

Life on the Island: Collage Portraiture and Storytelling as Community Building

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored the experiences of island residents who participated in a collage portraiture workshop. Workshop participants used collage portraiture, an arts-based research method, to tell their stories of island life and engage with fellow community members. Nine island residents participated in the workshop and were interviewed about the experience using a semi-structured interview guide. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and data analysis revealed three overarching themes: (a) the process of collage portraiture, (b) collage portraiture as storytelling, and (c) future use of collage portraiture. This study contributes to a small body of literature investigating the use of collage portraiture as a method of storytelling and as an arts-based research method for use in community building.

This study explores the experiences of residents of a small Northern New England island using collage portraiture, a method of arts-based research (ABR), to describe life on the island. ABR is used across disciplines to holistically explore theory, practice, and lived experience; it offers the unique opportunity to participate, view, touch, and interpret beyond the limits of language, making the experience and findings more accessible to a wider audience (Gerstenblatt, 2013; Leavy, 2020; Scotti & Chilton, 2018). Collage portraiture is a method combining the artistic genres of collage and portraiture to create representations of individual and collective narratives using photographs, archival documents, hand-drawn images, and text (Gerstenblatt, 2013).

Collage portraiture was chosen as a method for island residents to present their unique historical, environmental, and social connections, which in some cases span generations. The process of creating collage portraits provides “another layer” of vision to convey stories by weaving together words and images in an accessible way for artists and nonartists in a communal or individual setting (Gerstenblatt, 2013). While the use of ABR as a research method is growing, there remains a gap in studies specific to the experiences of those using the method of collage portraiture in research, teaching, and community work. This study addresses this gap by exploring the collage-making experience, its meaning to the island residents, and its potential as a tool for community building, rather than evaluating the aesthetic content of the collages.

The current research study is part of a larger, multiphased, interdisciplinary, and mixed-methods study exploring cultural, environmental, and socioeconomic changes and challenges facing coastal communities in Northern New England and the Arctic. The project draws upon knowledge and methods from geography, anthropology, art, and social work and is divided into several focused projects. As part of the social work and art collaboration, research team members spent a year prior to this study building relationships with residents through visiting frequently, conducting qualitative interviews, and spending time listening to and engaging with community members. The collage portrait workshop was developed based on feedback from residents and was facilitated to share their stories in a community setting. Participants were prompted to create collage portraits describing their experience living on the island and reaction to social, cultural, and environmental changes, then verbally reflected on the process in interviews upon completion of the collage. This study was guided by the following research question: What are the experiences of island residents using collage portraiture to tell their story of island life and social, cultural, and environmental change?

Background

This study took place on a small island off the coast of Northern New England. The island seceded from the largest city in the state in 1993 and is home to approximately 200 year-round and

Figure 1. Collage Portrait Illustrating a Participant's Story of Life on the Island



1000 in summer. The reason for secession was island residents' desire to have more say on policies and governance. A community hub on the island is the elementary school, which employs two primary teachers and serves a dozen students. While there are new residents to the island, a presence remains that goes back generations.

During World War II, this island was a refueling station for coastal vessels. The military used eminent domain to repurpose land and build facilities, which caused many residents to be evicted or to vacate their property for little compensation. The military essentially split the island in two, creating a separation between the east and west sides that, although in close proximity, created difficulties getting to either side of the island. The military presence and remaining structures are part of the island's history.

Island property has escalated in value, causing long-standing residents and potential new year-round residents to be priced out of the housing market. New summer residents build new homes

or refurbish old ones. Some summer residents have generational ties to the island or have been coming for decades and have established a history and identity connected to the island. To be elected to the city council, one must be a full-time resident; however, many part-time residents are involved in civic matters, including during winter when they are not in residence. The Comprehensive Plan for the island states a commitment to preserving island life over development that may compromise the values and close-knit community that has existed for generations (Long Island Comprehensive Plan Citizen's Committee, 2022).

While this study is part of a larger mixed-methods exploration of the lived experiences of those residing in coastal communities in Northern New England and the Arctic, this paper focuses on the experience of using collage portraiture. It aims to better understand its value and potential to represent individual and collective stories and its potential for community building.

Literature Review

Arts-Based Research (ABR) and Community Building

“ABR gives social scientists an additional tool for knowing about the world, one that captures data not expressed in numbers or through interviews” (Gullion and Schäfer, 2018, p. 522). Furthermore, researchers employing ABR are seeking “after truths, not the truth” (Bochner & Riggs, 2014) in exploring multiple meanings and varied perspectives. Advantages of ABR methods include that they: (a) provide new insights and learning; (b) are well suited to projects that describe, explore, discover, and problem-solve; (c) forge micro-macro connections; (d) are holistic; (e) are evocative and provocative; (f) stimulate critical consciousness, raising awareness and empathy; (g) unsettle stereotypes, challenge dominant ideologies, and include marginalized voices and perspectives; (h) are participatory; (i) offer multiple meanings; and (j) advance public scholarship and usefulness (Leavy, 2018, p. 9–11).

In community-based research, ABR methods have been used to provide a deeper and contextualized understanding of lived experiences and to help identify solutions to local issues and concerns (Gullion & Schäfer, 2018):

Arts-based methodologies together constitute some of the most dynamic strategies at our disposal for the preservation, organization, and regeneration of data that most effectively inform human beings of who we are, where we come from, what our purpose is, and where we may be going (Rolling, 2008, as cited in Rolling, 2018, p. 495).

ABR methods can enhance critical thinking and deep expression by integrating art and science (Trott et al., 2020) and are well suited for “research projects that aim to describe, explore, discover, or unsettle” (Leavy, 2020, p. 22). The application of ABR in the community has demonstrated a relationship between art and community activism (Cohen-Cruz, 2002, as cited in Stoll et al., 2018). Van der Vaart et al. (2018) identified connections between ABR and community resilience, specifically noting that ABR methods can produce findings that go beyond academia to provide insight into the experiences of fellow community members and potentially inspire community action.

In ABR methods, participants and nonacademic research partners can be treated as cocreators and collaborators while expanding diversity and participation potential (Gullion & Schäfer, 2018). Goals of community-based arts projects are to engage residents and create a participatory culture (Jenkins et al., 2007) by offering low barriers to participation and the sharing of one’s experience, an opportunity for creative expression, and some degree of social connection whereby participants believe their contributions are valued. To reach residents in a meaningful and sustainable way, artists and community practitioners use the strategy of “deep engagement” (Jackson et al., 2011; Sandercock, 2004) to establish a broad range of networks and relationships.

Current literature suggests ABR is powerful in developing a sense of place as individuals come together and experience stories through the eyes of their fellow community members (Warr et al., 2021). There is “aliveness” (Irwin et al., 2018, p. 50) in the way ABR methods and the resulting creations portray daily life and culture (Leavy, 2020), which can also be revisited (Mafe, 2009, as cited in Irwin et al., 2018), allowing for expanding meaning making and interpretation.

Collage Portraiture and ABR

Gerstenblatt (2013) combined collage and portraiture, creating collage portraiture, as an added component of a narrative study exploring the experiences of Black American women participating in an art installation on family land. The collage portraits created by the researcher lifted the women’s experiences off the written page to elucidate the themes contained in the transcripts of interviews conducted with the women. Additionally, the women revisited the process of creating the installation on land that held meaning and memory when viewing their collage portraits.

Collage portraits provide researchers an alternative method of representing stories and complex narratives and offer participants an opportunity to articulate their experiences using the words and materials of their choosing (Gerstenblatt, 2013). Creating visual representations using text from interviews, photographs, archival data, and created imagery allows the researcher and participant to engage in complex and difficult stories that might be challenging to articulate using only words (Gerstenblatt, 2013). The use of collage portraiture

as a storytelling technique allows the artist/scholar to add depth to their analysis and interpretation while playing with texture, color, and form as transcendent processes in representing the complexity of the research subject (Gerstenblatt, 2013). The process of collage portraiture enables participants to articulate their experiences metaphorically, in personal ways (Scotti & Chilton, 2018). Storytelling has historically been an important form of communication for passing along information and sharing individual experiences (Cash, 2016; Scott et al., 2013). Collage portraiture is one way of storytelling: It contextualizes individual and collective narratives and offers alternative venues to experience complex phenomena (Gerstenblatt, 2013).

Methods

This study examined participants' experiences of creating collages to tell their stories of island living. Interviews with collage portraiture workshop participants provided the data for this study. The interviews were conducted with full- and part-time residents of the island over a 1-month period.

Participants

A combination of purposive and convenience sampling was used in this study. Participants were invited to attend the collage portraiture workshop through posts on the town's Facebook page, via emails to past participants in the first phase of the study, and through a civic email listserv (suggested by a participant in the first phase). Permission to use the Facebook page and civic email listserv was requested and granted. Nine island residents attended the workshop, and all agreed to be interviewed about their experience using collage portraiture to tell the story of their life on the island. Six interviews were conducted immediately after the workshop and three several days later.

Procedure

The study and all of its forms and procedures were approved by the university institutional review board. Researchers designed an interview guide to elicit participants' experiences telling their stories using collage. All participants agreed to allow the researchers to use their collages for research purposes of publication, conference presentations, and art exhibits. The interview guide was semi-structured and contained concepts drawn from empirical literature as well as the

professional experience of the principal investigator (PI). The guide included four questions for participants about their experience participating in the workshop, what was surprising about using collage, if they planned to use the method again, and if they would keep and share the collage. Two graduate research assistants (GRAs) were trained by the PI to conduct the interviews, manage the voice recorder, and ensure consent forms were properly signed. Interviews lasted between 5 and 30 minutes.

Positionality of the Researchers

The first author and PI is a professional artist and a professor of social work with extensive experience using arts-based methods and collage portraiture in research, pedagogy, and community work. The PI had developed relationships on the island over the previous year as part of a larger study, which included multiple visits to the island and interviews with 16 island residents. Three GRAs were also part of the team and are second, third, and fourth authors. The second author GRA is familiar with art and crafts, the third has previous experience leading community photo and collage events but no prior connection to the island, and the fourth author has long-standing (though not active) family ties to the island.

Data Analysis

All audio recordings of the focus groups were transcribed verbatim. Procedures associated with analytic induction and thematic analysis were used in this data analysis and considered well suited to the research question and study focus on participants' experience telling a layered story using collage. Analytic induction is concerned with a "progressive redefinition of [a] phenomenon to be explained and of explanatory factors . . . to locate common factors and provisional explanation" (Katz, 2001, p. 483). Thematic analysis identifies "themes within the participant understanding and meaning making" (Fielden et al., 2011, p. 3) and focuses on "capturing complexities of meaning within textual data" (Guest et al., 2012, p. 11).

The PI and three GRAs analyzed the data as a team using the following steps:

1. Read through transcripts to familiarize with the data.
2. Record reflections and prominent concepts, therefore sensitizing concepts to be kept in mind while reading.
3. Segment aspects of the text according to sensitizing concepts.

4. Review the segmented texts to determine similar, different, and indigenous categories.
5. Create thematic statements that describe the phenomenon occurring.
6. Thematic statements become themes after they are tested against the large body of research (validated by the transcripts and participant collage portraits).

Theory

This study is theoretically grounded in social construction and ecological theory. Social construction is well aligned with analytical induction and thematic analysis, which search for meaning making and understanding of a phenomenon and propose that what is “real is socially constructed” (Riger & Sigurvinsdottir, 2016, p. 33). Humans make sense of the world through social interaction and experiences with their environment (Crotty, 1998). Participants in this study used collage portraiture to construct their island narrative; they expressed the meaning of the island and their lives there through art, which included the weaving of generational ties, connection to the land, and the uniqueness of island life. Lock and Strong (2010) discuss meaning making from a social constructionist perspective: “Meaning-making, being inherently embedded in socio-cultural processes, are specific to time and place” (p. 7). Social constructionist research invites new practices of meaning making, making it well suited for arts-based methods and innovative ways of storytelling, particularly in community settings involving similar and different experiences of a shared phenomenon.

Participants in this study were residents of a closely knit island community that seceded from the mainland over 30 years ago. As a consequence of the island’s self-determination, mutual aid and high levels of civic engagement are required for the island to thrive and function. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological theory supports an integrated, reciprocal approach with an emphasis on interdependence and connection to the environment and contends that human behavior is best understood within the context of the social environment. The key concepts of both theories, including meaning making, interdependence, reciprocity, and connection to the social and natural environment, were illustrated in the participants’ collage portraits and subsequent interviews.

Findings

Three overarching themes emerged during the analysis of the collage portraiture workshop interview transcripts: (a) the process of collage portraiture, (b) collage portraiture as storytelling, and (c) future use of collage portraiture. Workshop participants discussed the process of collage portraiture, which included preparation, the act of creating the collage portrait, and collage portraiture as an opportunity for collaboration and community building. Participants also described collage portraiture in terms of storytelling, commenting on the stories they wanted to tell, their desire to represent the natural environment, collage portraiture as a means of expression, and their excitement to share their collages with family and friends. Finally, participants indicated how they might use the method of collage portraiture in the future after participating in this workshop.

The Process of Collage Portraiture

Preparation: Getting Ready. Collage portraiture workshop participants mentioned the need to make time and space for the creative process and expressed appreciation for the opportunity to do so in the workshop. Participants mentioned the block of time devoted to artistic expression (“I mean, that’s a big block of time, I don’t normally have the luxury of having that time in a workshop”) and noted the space made available to spread out and work with the materials provided (“It was a really wonderful opportunity to come and do that when somebody lays out nice flat tables that don’t have anything else on them”). One participant explained that the workshop made time and space for creativity that she wouldn’t have taken on her own: “Would I do it on my own? No, I wouldn’t have time. I wouldn’t take the time to do it.”

Preparation was a big part of the collage portraiture making process. Participants described how they got ready for the workshop by gathering and choosing materials to use in their collages. One said, “You’ve got to gather your stuff and think about it.” Some participants planned out their collages ahead of the workshop (“As soon as I thought about a collage workshop, I knew that I was going to do this theme”), while others were more spontaneous (“Ok, I will go with whatever presents itself”). One participant asked herself, “So, what would people want to see [about the island]?” Preparation for the workshop also involved reflection. Participants described choosing photos

and items for their collages that had meaning or told a story. One noted, “I did, in the back of my mind, just try to pick and choose things that mean the island to me ... what kind of things make the island the island.” Several participants discussed how looking through photos brought up memories of their family history on the island. Said one,

I think it was interesting looking back at the pictures and think about how things had changed through the years, and finding pictures and bringing up memories, and seeing what it was like years ago because my family’s been coming here since 1904.

Making It: Creating the Collage Portrait.

Workshop participants recounted the act of creating the collage portraiture and how they organized and assembled their collages. Some participants discussed organizing their collage portraiture by theme or event as they worked. Said one, “I like things in order, so I kind of did mine

of themes of the beach and events on this island.” Creating the collage portraiture was a tactile experience, and a few participants described the process of moving things around on their collage portrait, gluing, and being creative with available materials as fun. One participant stated, “To me, it was just, it was very fun. It was very tactile. I loved playing with glue, which is, you know, awesome.” Another participant noted,

Actually, it was fun. I don’t know why, I just grabbed a bag of sand right at the beginning, and at the end before I came and I thought “this is not going to fit on there.” But I don’t know, was it you or somebody who said, “just make it like glitter.”

In their collages, participants used both materials that they gathered while preparing for the workshop ahead of time and materials that the workshop hosts provided the day of the workshop. One participant noted,

Figure 2. Memories of Time on the Beach Are Included in This Participant’s Collage Portrait



You guys gave us some cool stuff ... I loved this postcard of the ferries and the old ferry landing. And then I love the idea of, you know, the background paper, and stuff you had, and the colors and the chalk.

Another participant described the spontaneity of her process:

I went over to the table, and I would think, “Okay, that postcard that I’ll take and see where it goes and okay, oh, purple. ... Oh, this page that has these different maps.” I had no idea [how I was going to use the maps]. I went with the image of collage, which is a layering and overlapping of different materials, whether it’s color or visual pictures, or words, or whatever it is. So, I really had no idea. ... “Okay, let’s just put that down. Okay, shift that” ... It really came together. And [the collage] was very spontaneous ... without doing a lot of front-end thinking.

Collaboration and Community Building.

Participants expressed appreciation for the workshop as an opportunity to build community on the island. One said, “This was another way of getting together as a small group in the community and seeing what other people were doing and talking to them, and I think it was great.” One participant explained how she decided to participate in the workshop: “You know, I thought it would be fun to see all the people that you talked with. And so that sounded fun to get together.” Another participant saw the collage portraiture workshop as an opportunity to express a shared love of the island: “It’s a way to reinforce there’s a commonality in people’s love of the island.”

The workshop also provided an opportunity for collaboration. Participants were influenced by the work of others around them. One explained, “I was inspired by all the other people and what they were doing.” Another described using techniques modeled by other participants:

Figure 3. Use of a Variety of Materials on a Participant's Collage Portrait



I saw one woman who had colored her whole paper first and then put her things on. But I felt like I'd be copying her if I did that. So, I sort of arranged these and then I colored in between.

One participant described working together with a friend: “She came over to look at mine at some point. ... And she dropped these little things off here. I hadn’t picked them out. She said, ‘They go here. Each one goes there.’”

Collage Portraiture as Storytelling

The Story I Wanted to Tell. Workshop participants told their stories of island life and generational history through their collages. Some started the workshop with an idea of the story they wanted to tell, while some participants’

stories emerged unexpectedly. Many participants centered their collages on family. One recounted, “So that’s kind of how I organized it around family because that’s what it’s all about here for me, on the island.” Several participants incorporated family history and island traditions into their collages. One participant noted, “To me, the surprising thing about using collage portraiture as the medium was how natural the process flowed from my sort of origin story on the island, which was through my great grandparents and down to my granddaughter.” Another explained:

What I tried to do in my collage is depict the things that my family and I enjoy ... things that we like to enjoy on the island and incorporating a little bit of the history of how we get here.

Figure 4. Generations of Family Represented on a Participant’s Collage Portrait



For many collage portraiture participants, a big part of island life is sharing island experiences with extended family who visit every summer. One workshop participant showed family island traditions in her collage:

You know, I think it just brought home the fact that, you know, it's become these great traditions. And I've done them. My kids have done them. Now my grandchildren are all doing the same things. They're doing the things that I was doing when I was five. So that was kind of cool to think about. So, the jumping off the wharf. You know, I did that. My kids did that. This summer my grandkids did that.

Two of the workshop participants used shape to create a story within a story; one cut out her collage portrait in the shape of the island, and another glued her collage portrait elements together into the shape of an abandoned military tower on her family property. The participant who created her collage portrait in the shape of the tower explained how she wanted to draw people in to learn more by adding words in small font along with the photos:

You know, I think it's only for a brief moment that people can get a glimpse and be like, "oh, that looks like a tower." But if they really want to know more, then they'll take the time to come in.

Some stories appeared unexpectedly for collage portrait workshop participants. One participant described how her friend at the workshop was surprised that her collage portrait told the story of strong women in her life: “She had gotten all these pictures of women in her life, her aunts, her mom, her kids, and her granddaughter. And she didn’t realize until she got there that they were all pictures of women.” Another participant expressed surprise that, when her collage portrait was finished, it did tell a story: “I think the surprising thing for me was that it did tell a story. A couple of people came by and said, ‘Oh, this is really all about your family, isn’t it?’”

One participant enjoyed the spontaneity of the collage portrait process: “I like that I didn’t know where the story was going. ... So, what I loved at the end is that I felt like I was catching a spirit of the island.”

Representing the Natural Environment.

Several workshop participants emphasized a desire to illustrate the island's natural beauty in their

Figure 5. Collage Portrait Created in the Shape of the Island



collages; as one participant explained, “There’s no shortage of beautiful vistas” on the island. The island is considered a summer destination and its population swells dramatically in the summer, but one participant explained that she wanted to include pictures of winter life on the island as well as summer life, “They’re both equally wonderful.” A few participants mentioned changes in the island landscape due to storms, erosion, and logging on the island.

We have pictures of my grandfather and my mother, you know, like 70 years ago down on the beach. And then we took pictures when we were kids, and those rocks were always the same from when I was kid until maybe 10 years ago. There must have been a big storm, and now they’re jumbled because we want to go re-

create the picture. But the rocks are a little bit different now and they are big rocks. So obviously, a storm moved them, right, and the vegetation has changed, because it was woods that we would run in. And then it all fell over and the loggers came and took it. So, it’s kind of regrowing again. It’s had a lot of changes.

Collage Portraiture as Expression. Workshop participants described collage portraiture as a unique method of expression. One participant explained that the method of collage portraiture allows for storytelling in a nonlinear way:

It’s not a straight narrative ... it’s a little like how life is ... the collage lets a relationship happen that wouldn’t necessarily if I line them [photos and other materials] up in order on a table.

Figure 6. Collage Portrait Highlighting a Tower From the Previous Military Presence on the Island



A workshop participant who is a three-dimensional artist and potter explained:

I was never really interested in collage before. ... It's a whole different process ... to do something flat surface for me was a whole new challenge through a different way of thinking. But I liked the idea of layering.

Collage portraiture was a new method of expression for most participants in the workshop. Some participants mentioned that they did not consider themselves to be artistic and that the idea of creating a collage portrait was intimidating or frightening. As one explained, "It was a little intimidating at first to try and figure out how to do this and what to do, and I'm not naturally an artist." A couple of participants were accustomed to expressing themselves through writing ("Words are my way of expressing how I feel or what I see rather than images") and were surprised at how effective collage portraiture is in storytelling, noting about the collage portrait that it "eventually came together. Maybe not in the most artistic way, but in a way, that means something to me."

Sharing. Participants were pleased with their finished collages and excited to share them with family and with the larger island community. Several participants mentioned displaying their collages in their island homes where visiting family would see them. One explained, "I can't wait 'til when they come visit next summer, to show them the whole thing," while another noted, "I thought this would be great to display on the wall here at the island so that it's a better way for us to remember all of those very cool memories on one spot."

Many workshop participants expressed a desire to share their collages with a broader audience and discussed the possibility of an exhibit in the island historical society or in the library art gallery adjacent to the island school. One participant explained, "What would be neat is to see the historical society do something, or the library, do like pictures and have people explain [their collage]," and noted, "People here [on the island] really do appreciate art."

Future Use of Collage Portraiture

After participating in the workshop, most participants indicated that they would use the method of collage portraiture again in the future. One participant did not finish her collage portrait during the workshop but explained, "I haven't

stopped thinking about it." She mentioned that she has ideas for future collages that she would like to create: "I like doing collage, I really do. I have lots of ideas for collages that I want to do." A few participants described collage portraiture as a way to put stories with pictures and compared making a photo collage to scrapbooking or making a photo book. One participant explained, "I love to make photo albums, which is kind of a form of collaging"; another noted that a photo album or scrapbook is "kind of like a collage, only in the book."

A majority of participants reported enjoying the workshop and creating their collages. One said, "I enjoyed it. Do it again in a heartbeat." However, a few participants mentioned that while they would be willing to participate in another collage portraiture workshop, they would be less likely to use the method of collage portraiture on their own. "I would need direction," one said, "I would need someone to put all the stuff together for me."

Discussion

The results of this study support the value of using collage portraiture as a way to tell complex, layered, and personal stories (Gerstenblatt, 2013; Scotti & Chilton, 2018). From the process of creating the collage portrait, which encompassed delving into family photographs and mementos as well as sharing memories and talking with fellow islanders, participants felt the method was a meaningful way to tell their stories (Mackworth-Young et al., 2020). Additionally, creating collage portraits in a communal setting offers the benefit of community building and identifying shared experiences and values (Dutton et al., 2019; Klorer, 2014) and as one participant in this study said, "to reinforce a commonality of people's love of the island." The approach used by the researchers/community practitioners was participatory, focused on building relationships and collaboration, and what Jackson et al. (2011) and Sandercock (2004) referred to as "deep engagement." Using a participatory and deep-engagement community practice approach resulted in mutually beneficial outcomes for the community and the researchers and their students.

Once the collage portraits were created, participants wanted to keep and share them, and most indicated they would use the method again. An unanticipated outcome of the workshop was the volition on the part of participants to include the collage portraits in an exhibit at the historical society located within the island community center. This exhibit, *Short Stories: Life on Long Island*, was

curated by the director of the island historical society, who was also a workshop participant.

The Process of Collage Portraiture

Beneficial aspects particular to the collage portrait process were elucidated in this study. Segmenting time and space dedicated to creative work was meaningful in itself, something people with busy lives “don’t normally have the luxury of [doing].” Arts-based workshops such as collage portraiture give individuals time to attend to their creative side, gather with neighbors, and document important stories. Supplying materials and items to use in creating a collage portrait helps inspire and jump-start the process; however, all participants spent time preparing thoughtfully and deliberately for the story they wanted to tell and intentionally selecting what to include from their personal collections of photos and mementos. It is important to provide information on what will be supplied and what participants need to bring when organizing and publicizing a community collage portrait workshop.

Findings from this study validate Leavy’s (2020) assertion that using collage portraiture as a method of storytelling can be a self-reflective process for the creator of the collage. The significance of preparation prior to the workshop was evident in the bags full of photos, documents, and other materials and items as well as themes, ideas, and stories that participants brought to the workshop to portray in their collages. Preparation for the workshop included revisiting memories as participants chose photos and items that were meaningful to them or told their story of island life. The act of collecting materials and reflecting helped frame the story—“You’ve got to gather your stuff and think about it” and “In the back of my mind [I tried] to pick and choose things that mean the island to me.” This illustrates how iterative and purposeful the process of creating a collage portrait is throughout each stage.

Some participants in the workshop stated they were initially intimidated by the idea of creating a collage portrait (Barone & Eisner, 2012, as cited in Scotti & Chilton, 2018); as they were “not artists.” However, the method of collage portraiture proved to be accessible, and participants were satisfied with their work, unconcerned with judgment, and excited to share their collages with family and friends. They even proposed the idea of a community exhibit. The current study suggests that collage portraiture as a method of artistic expression and storytelling may be more accessible

than other methods because the process does not require drawing or inherent artistic ability. Collage portraiture can be created by organizing and layering photos, documents, found items, and text. The approachability of collage portraiture makes it an ideal arts-based method to use with a variety of populations and settings.

Collage Portraiture as Storytelling and Community Building

This study supports the utility of arts-based methods as a way to build community, particularly around a shared interest or experience (Leavy, 2020). For participants in this study, it was meaningful to come together for the workshop and express their reverence for the island while telling their individual stories. The communal setting supported collaboration in creating the collages, finding inspiration in the work of participants, and providing an opportunity to share memories, photos, and ideas. The concept, preparation, and execution of this workshop required deep engagement and collaboration with the community (Jackson et al., 2011; Sandercock, 2004). Community members took the lead in suggesting ways to invite residents to participate, such as posting on the island’s Facebook page and other closed civic communication networks. The space at the community center was secured at no cost, residents offered supplies, and we worked with and supported local businesses for lunch and refreshments.

Participants in this study indicated that collage portraiture is a pleasurable experience that extends beyond the creation process, reiterating the findings of Margolin (2014, as cited in Scotti & Chilton, 2018). Some said they would prefer to do such a workshop with other participants for support and structure rather than independently create a collage portrait, which further supports the communal and relational benefits of collage portraiture and arts-based experiences (Cash, 2016). Rather than relying on others to tell their stories using more traditional methods or risk not documenting stories at all, collage portraiture offers a way to view the story daily, sparking ongoing dialog and reminiscence (Gerstenblatt, 2013; Mafe, 2009, as cited in Irwin et al., 2018).

Not only were participants proud to share their stories with fellow community members during the creation process, but they also expressed a desire to continue sharing their stories by displaying their completed collage portraits in their homes and in their community. Of their own volition, the

participants in the workshop rallied around the idea of a community exhibit, further exemplifying the community-building nature of the project. A fellow participant, who is also the director of the island historical society, led the process of creating a public exhibit titled *Island Stories* that featured the collage portraits. This exhibit allowed island residents, their families and friends, as well as visiting tourists to gain a deeper understanding of how residents feel about the island. The exhibit was up for 5 months.

This study supports the potential of collage portraiture as a method, to: (a) represent individual and collective narratives that are layered, personal, collective, nuanced, and unfolding; (b) be shared in community settings in accessible and meaningful ways; and (c) facilitate community building and engagement and deeper understanding of individual and collective shared experiences.

Conclusion

The current study demonstrates how collage portraiture brings community members together in a joyful, engaging, and collaborative way to tell their stories. This requires dedicating time to a creative endeavor they might not otherwise have the opportunity to undertake. For artist/scholar/community practitioners working with communities, using a participatory approach is essential for relationship building

and reciprocity. Investing in relationships with community members over time supports a deeper understanding of the distinct historic, social, and cultural factors, and strategies for engaging residents in an authentic and reciprocal way is an essential aspect of participatory practice. Social construction and ecological theory provide a theoretical framework for relational, reciprocal community practice in communities where interdependence, a deep connection to one's social and natural environment, and a necessary high level of civic engagement are needed to sustain, thrive, and function.

The starting point of the collage portrait is personal; it then anchors the individual experience to a collective narrative addressing attachment to place, identity, memory, generational ties, and connection to the natural environment. The process is iterative and provokes ongoing inquiry and discussion, which provides an opportunity for reflection and learning about oneself and one's community. When the exercise is done in a communal setting, it offers an opportunity to learn about the shared and distinct experiences of others. Collage portraiture as a method of expression allows people to access their creative side without the pressure of more formal artistic training or expectations of artistic excellence. The release of these pressures welcomes broad participation, diversifying and expanding voice in storytelling.

Figure 7. Grandchildren of the Director of the Island Historical Society View Her Collage Portrait on Display in the Exhibit



We developed the following recommendations based on our experience and hope others find them applicable to their own contexts.

- Build relationships over time with frequent visits and communication.
- Integrate collage portraiture in other civic areas to elicit experiences and ideas.
- Use the method in communal settings to allow for discussion, sharing stories, and forming new relationships.
- Have materials, facilitation of the process, and snacks at community workshops. Purchase food and supplies locally as much as possible.
- Arrange multiple workshops to encourage and increase participation and strengthen community building.
- Work closely with community organizations to secure all logistical issues.
- Design additional research on the impact and experience of using collage portraiture as a method of storytelling and community building.
- Additional exploration is warranted on how collage portraiture and arts-based methods can expand and diversify voice in how stories are told.

Further research could explore collage portraiture as a storytelling method with individuals and communities that supports expression of meaning and interpretation of their lived experience and connection to their environment (Mafe, 2009, as cited in Irwin et al., 2018). This might include focus groups, expanded use of collage portraiture in a variety of settings and communities, and longitudinal studies to explore the long-term value of collage portraiture for the community and individual. Such understandings will assist in the development and support of innovative and effective practices for engaging the community in meaningful ways to represent their individual and collective narratives.

The results of this study suggest the participants in this workshop gained direct benefits from attending the workshop and telling their story of island life through collage portraits. Those benefits included solidifying existing and forming new relationships, validating the importance of one's story, learning about personal and community history, segmenting time to engage in and explore one's creativity, reflecting on island memories, and community building.

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