

Speaking in Pictures and Play: The Unique Approach to Using Art and Play as Data in Hermeneutic Research

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Abstract

Art and play are the language of children. The act of creating art and playing help children to make sense of their world. Pediatric clinicians have used art and play as therapy to elicit conversation, to allow children to express themselves, and to overcome communication barriers when children may not have the vocabulary to articulate what they would like to say. Art and play therapy have demonstrated their utility in practice, and this way of communicating should be equally effective as part of data collection and analysis in hermeneutic research. By approaching hermeneutic interviews with children in a novel way, using art and play to augment what is said in an interview, new opportunities for understanding the worlds of children may arise.

Keywords

art, play, children, hermeneutic research, data collection, data analysis

Play and art are recognized as the language of children, and allow them to understand their reality and to be understood by those who engage in these activities with children (Aasgaard & Edwards, 2012; Kramer, 1971; Piaget & Inhelder, 2000; Sourkes, 1991, 1995). Depending on their developmental and cognitive age, a child may not have the vocabulary to articulate their experiences with words (Sourkes, 2018). Art and play therapy is often utilized by pediatric healthcare teams to allow children and clinicians to communicate in a common language (Aasgaard & Edwards, 2012; Sourkes, 1995; Sourkes et al., 2005). The ability to communicate effectively with children in a clinical setting using art and play should extend to research interviews with pediatric populations (Wong, 2019).

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Hans-Georg Gadamer established hermeneutics as a philosophical examination of human understanding through interpretation (Gadamer, 1960/2004). Moules et al. (2015) have developed a research methodology founded on Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics that inquires through open dialogue, careful listening, deep reading, and interpretive writing to better understand phenomena and experiences, rather than explain them. Research that utilizes other ways that children communicate, through play or art, could provide researchers with a common language to facilitate conversation and deepen our understanding of the experiences of children (Montreuil & Carnevale, 2016; Wong, 2019). Hermeneutics provides a substantive philosophical foundation for the interpretation of art and its communicative power, as well as an interpretive research methodology that allows the researcher and their participants to use art and play to meaningfully discuss a topic and arrive at an elevated understanding of experience.

Data in Hermeneutic Research

To be situated in a meaningful world is to live in a world that is understood and interpreted through language: the language of art, nature, and “in short, any language that things have” (Gadamer, 1960/2004, p. 470; Moules et al., 2015). Language is not a simple verbal narration describing experiences or phenomena; it provides humans with a foundation for understanding the world (Gadamer, 1960/2004; Moules et al., 2015). In hermeneutic research, everything that helps to further clarify the interpretation of a topic may be considered data, including the visual arts, textbooks, policy, poetry, literary or scholarly texts, and conversation (Moules et al., 2015). This extended concept of language, as more than the spoken or written word, includes the universal languages of children: art and play (Sourkes, 1991).

The idea to use art and play as data in research developed from my experiences in practice. Rather than asking how theory may work in practice, Caputo (2018) stated that, “when it comes to hermeneutics . . . The right question is, ‘These are good practices, how do they work in theory?’” (p. 221). As a nurse practicing in pediatric palliative care, I have seen how providing children with familiar and unthreatening activities can establish trust and enhance communication, either by providing the child with a distraction from what they are discussing, or by using art or gesture to communicate without words. Because art and play are so effective in establishing a shared understanding and language in practice, I am confident in my theory that it will work in hermeneutic research.

Art as Data

Art and its ability to depict the seemingly unfathomable or mysterious truths of human life is an important position of thought in hermeneutic philosophy, as it includes both the event of understanding through the experience of art and of making oneself understood through the creation of art (Zimmermann, 2015). Gadamer described the communicative nature of art as the “speechless language of the pictorial image” (Gadamer, 1977/1986, p. 83), as a speechlessness that is in its own way a kind of speech. Gadamer (1977/1986) wrote that the German word *Stumm* (mute) is linked to the word *stammeln* (to stutter or stammer); the difficulty of the stutterer does not lie in the fact that he has nothing to say, but that he has too much to say at once and is incapable of finding the words to express the abundance of things on his mind. If an artist could express what

they had to say in words, there would be no need for them to create the artistic form of their ideas (Gadamer, 1977/1986).

When art is used as an intermediary in conversation with children in the clinical setting, questions can be posed earlier in the process, conversation deepens, and children may provide an explanation of their drawing, thereby revealing their reality (Sourkes, 1991). Creating art is a developmentally appropriate medium for children to express themselves and to be understood, regardless of their ability to describe their experiences with words (Aasgaard & Edwards, 2012; Kramer, 1971; Sourkes, 1991, 2018). Children in the concrete operational stage of cognitive development, about age seven to 12 years, are able to produce mental images from their experiences and re-produce them in the form of art (Parsons, 1987; Piaget & Inhelder, 2000). Adolescent children are able to recognize and use metaphor and symbol in art (Parsons, 1987), which may yield rich data if the child is interviewed about the meaning of their work.

A colleague once told me about a bereaved identical twin brother, who sculpted a totem that featured prominent eyes in his sibling support group. This prompted my colleague to ask what the eyes meant, to which he replied, “Every day when I look in the mirror, it’s my brother’s eyes that are looking back at me. We have the same eyes.” Had this been collected as data in a hermeneutic interview, the researcher would have a surplus of language to interpret – the combination of the words and the image provide a widened horizon for the researcher to explore.

The artwork of children becomes a complementary set of data, where the researcher may analyze the artistic creations of children within the context of the interview dialogue to ensure that the interpretations are derived from the child’s explanation of what they were trying to convey. The researcher benefits from both the interview transcript text and the generated artwork to inform their interpretations. The convergence of the textual and the visual enhances the researcher’s ability to interpret the experiences of the other, giving them more data to be addressed by, and expanding the possibility of understanding further than what may have been achieved through dialogue in populations where the “right” words are not so readily available.

The *play of art* (Gadamer, 1977/1986) also guides the interpretation of children’s artwork. Entering into play in hermeneutics is to step outside of oneself, immerse oneself in the game, and become open to the possible outcomes of interpretation and re-interpretation (Moules et al., 2015; Zimmermann, 2015). For Gadamer, the play of art is not about escaping reality, but fully engaging in it: “The play of art is a mirror that . . . constantly arises anew, and in which we catch sight of ourselves in a way that is often unexpected or unfamiliar: what we are, what we might be, and what we are about” (Gadamer, 1977/1986, p. 130). Philosophical hermeneutics emphasizes the ability of art to convey real knowledge about ourselves and reveal the invisible forces that shape our lives, allowing us to cope with them (Zimmermann, 2015); the goals of art therapy align particularly well with hermeneutics in this sense. Artwork can help explore the meaning of a person’s experience (Devlin, 2006), and can be analyzed hermeneutically to construct new meanings that arise from careful interpretation and the play of art.

Play as Data

Play is a familiar concept for pediatrics and hermeneutics. Laing and Moules (2013) emphasized the ability of play at children's cancer camps to reshape and understand experiences, to find belonging and community, and to heal. In the population that I work with as a pediatric palliative nurse, children are constantly confronting reality rather than fantasy, and the opportunity to provide levity and fun through play is all the more valuable (Sourkes, 1995). Therapeutic play is another mode of communication between children and clinicians that may help children to convey their experiences and realities without needing to have a "sit down" conversation in a traditional therapy setting (Sourkes, 1995). When a child is engaged in therapeutic play, the illusion afforded by play is what exposes the child's reality (Sourkes, 1995). The truth being revealed as an illusion may seem counterintuitive, but is congruent with the hermeneutic concept of *aletheia*, the event of concealment and unconcealment (Moules et al., 2015), where "truth occurs precisely in itself in that concealing denial" (Heidegger, 1971, p. 52). The illusion provided by play is transparent, revealing the child's reality to the therapist and the child, without either having to address it directly (Sourkes, 1995).

Piaget and Inhelder (2000) theorized that symbolic play functioned for children in what an adult might consider to be their internal dialogue, and that rather than simply recalling and discussing an event, children require more direct symbolism to convey their experiences. Symbolic play is "the creation of symbols at will in order to express everything in the child's life experience that cannot be formulated or assimilated by means of [verbal] language alone" (Piaget & Inhelder, 2000, p. 61). As with the creation of art, play serves as an intermediary language for children and adults, and allows children to understand their realities and convey their experiences to others. Therapeutic and symbolic play demonstrate their efficacy in practice, and may be useful as data to analyze and interpret for hermeneutic researchers. Lang et al. (2020) used digital story telling in their hermeneutic research, where cocreated films served as data for analysis and interpretation. The method of data collection and analysis that Lang et al. (2020) established may also be applied to research interviews with children. Children could be interviewed using play to strengthen communication and filmed for visual analysis alongside the transcript text.

Engaging with Children in Research

The use of play and art requires that the researcher comes into play with the child, in the literal and philosophical sense, and to be open to allowing these modes of being to show them something new. The flexibility of what might be considered as data in hermeneutic research provides an opportunity to think of new ways to engage participants who have traditionally been excluded from or under-represented in research, whether it is because of communication challenges, perceived cognitive or developmental deficits, or ethical concerns regarding the discussion of sensitive topics. Through the novel approach of using art and play in hermeneutic research, the barriers to understanding are eased and allow children to participate in research and reveal their realities in familiar, enjoyable, and unique ways.

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