing and evaluating underlying assumptions, relating ideas systematically, and utilizing argumentation as a principal mode of inquiry (Aigen, 2005, as cited in Murphy & Wheeler, 2016). Accordingly, the method of philosophical inquiry is deemed most suitable in this context, given its congruence with the abstract theoretical nature of the research question.

Data Collection

The data collection procedure involved a systematic search of electronic databases including PubMed, PsycINFO, JSTOR, PsycArticles, ERIC on ProQuest, Academic Search Complete (EBSCO), and Google Scholar, in addition to the libraries of Concordia and McGill University, to identify pertinent empirical studies, theoretical papers, review articles, and books related to art therapy and attachment insecurity.

Materials

Scholarly literature, including relevant books, articles, and theoretical papers on art therapy, attachment theory, and related psychological concepts, was incorporated. These sources served as the primary materials for conducting a comprehensive literature review and theoretical analysis. The researcher utilized an Excel spreadsheet to track searches, organize articles, and

collect theoretical models, conceptual frameworks, and perspectives within art therapy and attachment theory. These frameworks formed the foundation for synthesizing ideas and identifying key theoretical constructs pertinent to the research. Search strategies involved using various combinations of the following terms: “art therapy”, “creative arts therapies”, “expressive arts therapies”, “therapy through the arts”, “attachment insecurity”, “attachment theory”, “attachment styles”, “attachment”, “adulthood”. The languages of publication included English and French, covering the period from 1995 to 2025.

Data Analysis

Philosophical inquiry is characterized by three philosophical procedures: clarifying and explaining key terms and concepts, exposing and evaluating underlying assumptions, and relating ideas systematically by using argumentation as a mode of inquiry (Wheeler and Murphy, 2016). During the data collection and analysis phases, the researcher maintained a record of ideas and data through an Excel spreadsheet organized by the following categories: “APA reference,” “Author(s)+year,” “Title,” “Purpose,” “Subject Characteristics,” “Sample Design/methodology,” “Data,” “Variables,” and “Conclusions.” Additionally, the researcher documented ideas through research journal entries and scheduled meetings with their supervisor.

Delimitations

To ensure the research project adhered to the designated time frame and constraints of a master’s research endeavor, the researcher delimited specific boundaries. The inquiry did not involve any participants and was exclusively centered on the existing literature. Only scientific, peer-reviewed English sources published between 1995 and 2025 were included, with the exception of foundational texts dating from 1980.

Ethical considerations present a tension between the conceptualization of philosophy as a free exploration of ideas and the imperative for ethical responsibility within philosophical inquiry. Some scholars contend that the deductive nature of philosophical investigation renders it completely exempt from ethical considerations, whereas others strongly oppose this perspective (Basu, 2023). Advocates of the latter viewpoint argue for the development of a code of ethics analogous to that employed in scientific research, their reasoning being grounded in the concept of doxastic wrongdoing—the potential for ideas to cause harm through conceptual exploration devoid of moral considerations (Basu, 2023). Throughout this research project, careful evaluation of the moral risks inherent in the arguments and claims was undertaken, with

particular attention paid to the definitions of constructs and the underlying messages conveyed through the ideas presented and the language employed.

Philosophical inquiry as a method. Philosophical inquiry enables the drawing of conclusions that have practical implications, such as informing policies, treatment approaches, ethics, or societal norms based on well-reasoned principles (Murphy & Wheeler, 2016). It fosters perspective shifts by offering new ways of interpreting issues, reframing problems, or encouraging deeper understanding. Through critical assessments, it evaluates assumptions, beliefs, or systems of thought for logical coherence and consistency (Murphy & Wheeler, 2016). Philosophical inquiry analyzes complex concepts and their broader implications, allowing for nuanced insights. In this present context, it may shed light on the suitability of art therapy in dealing with attachment wounds with an adult population through its conceptual analysis.

Validity and reliability. Since this method relies entirely on theoretical data, the strength of the arguments presented is directly connected to the quality of the data included. Ensuring only research articles with solid methodology and scientific rigour will be considered can contribute to reducing this limitation. Reputability of the journals will also be evaluated, and recent and up-to-date articles will be prioritized.

Another limitation rooted in this methodology relates to the real-world applicability of the findings. Experiences and insights from clinicians presently working with an adult population dealing with attachment challenges cannot be integrated into the findings, thereby excluding experts' opinions on the matter. Research always runs the risk of being disconnected with real-life phenomenology, and this is unfortunately a limitation that cannot be accounted for. Another factor limiting the generalizability of the findings concerns the broadness of the research question. Several factors such as specific psychopathologies, differing cultural norms or practical differences between professionals, might influence the applicability of these findings to more specific populations.

Chapter 4: The Findings

This chapter presents the findings of the philosophical inquiry, organized around three therapeutic factors identified as central to healing attachment insecurity in adulthood through art therapy: (1) sensory and tactile engagement, (2) imagery and concretization, and (3) therapist attunement within the triangular relationship. Drawing from interdisciplinary literature in art therapy, attachment theory, neuroscience, and psychotherapy, each section explores how these mechanisms contribute to attachment healing. The chapter begins by examining the role of sensory and tactile engagement in supporting affect regulation and widening the emotional window of tolerance. It then moves to an exploration of imagery and concretization as pathways for symbolizing and containing preverbal affect and facilitating insight. The final section discusses therapist attunement within the triangular relationship as a vehicle for co-regulation, affective mirroring, and relational repair. Together, these findings articulate a conceptual framework for understanding art therapy as an attachment-informed modality.

Part 1. Emotion regulation in art therapy through sensory and tactile engagement *Overview of the Therapeutic Factor*

A distinctive characteristic of art therapy is its reliance on sensory and tactile engagement, which involves integrating and stimulating the senses through the physicality of art mediums as outlined in the Expressive Therapies Continuum (ETC) (Hinz, 2019). In their influential systematic review of the proposed mechanisms of change within Creative Arts Therapies (CATS), de Witte et al. (2021) consolidated and classified several therapeutic factors that are common across all psychotherapies and shared by all CATS modalities (Joint Factors)—including art, music, dance/movement, and drama therapy—as well as those specific to art therapy itself (Art Therapy Factors). Although the authors identified embodiment as a common factor among CATS, I will incorporate the sensory and tactile engagement unique to art therapy within this broader framework, given that other CATS modalities fall outside the scope of this research.

Reporting on the findings of Koch (2017) and Lange et al. (2018), embodiment is defined as the heightened awareness of the mind and body facilitated by the “sensory quality of art materials, enactment, and the physical act of artistic creation” intrinsic to music and art-making (de Witte et al., 2021). Similarly, but exclusively within the visual arts domains, the tactile qualities of art media (Abbing et al., 2018, as cited by de Witte et al., 2021), as well as the techniques employed in utilizing such media (Bosgraaf et al., 2020, as cited by de Witte et al.,

2021), have been demonstrated to foster creative exploration and support engagement in therapeutic contexts. Although emotion regulation and processing are common elements across many psychotherapeutic approaches (de Witte et al., 2021), this sensory dimension of art therapy, inherent in the physicality of art materials, may facilitate a more profound level of emotional processing.

Czamanski and Cohen (2016) delineate the neurophysiological foundations of this process in their Bodymind model of art therapy. The influx of sensory stimuli resulting from engagement in art-making activates the amygdala via the somatosensory cortex, thereby facilitating the processing of emotional stimuli and engendering an emotional experience prior to the formation of meaning. Haeyen et al. (2024) elaborate upon this theoretical framework by suggesting that art therapy operates through bottom-up regulatory mechanisms, which originate with the experiencing of sensory stimuli—such as images, symbols, and mediums—in order to derive meaning from these encounters.

Through a systematic review of the neurophysiological basis of art therapy for the treatment of PTSD, Malhotra et al. (2024) shed light on the various ways art therapy supports emotional regulation. The prefrontal cortex plays a key role in regulating emotional and reward-related brain regions, including the amygdala and striatum (Kelley et al., 2019, as cited by Malhotra et al., 2024). Yan et al. (2021, as cited by Malhotra et al., 2024) found through an empirical study that drawing following a sadness-induced experience significantly deactivated the frontopolar and left dorsolateral prefrontal cortex of participants, more so than drawing after anger, suggesting a mood-specific regulatory effect. Along the same vein, colouring, doodling, and free drawing have been shown to activate the medial prefrontal cortex regardless of artistic expertise, indicating stimulation of reward pathways through visual artmaking (Kaimal et al., 2017 as cited by Malhotra et al., 2024). In virtual reality contexts, rote tracing increases prefrontal activation, while creative self-expression leads to reduced activation, suggesting a decrease in cognitive control demands during more spontaneous artistic engagement (Kaimal et al., 2022, as cited by Malhotra et al., 2024). While further art therapy research is needed to replicate these results, these neurophysiological empirical findings underscore the mechanisms of change through which art therapy operates: the sensory and tactile engagement required by the modality is associated with enhanced emotion-regulation capacities, regardless of the population. This may be particularly useful for adults with attachment issues who struggle with regulating

their emotions.

When engaging in art therapy, the experience of pleasure generated by artmaking may represent a crucial therapeutic factor, allowing for a more effective processing of negative emotions. While de Witte (2021) categorizes the experience of artistic pleasure as a separate joint factor (JF) of CATs, it will be conceptualized throughout this review as being an inherent part of the sensory and tactile engagement discussed above. Artistic pleasure is another therapeutic factor highlighted in the data, with the distinct nature of engaging in CATs offering participants enjoyable and uplifting moments that may nurture feelings of hope and positivity (Azoulay & Orkibi, 2015; Orkibi, 2019, as cited by de Witte et al., 2021; Rylatt, 2012). Playfulness is central to this experience and can be enriched through movement, dance, spontaneous role-play, art-making, or music-making, particularly when explored in a supportive and accepting environment. Encounters with beauty are also included as a possible source of enjoyment (Mannheim et al., 2013; Koch, 2017, as cited by de Witte, 2021). The integration of sensory engagement with pleasurable experiences can contribute to a greater capacity to endure and regulate distressing emotions, as well as diminish fear responses (Czamanski & Cohen, 2016). This aligns with findings in creative therapies, where engagement in textile-based creative activities can positively influence mood, as evidenced by decreased levels of interleukin-1 beta (IL-1 β), a proinflammatory cytokine (Futterman Collier et al., 2016, as cited in Malhotra et al., 2024).

Such practices are understood to operate within what Siegel termed the “window of tolerance”—a conceptual framework that defines the optimal zone of emotional and physiological arousal in which individuals can effectively process experiences without becoming overwhelmed or dissociated (Corrigan et al., 2011). Within this framework, art therapy plays a critical role by fostering dual awareness: the capacity to explore traumatic content while remaining grounded in the present moment (Gerge et al., 2019). Through tactile engagement with materials such as clay or paint, and the use of symbolic expression, clients are able to access and process complex emotional states in a safe and regulated manner, minimizing the risk of retraumatization (Gerge et al., 2019). Some scholars conceptualize this as the experience of a state of flow (Baker et al., 2015; Abbing et al., 2018 as cited by de Witte et al., 2021), while others conceive this as a temporary escape from suffering (Flanagan, 2004; Porter et al., 2017 as cited by de Witte et al., 2021), all of which suggest art therapy has some effect on mind-body

awareness. Modulating time and space involves the ability to shift between present-focused and past-oriented experiences, enabling individuals to move beyond immediate temporal or spatial boundaries through creative exploration that encourages transformation and growth (Moreno, 1965; Winnicott, 1980; Pendzik, 2006 as cited by de Witte et al., 2021), similar to Gerge et al's (2019) dual awareness concept delineated above. Through the sensory-soothing brought by the physical act of art-making, patients are able to navigate between their potentially traumatic past experiences while experiencing a state of flow.

Link with attachment theory. Attachment involves complex neurobiological processes (e.g. social engagement, neuroception, self-regulation) (Porges, 2011), where regulation abilities are significantly affected by insecure attachment styles: it guides the early development of the right hemisphere, the neurobiological foundation of the human unconscious involved in managing emotions (Schore, 2003; Rees, 2007). Individuals exhibiting insecure attachment patterns tend to experience diminished capacities for emotional regulation, as evidenced by research findings (Cheche Hoover & Jackson, 2021; Pooler Heller, 2019). Through the sensory quality of art therapy, art therapy can be helpful to increase emotion regulation abilities linked to unresolved attachment.

Through the multisensory component and the artistic pleasure derived from art therapy, clients with attachment issues may develop a higher tolerance for negative emotions within the therapeutic framework, thereby contributing to the adoption of healthier emotion regulation strategies. Individuals with compromised social engagement systems resulting from attachment trauma are more susceptible to experiencing emotional overwhelm due to an unregulated visceral feedback system (Porges, 2011; Manzotti et al., 2024). Those exhibiting attachment avoidance tendencies typically employ cognitive or behavioral distancing strategies to manage this overwhelm, often excluding painful memories or distressing material from conscious awareness through hypo-regulation mechanisms (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002; Girme et al., 2021). Avoidant individuals are more prone to attrition, attributable to a higher risk of not feeling fully committed or engaged and feeling threatened when questioned about the existence of negative emotions (Lorenzini & Fonagy, 2013). Considering that sensory engagement combined with pleasurable experiences is associated with an increased capacity to tolerate negative emotions and reduce fear responses (Czamanski & Cohen, 2016), art therapy may be particularly applicable for avoidant individuals who struggle with acknowledging challenging experiences. The tactile and

sensory aspects of art therapy may provide reassurance and relief, thereby increasing clients' emotional threshold, which may be especially beneficial for those exhibiting high levels of avoidance.

Regardless of the tolerance toward negative emotions, the therapeutic factor of artistic pleasure can increase the overall experience of positive emotions among this population. Being more likely to perceive experiences as bland and devoid of meaning (Park et al., 2022; Porges, 2011) due to the suppression of their sensory feedback from their bodies, mood improvement from experiencing artistic pleasure may be an interesting route to break this cycle. Experiencing artistic pleasure through sensory and tactile engagement can provide regulation and offer gradual positive experiences while the attachment system is activated, thereby providing corrective emotional experiences.

In Mentalization-Based Therapy (MBT), the aim is to stabilize an individual's sense of self when the attachment system is being activated, gradually working to find a balanced arousal without creating hyper- or hypoactivation of the system (Lorenzini & Fonagy, 2013). This yields similarity to the window of tolerance and dual awareness concepts outlined above, where the art therapy objective is to integrate negative emotional experiences without experiencing shutdown or overwhelm (Lorenzini & Fonagy, 2013). Unlike MBT, Transference-Focused Psychotherapy (TFP) holds that interpretation is key to the reintegration of disparate perceptions and representations of the self, and attachment activation is welcomed (Lorenzi & Fonagy, 2013). Similar to TFP, art therapy offers an additional structure to hold these interpretations and various representations of the self through the artwork and imagery created.

Summary of findings. Art therapy facilitates emotion regulation through its sensory and tactile properties, offering a non-verbal and non-threatening modality for emotional processing. Sensory engagement, particularly when accompanied by the experience of artistic pleasure, may act as a therapeutic factor by increasing affect tolerance and supporting the processing of negative emotions. These mechanisms are especially relevant for individuals with unresolved attachment patterns, for whom the embodied and regulating qualities of art-making can address core difficulties in emotional regulation and integration, particularly in individuals high on the avoidance scale.

Part 2. Imagery and concretization.

Overview of the therapeutic factor. During art therapy sessions, the patient may be invited to put their personal experiences into visual form, allowing for the elicitation of past, present, and future states or feelings (Bosgraaf et al., 2020, as cited by Malhotra et al., 2024; Haeyen et al., 2015; Hilbuch et al., 2016). This has been identified by deWitte and colleagues (2021, p.17) as a therapeutic factor unique to CATS, referred to as concretization and defined as “changing an abstract content or statement into a tangible form that can be physically perceived, experienced and related to.” While this therapeutic factor still lacks empirical studies, the transformation of abstract and ambiguous emotional material into a visual, physical form is hypothesized to be an important mechanism of change, enabling patients to gain new perspectives and insights (Abbing et al., 2018; Bosgraaf et al., 2020, as cited by de Witte et al., 2021; Blatner, 1992; Haeyen et al., 2015; Hilbuch et al., 2016). Gerber et al. (2012) conceptualize the effects of concretization as a “significant reconfiguration of perception and thought resulting in the lessening of psychic restraint and pain, allowing for the emergence of new psychological perspectives” (p. 45). This factor has been specifically associated with CATS, as it relies on the physicality of the artistic mediums to operate.

A parallel between concretization (specific to art therapy) and externalization (identified by Malhotra et al. (2024) as a factor common to all psychotherapies) can be made, but demands clarification. Other psychotherapies encourage insight by externalization (a type of cognitive reframing aiming to challenge negative thought patterns by creating distance between the client’s issue and the self). Similarly, concretization aims to generate insight and perspective-taking through the exposure of internal experiences onto the concrete art representation (Abbing et al., 2018; Bosgraaf et al., 2020; Czamanski-Cohen et al., 2019; Deboys et al., 2016; Gabel and Robb, 2017; de Witte, 2021, as cited by Malhotra et al., 2024). While sharing similarities, concretization through imagery facilitates perspective-taking through projection, expression, symbolism and metaphors.

The embodied image. During and after an artwork is created, it holds the potential to receive the client’s projections of internal, sometimes previously unconscious, experiences. The image’s function is in part to temporarily “hold” emotional content, acting as a container and allowing the client to revisit, work through, and reintegrate these feelings into the self when they are emotionally prepared to do so (Bion, 1962; Dalley, 1987; Shaverien, 1994). Johnson’s (1998,

as cited by de Witte et al., 2021) framework of therapeutic transformation further reinforces the significance of symbolism, in which internal experiences are externalized through the arts, transformed in ways that promote well-being, and subsequently re-integrated by the client (p. 85). Shaverien (1994, 1999) introduced the term “embodied image” to describe a significant artwork that reflects the artist’s unconscious emotional experience. This type of image serves as a bridge for accessing and expressing internal states that are not easily communicated through words. Through free association, the client’s emotional content embedded in the image can be articulated and infused with personal meaning through verbal expression (Avrahami, 2005; Eisanbach, Snir, & Regev, 2015; Malhotra et al., 2024). The use of symbolism facilitates the client’s engagement with challenging material, supports the emergence of transference, and enables integration between conscious and unconscious experiences (Ellis, 2001; Gabel & Robb, 2017, as cited by de Witte et al., 2021; Short et al., 2009).

This modality may be particularly suitable for individuals with complex trauma, those who are less cognitively oriented, easily overwhelmed, have limited verbal memory, or struggle to identify, connect with, or express their emotions (S. W. Haeyen, 2018a; S. Haeyen, 2018b, 2024). For individuals who are not cognitively inclined or who face challenges in recognizing and articulating emotions, a rational or verbal approach may not serve as an effective or accessible point of entry (S. W. Haeyen, 2018a; S. W. Haeyen, 2018b). The multi-sensory nature of art making can stimulate latent memories, bringing them into awareness and making them more accessible for exploration and reflection (Bat Or, 2010). Engaging with artistic materials can evoke emotional responses that facilitate access to traumatic memories, allowing clients to explore them gradually and safely (Avrahami, 2005; Spiegel et al., 2006; Wertheim-Cahen, 1991). For example, clients in the military with PTSD have found it easier to access emotions, recall trauma, and access representations of the self with the individual, the collective and the relational during art therapy sessions (Campbell et al., 2016; Lobban & Murphy, 2019, as cited in Malhotra et al., 2024; Smith, 2016; Walker et al., 2016, 2017;).

By lowering psychological defences, art therapy supports the emergence of unconscious associations, allowing individuals to project internal desires and aggressive impulses onto the artwork in a non-threatening manner. (Haeyen, S. et al., 2018a; Haeyen, S., et al. 2018b as cited by Haeyen et al., 2018).

Link with attachment theory. Schaverien's concept of the 'embodied image' yields similarity to Winnicott's foundational concept of the transitional object. Dr. Donald Winnicott initially introduced the term "transitional object" to describe the warm, comforting, and emotionally significant items to which infants form attachment bonds in early development. He proposed that these objects function as a psychological bridge between the child's internal world and external reality, supporting the toddler's gradual transition toward independence in the context of maternal separation (Lee & Hood, 2021; Xie et al., 2023). Expanding on his theory, Bowlby referred to TOs as attachment objects, emphasizing their crucial role for the toddler when experiencing separation anxiety from the primary caregiver (Lee & Hood, 2021). While it was initially hypothesized that children would outgrow the use of TOs when entering adulthood, it has now been demonstrated that some adults maintain their bond with these TOs in emotionally vulnerable situations (Ko et al., 2024; Lee & Hood, 2021). Within a therapeutic framework, the artwork, described as the embodied image by Schaverien (1994, 1999), can serve as a transitional object for the adult in therapy (Haeyen, 2015). It acts as a container for the adult's internal world, and, especially in a context where attachment difficulties are the reason for consultation, can provide relief, regulation and security when attempting to heal unresolved attachment.

Summary of findings. Art therapy supports attachment repair by transforming internal, often preverbal emotional states into concrete, visual representations. Through the process of concretization, clients externalize abstract feelings into tangible images, facilitating perspective-taking and insight via symbolic expression and projection. These images, referred to as embodied, act as containers for unprocessed affect and unconscious material, offering clients a way to gradually revisit and integrate difficult experiences. In the context of attachment work, the image can function similarly to a transitional object, providing emotional continuity, regulation, and a stable and physical anchor for exploration of self and relationships. By lowering psychological defenses and offering a non-verbal channel for expression, this process makes internal experiences more accessible to individuals with insecure or unresolved attachment patterns.

Part 3. Attunement within the triangular relationship.

Overview of the therapeutic factor. De Witte and colleagues (2021) coined the term "active engagement through the arts" to describe the opportunity for clients to explore

interpersonal communication through non-verbal attunement within the arts. Different overlapping terms are used in the literature to designate this attunement as specific to creative arts therapies, including relational aesthetics, triangular relationships, and active engagement (De Witte et al., 2021). Regardless of the differing operational terms, all strive to delineate the phenomenon where the patient experiences arts-based synchronicity due to the equal engagement in the artistic process between the therapist and client.

Although de Witte et al (2021) distinguish active engagement from creativity as two different therapeutic factors, in the context of attachment theory, they can be considered as one. From their extensive meta-analysis of therapeutic factors unique to CATS, de Witte et al (2021) define creativity as one central mechanism of change. Creativity as a change factor is described as the act of being engaged in something novel through “active play-like exploration, self-expression, testing and trying out new ways of being” (de Witte et al., 2021). It operates through the exploration of new media and ways of creating, consequently fostering insight and new perspectives from the shifts from one medium to another (de Witte et al., 2021). Malchiodi (2020) also brings forward that healing can occur through the creative process itself, bringing to life new perspectives and insight simply from the act of creating. “The visual, tangible, and experiential character of art therapy fits well with the often wordless, visual, and sensory nature of early childhood experiences” (Malchiodi, 2020). Verbal expression in therapy may induce dissociative responses and encourage the formation of a defensive or ‘false self’; by contrast, art therapy supports contact with the authentic self during therapeutic self-exploration processes (Einhorn et al., 2023). Art therapy activates somatosensory and visual memory systems related to trauma through tactile engagement and imaginative play, offering an alternative to the verbal modality. According to Laird & Mulvihill (2022), the neutrality of nonverbal artistic expression may facilitate less confrontational and more approachable therapeutic dialogue. Participation in art-making within therapy can also foster a sense of agency and accomplishment, as clients explore unfamiliar creative tasks, thereby enhancing self-efficacy and perceived competence (Rastogi et al., 2022).

Through this physical and creative exploration, early childhood memories can be revisited, modified, and altered. However, just as mentioned above, the therapist’s careful attunement is crucial during this process, monitoring and remaining available during this

vulnerable exploration, potentially guiding the repair of broken attachment bonds through reattunement during distress (de Witte et al., 2021).

Integrating neuroscience research to explain the art therapy process, Franklin (2010) dives into the literature of mirror neurons to elucidate this particular attunement present during the creative process. He outlines how art therapy can facilitate affect regulation, linked to attachment, through empathetically attuned artwork (Franklin, 2010). The mirror neuron system (MNS), first discovered in the premotor cortex of macaque monkeys, refers to a class of neurons that fire both when an individual performs an action and when they observe another performing the same action (Gallese, 2003; Gallese et al., 2004, as cited by Franklin, 2010). In humans, the MNS is believed to be foundational to social cognition, supporting embodied simulation and enabling an "as if" experience of others' intentions, emotions, and somatic states (Gallese, 2008).

In art therapy, this system is particularly relevant to attunement—the therapist's capacity to sensitively perceive, resonate with, and respond to a client's emotional states. As Franklin (2010) discusses, the art therapist's mindful presence and artistic engagement, especially through "third-hand" interventions (Kramer, 1986), can elicit empathic resonance that is both visual and somatic in nature. Observing a client's artmaking, especially their gestures, rhythm, and affective tone, activates the therapist's mirror neuron system, facilitating an embodied sense of the client's internal state.

This neurobiological mirroring undergirds empathic attunement, which is central to affect regulation and attachment repair in art therapy. As Schore (2003) and Siegel (2007) have theorized, affective synchrony between therapist and client promotes the re-patterning of early attachment injuries, with art providing a multisensory, nonverbal channel for this exchange. In summary, mirror neurons support the nonverbal, embodied simulation of another's inner experience, and in art therapy, this mechanism enables the therapist to be attuned to the client's affective world—through their artmaking and imagery—thus fostering relational safety, empathic reflection, and emotional integration.

Link with attachment theory. Czamanski and Cohen (2016) highlight the similarities between the art therapy approach and attachment theory. During an art therapy session, the client engages in an artistic exploration, exploring the environment, trying new mediums, techniques and ways of creating art, while the art therapist remains attuned and available as an attachment figure. Acting just like a "good-enough mother", the art therapist intervenes only if overly

distressing activation occurs, but otherwise allows for exploration, offering a safe haven for the client to return. Through this triangular relationship between the client-artwork-therapist, many opportunities arise to repair broken attachment bonds via the attunement provided throughout the various steps of the artistic process (Czamanski & Cohen, 2016). Because most memories of early infancy are preverbal, interpersonal communication ensues through the senses (scents, touch, tone of voice, gaze) (Schore, 2003). Franklin (2010) brings forward that these multisensory pathways perhaps lay a foundation for aesthetic affect regulation later in life.

Similarities with current approaches to attachment work. Schema-Focused Therapy (SFT), which first focuses on the therapist compensating for the lack of parenting in the patient's early life (Lorenzini & Fonagy, 2013), resembles the concept of "corrective emotional experiences" proposed by EFIT and ABFT (Diamond & Levy, 2016; Brubacher, 2017). In these two approaches, the therapist first acts as a reliable, secure base where the patient can experience corrective emotional experiences to relearn the previously maladaptive attachment schemas around perceptions of self and others. In art therapy, this same process occurs, not only between the therapist-client relationship, but also through the triangular relationship where the art therapist demonstrates careful attunement while the client is engaging in artistic exploration. While this attunement is a common factor to any psychotherapy (de Witte et al., 2021), the triangular relationship of art therapy increases the opportunities through which a realignment of attunement can occur. This can take the form of offering the right choice of materials or mediums, how the art studio is set up, what is the choice of art interventions, or rely on the accurate perceiving of the resulting artwork, acting both as a transitional object and also as a reflection of oneself.

Summary of findings. Attunement within the triangular relationship—client, artwork, and therapist—is a core therapeutic factor in art therapy. De Witte et al. (2021) refer to this as "active engagement through the arts," where shared, nonverbal participation fosters relational synchrony. Art therapy's nonverbal nature allows access to preverbal, sensory memories often unreachable through traditional talk therapy (Einhorn et al., 2023; Malchiodi, 2020). It offers a less confrontational path to emotional expression and promotes self-efficacy through creative mastery (Laird & Mulvihill, 2022; Rastogi et al., 2022).

The therapist's attunement—supported by the mirror neuron system (Franklin, 2010)—enables empathic, embodied resonance with the client's internal states. This contributes to affect

regulation and the repair of early attachment wounds (Schore, 2003). Mirroring approaches in attachment-based therapies, the art therapist functions as a secure base, allowing exploration and emotional realignment within a relational and creative frame (Czamanski & Cohen, 2016). The artwork and art process itself enhance this dynamic, compounding the opportunities for reattunement inherent to the structure of the modality.

Chapter 5. Discussion

This research aimed to explore the therapeutic factors related to attachment theory in art therapy. The primary research question was: Which mechanisms of change of art therapy contribute to the healing of attachment issues in adulthood? From a systematic analysis, three interrelated therapeutic mechanisms emerged—sensory and tactile engagement, imagery, and attunement within the triangular relationship. The method of philosophical inquiry was employed to clarify the conceptual foundations of therapeutic mechanisms. The findings demonstrate how these mechanisms not only facilitate emotion regulation and insight but also serve as vehicles for attachment repair.

Emotion Regulation in Art Therapy Through Sensory and Tactile Engagement. The sensory and tactile dimension of art therapy emerged as a foundational entry point for emotion regulation. Grounded in the literature on embodiment and bottom-up processing (de Witte et al., 2021; Haeyen et al., 2024), the data suggest that physical engagement with art materials can activate neurobiological systems involved in affect regulation, such as the amygdala and prefrontal cortex (Malchiodi, 2020; Malhotra et al., 2024). What this means is that the “art” in “art therapy” plays a crucial regulatory function, cumulating the regulatory properties that would be of a lesser effect without the materiality of this approach. These findings align with Czamanski & Cohen’s (2016) bodymind model, emphasizing that the act of creating art not only provides regulation but can also induce emotional responses before cognitive appraisal. In other words, the materiality of art reaches the brain through bottom-up processing, allowing access to normally shut-down aspects of one’s experience before usual cognitive defences become activated.

Importantly, the pleasurable aspects of art-making may also serve a regulatory function by expanding affect tolerance and anchoring individuals within their window of tolerance (Gerge et al., 2019). This mechanism is particularly relevant for individuals with insecure attachment patterns who often struggle to modulate affect, as early relational environments often failed to support co-regulation and emotional containment (Girme et al., 2021; Lorenzini & Fonagy, 2013; Porges, 2011; Schore, 2003). When working with an avoidantly attached patient, it is not uncommon to witness someone who presents a lower tolerance of negative emotions. In the cabinet, this may manifest as a client being reluctant to address, discuss, and acknowledge their struggles, negative affect, and weaknesses, leading to a higher attrition rate with this population

(Adams et al., 2018; Simpson & Steven Rholes, 2017). This therapeutic reality underscores the value of incorporating a positive experience within the alliance, thereby increasing the window of tolerance through artistic pleasure and counterbalancing the effects of acknowledging negative affect. The multisensory engagement in art therapy may thus serve as a corrective experience, enabling clients to access and modulate emotion within a safely scaffolded relational context.

Imagery and concretization. The second mechanism, imagery and concretization, highlights art therapy's capacity to externalize internal, often preverbal and unconscious, affective experiences. As theorized by Schaverien (1994, 1999) and further supported by the concept of the embodied image, symbolic artwork serves as a container for unconscious material, allowing for reintegration through reflective processes. By putting externally onto an image what one feels internally, the client can express unconscious and conscious material, witness it, and subsequently reintegrate it into one's conception of the self. This externalization parallels Winnicott's concept of transitional objects, wherein the image may function as an attachment figure, offering security and continuity during emotionally vulnerable states (Haeyen, 2015; Lee & Hood, 2021; Xie et al., 2023). When confronted with challenging and distressing ideas, memories, feelings or sensations, the image serves as a safe haven onto which the client displace its fears whilst continuing to explore. These findings also suggest art therapy may be particularly well-suited for populations who are less verbally oriented or easily overwhelmed, as it bypasses traditional cognitive defences and fosters gradual access to difficult material (Campbell et al., 2016; Einhorn et al., 2023; Haeyen, 2018a, 2018b). In the context of attachment, where early emotional experiences are often encoded somatically and without language, the ability to access and transform internal states through image-making offers a reparative, developmentally appropriate avenue for processing unmet relational needs. The image thus becomes both a reflective surface and a stabilizing presence within the therapeutic dyad.

Attunement within the triangular relationship. Ultimately, the role of attunement within the triangular relationship underscores art therapy's distinctive contribution to attachment-informed care. The art therapist's capacity to engage in visual and somatic resonance through shared creative processes (Franklin, 2010) activates the mirror neuron system and supports empathic attunement (Gallese, 2008). This process not only mirrors the early relational dynamics described in attachment theory but also expands opportunities for reattunement through the medium of art itself. The therapist's relational stance, informed by both artistic and clinical

sensitivity, provides a secure base from which clients can explore novel ways of being (Czamanski & Cohen, 2016). These findings closely parallel the corrective emotional experiences described in attachment-based therapies such as EFIT, ABFT, and SFT (Diamond & Levy, 2016; Lorenzini & Fonagy, 2013), positioning art therapy as a uniquely embodied and relational modality for addressing attachment-related wounds. Insecure attachment often results from repeated failures of attunement and emotional misrecognition; thus, the therapist's nonverbal and aesthetic responsiveness during art-making offers an embodied form of relational repair. The triangular structure of the client–artwork–therapist relationship increases the density of potential attuned moments, thereby supporting the development of new internal working models of self and other.

Toward a Tripartite Mechanism Model for Attachment Repair in Art Therapy

Taken together, the findings of this inquiry suggest that the therapeutic effectiveness of art therapy in addressing adult attachment issues emerges not from a singular process, but from multiple overlapping mechanisms: (1) sensory and tactile engagement, (2) imagery and concretization, and (3) relational attunement within the triangular relationship. While each mechanism offers distinct therapeutic contributions, their recursive interaction may form an integrated system that supports emotional regulation, symbolic integration, and the development of new relational capacities.

The first mechanism, sensory and tactile engagement, provides an embodied entry point for emotional regulation. Through bottom-up processing, the sensory qualities of art materials can bypass habitual cognitive defences and access affective states that are often under-integrated in individuals with insecure attachment histories. This somatic grounding not only enhances affect tolerance but creates the conditions for deeper psychological work by expanding the client's window of tolerance (Gerge et al., 2019; Porges, 2011).

Building on this foundation, imagery and concretization allow for the symbolic representation of internal states that may be preverbal, unconscious, or difficult to articulate. The artwork functions as a transitional object—simultaneously self and not-self—offering a reflective surface through which implicit material can be externalized, explored, and gradually integrated (Schaverien, 1994, 1999; Lee & Hood, 2021; Xie et al., 2023). In the context of attachment, where early experiences are often encoded somatically and outside of language, the image

becomes a developmentally attuned medium through which unmet relational needs can be symbolized.

Crucially, these two mechanisms are scaffolded and amplified by the third: relational attunement within the triangular configuration of client, artwork, and therapist. The therapist's aesthetic and emotional resonance with both the client and the emerging image enables a form of nonverbal co-regulation that parallels early relational dynamics (Franklin, 2010; Gallese, 2008). Within this triangular field, the therapist is not merely a neutral observer but an embodied participant, offering empathic presence and interpretive containment. This attunement supports the formation of corrective emotional experiences—ones in which the client's affective expressions are met with responsiveness rather than rupture.

This research suggests these three mechanisms do not operate in isolation but form a recursive and mutually reinforcing system. Sensory regulation creates safety for symbolic exploration; symbolic expression invites deeper attunement; and relational attunement, in turn, enhances the client's capacity to engage with both their internal states and the artistic process. As such, this model proposes that therapeutic change in art therapy unfolds as a cyclical process of embodiment, expression, and relational repair. This tripartite system offers a unique contribution to attachment-informed care by integrating somatic, symbolic, and relational dimensions of healing in a unified therapeutic field.

Cultural considerations

As a whole, these therapeutic mechanisms suggest that art therapy operates not only through symbolic and expressive means but also through deeply embodied and relational processes. By integrating sensory experience, visual symbolism, and empathic presence, art therapy provides a multimodal pathway for healing early relational trauma and strengthening emotion regulation capacities.

While the identified therapeutic mechanisms – tactile and sensory engagement, symbolic imagery, and relational attunement – are presented as broad factors of change, different cultural backgrounds may influence their impact, manifestation and expression. While some scholars believe attachment to be a universal construct, others argue it is widely impacted and modulated by different cultural frameworks (Keller, 2018). The effect of these mechanisms may be reduced or amplified depending on the cultural influences, and careful explorations of the interplay should be carried out in future research.

For example, sensory or tactile engagement with art materials may evoke different meanings across cultures—what is considered soothing, grounding, or pleasurable in one context may carry different symbolic or emotional connotations in another. Similarly, the act of externalizing emotion through image-making may be encouraged in some cultural frameworks but seen as disclosing or even transgressive in others (Sue & Sue, 2016). Furthermore, relational attunement—particularly within the triangular relationship—may be filtered through culturally shaped expectations of authority, hierarchy, and emotional proximity. In some cultural traditions, nonverbal co-regulation may be more valued than explicit verbal emotional attunement, thereby making art therapy a suitable modality; in others, therapist neutrality may be favoured over emotional resonance. This signifies these mechanisms, particularly relational attunement, should be culturally situated, with therapists adapting their stance to honour their clients’ cultural norms around family, attachment and relationality.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study is limited by its theoretical and conceptual scope, as it was conducted through philosophical inquiry rather than empirical investigation. While this approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of foundational theories and alignment across disciplines, it does not provide clinical outcome data or firsthand accounts from clients or therapists. The absence of a participant sample also limits the generalizability and applicability of the findings to specific populations or treatment contexts. To produce an in-depth review of the literature, the researcher was also required to focus on a psychodynamic and neuroscience theoretical framework. The absence of empirical counterpoints or alternative theories (e.g. behavioral or cognitive views) might limit the insight on these therapeutic factors.

Future research should empirically test the hypotheses generated by this theoretical framework. Qualitative studies could explore the experiences of clients and therapists regarding attunement, symbolic processing, and sensory engagement in art therapy sessions targeting attachment issues. Neurobiological studies could further investigate how art-making impacts emotion regulation pathways in individuals with different attachment styles. Longitudinal and mixed-method designs may also shed light on the durability and evolution of therapeutic change in attachment-focused art therapy. Expanding this line of inquiry will help bridge the gap between theory and clinical practice, advancing art therapy as a robust and attachment-informed treatment for adult mental health.

Furthermore, this research does not account for the impact of sociocultural frameworks on the aforementioned therapeutic mechanisms. Attachment patterns, emotional expression and symbolic meaning may differ across cultures, and future theoretical research should examine how culture may impact these therapeutic factors. An adaptation of this model that is culturally informed would ensure greater applicability and ethical sensitivity across diverse populations.

While artistic pleasure is somewhat a universal factor in that it encompasses elements of play and creativity, a limitation of the study relies in the risk of overgeneralization. Aside from cultural modulators, pleasure in art-making or symbolic processing may not function similarly in all individuals. Trauma survivors may dissociate or find sensory engagement dysregulating, and individual differences in neurological, cognitive, or cultural development may moderate these mechanisms (Malchiodi, 2020). This is, however, part of the expertise of the art therapist to attune to their clients and adjust the proposed interventions accordingly, but it is nonetheless important to take into account that it is outside the scope of this research project. Broad theoretical research, like this current study, unfortunately, cannot delve into the nuances proper to specific populations.

Conclusion

This research has examined how art therapy facilitates healing for adults with attachment insecurity by engaging three core therapeutic factors: sensory and tactile engagement, imagery and concretization, and therapist attunement within the triangular relationship. Drawing on attachment theory, neuroscience, and the literature of creative arts therapies, this work has demonstrated that art therapy aligns with the mechanisms through which early attachment bonds are formed and repaired (Bowlby, 1980; Schore, 2003; Franklin, 2010; Malchiodi, 2020). The embodied and nonverbal nature of art therapy allows clients to access and process preverbal emotional material, expand their tolerance for affect, and receive corrective relational experiences through attuned therapist responses (Czamanski & Cohen, 2016; Franklin, 2010; Haeyen et al., 2024).

Unlike traditional talk-based therapies, art therapy offers multiple entry points for emotional exploration and regulation, making it particularly beneficial for individuals with high attachment avoidance or limited verbal access to emotions (Haeyen, 2018; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002). The symbolic and relational aspects of the art process offer containment, integration, and the potential for meaning-making within a secure therapeutic environment (Avrahami, 2005; Schaverien, 1999). This inquiry contributes to a growing recognition of the value of art therapy in addressing complex emotional and relational wounds, underscoring the need for greater inclusion of attachment theory in art therapy training and practice.

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