

Social work and the arts: Images at the intersection

Christina Sinding

School of Social Work and Department of Health, Aging & Society, McMaster University, Canada

Rachel Warren and Cathy Paton

School of Social Work, McMaster University, Canada

Abstract

This article considers social work engagement with the arts. We are interested in claims made in the social work literature about why art matters (or should matter) to social work, and about what art achieves for people and communities and ideas. We focus in particular on the images and metaphors at play in descriptions of arts-informed social work projects. Our intent is to offer a framework for understanding what social work communities think (and hope, and imagine) happens when we take up the arts in education, practice and research.

Keywords

Art, arts-informed social work, epistemology, metaphor, performance, photography, poetry, social work education

Background

Published writing about arts-informed social work is variegated and lends itself to a wide range of clustering or categorizing approaches. We might, for example, organize this literature according to who the arts initiative aims to affect: social work students, social workers, clients, community members, citizens, 'the public.' The nature of the engagement is also salient. In some initiatives, people engage art as makers or doers of it, in others, as audiences or witnesses to art (that is created

Corresponding author:

Christina Sinding, School of Social Work and Department of Health, Aging & Society, McMaster University, 1280 Main Street West, Hamilton, ON L8S 4M4, Canada.

Email: sinding@mcmaster.ca

either by laypeople or artists). When the focus is on creating or participating in art, emphasis is typically on the process. In cases where the art is presented, the work itself becomes relevant, as does the relationship with audiences.

Other writers focus on specific social work practices, exploring how counselling (or conscientization, group building, community development, advocacy and so on) can productively draw on the arts. Social work research – how it is thought about, done, and presented – has been drawn into dialogue with the arts, as has social work pedagogy. Relations between social groups, between social workers and clients, or more broadly, relations of dominance and subordination, are increasingly engaged in artful ways. Some scholars urge a sharper or more decisively artful turn to the very nature of social work as a practice or set of practices.

The significance assigned to questions of form – to the ‘artfulness’ of art – varies considerably in the literature on arts-informed social work. We can imagine it along a continuum. At one end is the idea of art as one among many purposeful activities that can facilitate the process or outcome of interest. Here, art is ‘just another way’ to do certain social work practice. So for example, a writer at this end of the continuum might claim that making art collectively is a way for a group of people to build community, but would not distinguish arts-informed processes from any other communal activity (creating a community garden, for example). Or, the writer might refer to collage as a means by which people tell their stories, but without suggesting or implying that the artful process, the technique, or the finished artwork ‘did something’ *particular* to the tellers or to the stories. In the middle of the continuum, we have the idea that art increases the efficacy of a particular social work process or practice or aspiration. Here, art is imaged as enhancing what is going on; familiar social work processes (group cohesion, for example) are facilitated, deepened, etc. Again, however, a position in the middle of the continuum does not necessarily claim that anything qualitatively different is happening because of the art. And at the far end of the continuum, the ‘artfulness’ of the art, its form or craft per se, is significant. The claim here is that the art or the form is a significant determinant of what happens: art ‘works’ distinctly differently than conventional social work; art about a thing produces markedly different effects than social work about that thing. Further, in this literature, art is typically put forward as a response to particular troubles with conventional social work. Our article focuses on writing that leans to this end of the continuum, writing that claims something distinct for art.

The purpose of our engagement with the literature on social work and the arts – the particular clustering of literature that we offer in this article – has evolved over the course of its writing. Initially framed as an explication of the claims made for art in relation to social work processes and aspirations, it evolved to encompass an exploration of the images and metaphors at play in this literature. Exploring these metaphors, especially those about how art ‘works’ on and for people and communities, illuminates some implicit assumptions about people and their needs and about contemporary social work and its limitations that underpin the impetus towards arts-informed social work. This article presents one way of understanding

what we as a social work community think is happening and can happen, at the intersection between social work and the arts.

The process

We began by gathering literature circulating in the social work universe that describes how social work scholars and practitioners are taking up the arts. By 'circulating in the social work universe' we mean published in a social work journal, explicitly addressing social work as a discipline or practice, and/or written by social work students or faculty members. We searched Social Work Abstracts, Social Sciences Abstracts and Social Services Abstracts, as well as MLA, CINAHL and Sociological Abstracts, using social work AND 'poetry or visual art or photograph* or theat* (for theatre, theatrical etc) or music or dance or drama or fiction' as subject headings. We omitted search terms such as 'literature' and 'narrative' to eliminate irrelevant material. We then combed through the reference lists of these writings and pursued promising titles. While we have assembled an impressive stack of writings (about 130), no doubt we have missed important contributions, especially those published in books.

A cluster of the writings we gathered claim that social work, as it is (or should be) practiced, is an art form, that social workers are artists or artisans, and that we would benefit from understanding ourselves and our practice this way (Martinez-Brawley and Mendez-Bonito Zorita, 1998; Seligson, 2004; Walter, 2006). Related writing suggests that artists' practices (how artists 'put things together' for example) can or should be a source of social work knowledge (Chambon, 2008), or draws attention to social work's historical and epistemological taproots in the humanities (Moffatt, 2001). We refer to this literature here insofar as it often justifies or calls for a closer relation between art and social work; however our primary focus is social work projects that feature art in its material forms.

This article includes in a more selective way readings from other disciplines (applied theatre, education, health studies, disability studies, medical humanities, cultural policy) and draws on examples from our own and colleagues' teaching, projects currently underway, and conversations about all of these. Our analysis is also informed by Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) text *Metaphors We Live By* with its central contention that metaphors are fundamental to our everyday conceptual frameworks. According to Lakoff and Johnson, metaphors convey a patterned set of 'truths' about a thing, and carry a series of implications (or 'entailments'). So for example, in Western culture, arguments are commonly represented as battles. The language of war (attack a position, an indefensible stance, win/lose, a new line of attack and so on) comprises a patterned way of talking about arguing. This patterned way of talking draws focus to some aspects of arguing while obscuring others (the collaborative aspects, for instance) – and, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue, it deeply influences how we think about and do arguing in the world. In the discussion, we offer some reflections on the significance of metaphors about art in social work.

As noted above, our initial reading of the articles was focused on identifying claims about art – crudely, we read for the ‘outcomes’ and ‘mechanisms of action’ of art in social work. When we turned our attention to metaphor, we re-read the articles, looking for images and metaphors embedded in statements about how the authors perceived or witnessed or experienced art ‘working’ – and especially, how the specific art form or work ‘did what it did.’ Commonly these metaphors appeared in sections that provided a rationale for the project or initiative (or, in sections about the troubles the authors perceived themselves to be evading with the use of art). In addition to exploring statements about art ‘doing something’ for people or communities or ideas, we read with attention to the contexts in which art was perceived to be important or useful, as the combination of context and ‘what art did’ often confirmed a metaphor about how the art worked.

The metaphors

In the literature on arts-informed social work we identified three main metaphors that described how art ‘works’: getting stuff out; inhabiting others’ worlds; and breaking habits of seeing/knowing.

‘Getting stuff out’

Many accounts of the arts in social work have in common an image of a person, a self/a body, containing a jumble of difficult, troublesome perceptions, feelings or memories. Associated with this image is an imperative to get the trouble ‘out,’ to exteriorize it. Underpinning this image (and its associated imperative) is the idea that these problematic feelings and perceptions, if not drawn out in some safe and careful way, will come out unbidden – will manifest in unpredictable, unwelcome, dangerous physical or social ways.

Art, in these writings, is presented as a means of allowing or enabling the exteriorization of difficult feelings and thoughts – allowing troubles to be ‘released’ from inside (DeCarlo and Hockman, 2004), to emerge from the body, to transit the skin. Art is described as an ‘emotional safety valve’ (Mazza, 2009: 6), an ‘outlet’ for ‘unconscious thoughts, beliefs, feelings’ (Coholic et al., 2009: 34), or a ‘channel’ for ‘the expression of difficult feelings’ (Gardstrom, 1999 in DeCarlo and Hockman, 2004: 51) with ‘purgative’ effect (DeCarlo and Hockman, 2004: 51). We also see the image of a tap, a spigot: art enables an ‘outpouring of feeling’ (Pennebaker, 2000 in Tilly and Caye, 2005: 132).

In a related set of metaphors, the troublesome experiences cannot be readily accessed because they are too ‘far in,’ or too ‘far down’ or because they are hidden or shielded. Here, art does not merely allow difficult feelings to ‘get out’; rather, art ‘gets in’ – actively reaching (and sometimes evading or removing barriers to) something more meaningful in the jumble of feelings and thoughts. Art is used to ‘unearth’ feelings (Tilly and Caye, 2005: 132) or ‘provide... access’ to

hard-to-reach emotions (Buino and Simon, 2011: 293). Art is cited for 'reaching emotional depths not accessible otherwise' (Tilly and Caye, 2005: 132).

In this literature, art offers a vital alternative to conventional communication, for moving troublesome internal material 'out.' Art is said to be especially useful and productive for people who 'have difficulty expressing themselves in words – whether for cognitive, psychological or safety reasons' (McFerran-Skewes, 2005: 148). So we read that 'art and play help children release feelings they cannot articulate' (Webb, 2003: 418). Visual and embodied arts in particular are often evoked when language, or speaking in particular, is ill suited for the task of expression (Schnekenburger, 2006). Writing about dance therapy, for example, Gorham (1995) claims that 'there are instances when talking or dialogue may defeat the individual's attempts to feel a deeper more cohesive sense of self' (p. 362). In an analysis that troubles research conventions (rather than pointing to research participants' struggles), Ann Fudge Schormans (2011, p. 67) relied on arts-informed approaches in her inquiry with people labelled intellectually disabled because 'traditional research(er) insistence upon the written and spoken word can be both limiting and exclusionary.' Certain experiences, traumas for example, do not lend themselves to easy verbalization (Chambon, 2007; Lefevre, 2004). Pamela Grassau (2009) calls for the use of visual images in social work research because some experiences are 'below words' (2009: 253). Lefevre (2004) suggests that the use of music conveys feelings which 'transcend words' (2004: 335).

While much of this literature focuses on the individual, some attends to social groups. Here, the messy problematic stuff on the inside of a person has an echo in collective life: the social relations between us are a mess, troubled, and require expression – and again, art is vital in part because usual forms of communication are in some way inadequate.

An article by Dan Wulff and colleagues (2010) begins with reflections on how conversations about racism are so often avoided in the academy. An artful approach made a difference: during performances of a drama developed by a School of Social Work diversity committee, 'we could say the "unsayable," that is, we were empowered to speak in the context of our [performance scripts] that we struggled to voice in our routine daily conversations with each other' (2010: 119). Linda Smith and Motlalepule Nathane-Taulela (2011), reflecting on the South African context, describe a similar evasion and suppression of discussions about apartheid. Their use of art recognizes the unique set of internalized and structural oppressions of class, race and gender that permeate the post-apartheid and post-colonial context (Smith, 2008). Inviting students to draw early memories of powerlessness enables their consciousness of forms of oppression and how these become internalized; it also, Smith and Nathane-Taulela (2011) suggest, offers a way to make the persistence of oppression available for critical reflection in a context where its public acknowledgement is routinely discouraged. (For a project with similar insights, see Nickson et al., 2011).

In other instances, usual forms of communication are inadequate not because talk about the issue is suppressed, but because the phenomenon itself is so elusive.

Izumi Sakamoto and colleagues have explored the very complex dynamics at play in the requirement that newcomers to Canada demonstrate ‘Canadian experience’ (Sakamoto et al., 2010). The interactional signifiers of ‘Canadian experience’ are often intangible; potential employers register very subtle gestures and expressions as Canadian (and not). Whereas language typically fails to capture these subtle gestures and expressions, dramatic techniques can. One writer suggests that art works are able to ‘access the “sedimented stuff” of society’ (O’Neil, 2002 in Gunaratnam, 2007: 280). ‘Sedimented stuff’ is a powerful metaphor, invoking as it does features of the society that are ‘foundational,’ and right beneath us, but deeply and enduringly buried.

So art is commonly represented in social work literature as a means to ‘get at’ and ‘get out’ difficult feelings and social relations. Yet it is not only problematic material that needs ‘getting out,’ bringing beyond the container of the (social) body; it is also ‘good’ internal material. So for example an article on art in relation to strengths-based practice suggests that ‘engagement in the creative process can tap into inner strengths that are not always apparent and can draw out well-hidden resiliencies’ (Furman, Downey et al., 2008: 149); creating poetry can ‘help liberate energy that can be utilized for growth and healing’ (Wade, 1997 in Furman, Downey et al., 2008b: 149); ‘the process of creation unleashes the healing potential within each person’ (Johnson, 1990 in Furman, Downey et al., 2008b: 149). Bordelon suggests that poetry gives writers the power to explore ‘the profound and sublime of personal experience,’ to capture ‘a fleeting revelation in one’s inner life’ (2006: 374). At the level of the group, art is said to uncover collectively held goals. Spratt cites Augusto Boal (1992) in describing an exercise that ‘allows tentatively held, and often suppressed, aspirations to be expressed’ (Spratt et al., 2000: 119).

As noted above, amidst these ‘getting it out’ metaphors surrounding the use of art in social work we find the repeated problematizing of conventional means of communication and expression. One specific problem is that usual forms of expression require ‘too direct’ an engagement with difficult issues. So the use of figurative language (or play, in the case of children (Webb, 2003)) is sometimes encouraged. As Furman and colleagues explain:

‘By speaking in metaphoric language, clients are able to safely discuss issues that are often too painful to address directly’ or that they are ‘not ready to face directly . . . Poetic explorations . . . enable clients to test their ability to deal with painful events and feelings slowly and safely.’ (Furman, Downey, et al., 2008: 150)

The virtues of less direct engagement with difficult issues appear in other accounts. The drama Wulff and colleagues created was prompted in part because their usual presentation approach of ‘structured, straightforward discussions’ (2010: 113) about diversity and discrimination generated a series of negative reactions among faculty. Their fictionalized personification of racism usefully served to ‘externalize’ the problem, and also – in contrast to the ‘straightforward’ discussions

– gave the audience ‘some room’ from the pressure to speak or act, ‘some distance’ (p. 114) from which to reflect. The idea that art offers a productive ‘distance’ is also taken up by Spratt and colleagues in their reflections on the use of theatre to analyze and effect change in child protection systems. Here, fictional roles ‘allow participants the necessary distance to debate risky issues in safety’ (2000: 118). In the drama Wulff and colleagues describe, ‘the issues of diversity and racism were a step removed from the audience, and the conversation was consequently non-threatening’ (2010: 115).

In summary, then, this cluster of metaphors revolves around the idea that art allows or enables individual and collective interior troubles – and strengths, insights and aspirations – ‘to get out’; art permits or brings forth ‘what’s inside’ that would otherwise (with other interventions) remain contained inside, unnoticed or unarticulated.

Inhabiting others’ worlds

The literature that we have drawn together in this section offers or implies a metaphor of inhabiting the life worlds of other people – or, in more common language, ‘walking in another’s shoes.’ The metaphor of inhabiting entails a process well beyond the cognitive. It is sensory, and activates emotion; it is about imaginatively entering (or coming closer to) others’ lived experiences.

As with the ‘getting it out’ metaphor, this set of images about how art works sometimes also references certain troubles with social work as usual: troubles that emerge from our reliance on science, from contemporary conditions of social work labour, and from our usual ways of doing social work education. In this set of metaphors, each of these is a barrier to ‘getting into’ situations unlike our own, or a barrier to authentically knowing other people (barriers that art overcomes).

Craig’s (2007) analysis of the significance of narrative in conveying the complex realities of social work labour begins from the recognition that social workers (in her case, in hospital settings) have become experts in using a ‘scientific’ (neutral, apparently objective) voice. The voice of science however is inadequate for conveying knowledge about what social workers do; for this, we require a language and style ‘more closely resembled to the nuances of the human situation’ (Goldstein, 1993 in Craig, 2007: 436). Here, storytelling, and narrative approaches more generally, become a form of resistance to a scientific voice, a way of offering a much more adequate and accurate ‘window into the lived experience’ of social workers and their work (Swenson, 2004 in Craig, 2007: 444).

Not dissimilarly, Goldstein starts from a critique of contemporary practice urgencies to identify ‘the problem’ and get it ‘solved.’ Approaches to practice that emphasize control, efficiency and expediency, while not without merit in particular circumstances, tend ‘to become casehardened’ (Goldstein, 1998: 244). ‘Casehardened,’ in Goldstein’s analysis, reflects an approach to practice that is unresponsive to what is ‘less obvious’ in what we are doing. In relation to ethical dilemmas in social work, such an approach is insensitive to the ‘nuanced,

subtle... moral issues that almost invisibly intrude into human relationships' (p. 247). Against a casehardened approach – or, more generally, towards a social worker who responds 'reflectively, creatively and immediately... to the messy and often chaotic human situation' (p. 252) – Goldstein advocates for the humanities in social work education. Goldstein quotes Posner (1997) on the 'empathy-inducing' role of literature, particularly in relation to cultures and sensibilities unlike the reader's own. Westerling and Karvinen-Niinikoski (2010) make similar claims for theatre. They describe a drama project in which ten women, among them Finns and recent immigrants to Finland, participated. Among their conclusions: social integration, as an act of solidarity, can be promoted through theatre: 'by inhabiting different subject positions, one can find new points of identification with others' (2010: 265) (see Torre (1990) for a related analysis; Torre also links an audience's identification with characters in a presentation with processes of consciousness-raising). And while the empathy-inducing role of literature is often in relation to 'others', empathy for self is also discussed. Cole and Valentine (2000) note that children, in reading about others in similar situations, may feel less alone or different; books, in 'presenting to us an image of ourselves' can affect (in a positive way) 'the equilibrium of children who do not belong to so-called normal families' (Fox, 1993 in Cole and Valentine, 2000: 306; see also Tilly and Caye, 2005).

This metaphor of 'dwelling in' – this idea of inhabiting – is used in a (relatively rare) account of the arts in relation to policy development.¹ In this work the central claim is that storytelling and theatre draw us into policy dilemmas in especially productive ways. Whereas a case study engages people in debate and problem solving, a storied theatrical production 'immerses' audiences in the situation: audience members 'feel the position of the person in the play' (Nisker, 2010: 88). When audiences comment on a situation they have 'lived in' imaginatively, they offer much more complex and reflective responses than other public policy conversations generate (Cox et al., 2009; Nisker, 2010).

'Breaking habits' of seeing/knowing

The literature on social work and the arts that takes up this metaphor typically works from the premise that our habitual perceptions are harmful or diminishing to ourselves or others. Art, here, works as a foil to usual (dominant) images; art has the capacity to interrupt our habits of seeing, to challenge and alter what (and how) we know, and thus how we act and relate to one another.

Dominant cultural and media representations are featured in this literature as organizing and limiting people's knowledge of self and others. Among the virtues of poetry for a group of women parenting sexually abused children, for example, was that 'it showed them a quality of thinking and feeling that went beyond those of the mass media' (Tilly and Caye, 2005: 138). Furman, Downey et al. (2008) refers to a Vietnam veteran (described by Geer, 1983) who, perceiving himself as a machine, was 'predetermined to act in a mechanistic, rote manner.' An artful

approach to therapy encouraged the client 'to find a more flexible and expansive metaphor' to replace the static, limiting self-image (p. 152).

In literature that draws on a 'habits of seeing' metaphor, social workers and social work students are often featured. Various social forces are portrayed as shaping social workers' perceptions, with dominant cultural representations again especially salient. Fiona Patterson, reflecting on social work students' reticence to enter gerontological social work, points to 'powerful medical, psychiatric and sometimes stereotype-based theory and research about aging' (2004: 178). She uses a narrative perspective and the richness of literary works to counter these constructions, to 're-educate ourselves and inspire students' to work with elderly people 'more responsively and creatively' (p. 178). Discussing international social work placements, Furman suggests that poetry, in prompting reflection on alternative meanings for events and interactions, can have the effect of 'potentially liberating the mind from stereotypical ways of seeing the world' (Furman, Coyne et al., 2008: 76).

In their exploration of the use of photography in social work education, Catherine Phillips and Avril Bellinger (2011) note that popular discourses (in this context, racist discourses about asylum seekers) 'can literally dominate and inform [students'] practice knowledge' (2011: 3). They set their use of Diane Matar's photographs of politically displaced people living in Britain in the context of this problematic practice knowledge. Phillips and Bellinger are deliberate in their choice of these photographs, drawing attention to Matar's recognition of people seeking asylum as individuals, afforded dignity in both the making of the photographs and the images themselves. In the effort to make meaning from photographs, viewers are drawn to 'situate ourselves within the social relations embedded in the image' (Phillips and Bellinger, 2011: 7). These particular photographs – in the familiarity of the living spaces, the dailyness, the full biographies they imply – collide with the more widely available images of asylum seekers, and thus effect a kind of interruption to the othering social relations embedded in those dominant images. In offering such evocative alternative images, Matar's photos reconfigure contemporary social relations between citizens and 'others.' There are connections here to early US social work leaders' use of images. Daniel Huff (1998) writes, for example, of Lewis Hine's 'sociological photography' for the National Child Labour Committee: 'his dignified pictures of immigrants,' combined with 'carefully crafted captions and narratives' were used 'to blunt early 20th century stereotypes of the new immigrants as second-class citizens' (Guimond, 1991 in Huff, 1998: 579).

Writing in more general terms, Adrienne Chambon (2007), drawing on Susan Sontag (2003), points to dehistoricized and decontextualized media representations in their numbing repetition, their assertion of the unalterability of anything at all. In using these pervasive cultural images in our teaching and writing Chambon contends that we echo their form, and in the process shut down 'the possibility of understanding situations in alternative social work ways' (p. 206). Chambon links this shutting down with the contemporary emphasis on standards and

benchmarks in social work, an emphasis that ‘forces repetition of the already known’ (Green 1994, in Chambon, 2007: 209). Again, it is the possibilities for interrupting or evading the ‘already known’ that draws Chambon to the work of particular artists. Reflecting on their forceful poetic and artistic images she quotes Cixous (1993): ‘all great texts begin in this manner that *breaks*: they break with our thought habits’ (in Chambon, 2007: 222).

Phillips and Bellinger (2011) suggest that images ‘contain’ particular social relationships. It is the effort to deliberately alter the relationships contained in dominant images of people with intellectual disabilities that motivated the project Ann Fudge Schormans undertook. Fudge Schormans’ research invited people labelled intellectually disabled to respond to and offer commentary on public photographic depictions of people with disabilities and then, working with a digital media consultant, to change the images, or create new ones. For ‘the photochangers’ this process involved ‘re-making and re-thinking themselves’ (Fudge Schormans, 2010: 61). This re-making process is echoed in other accounts of arts-informed social work: ‘as authors of the stories of their own lives, people can reposition themselves and other characters and change the script to better reflect their visions and dreams’ (Furman, Downey et al., 2008: 149). Similarly, Houlding and Holland note that for a group of psychiatric inpatients, art provided ‘an alternative experience of self (that of poet and writer)’ (Houlding and Holland, 1988: 195).

For Fudge Schormans, the significance of the photochangers’ work was in how it offered ‘a means of interrupting what is known about them’ (2010: 54). Through their research and its public presentation, Sam, Donna, Robin and Bob effected changes in the ‘perceptual habits’ of non-disabled people:

Re-making and re-thinking themselves, and people with intellectual disabilities more broadly, through their re-imagining of public photographs and their conversations with non-disabled audiences, the group succeeded, in a small way, of making non-disabled viewers ‘re-make’ and ‘re-think’ people labelled intellectually disabled. (p. 61)

Reiter (2009) describes a somewhat similar process in his account of arts-based community development projects in Brazil. He outlines extreme inequalities of wealth as well as profound ‘misrecognition’ (in Nancy Fraser’s (1998) use of the term, as being denied full partnership in social interaction, denied the status of ‘peer’). A music school, initiated as a local social movement in a poor neighbourhood, led to a large-scale sustained training and performance program. Some of the music program’s benefits were similar to more conventional social and economic development initiatives (some of the students gained employment as a result of their involvement, for example). The music program was distinct however in its capacity to draw state actors and local middle- and upper-class white Brazilians to the Candéal neighbourhood multiple times, over extended periods. Presenting their art – presenting their own representation of identity and situation to an audience – the drummers achieved various kinds of recognition. There was the immediate appreciation for their talents, but more significantly, Reiter claims, ‘artistic

expression provided a vehicle for inserting the voices of historically marginalized groups into the public realm, thereby challenging cultural hegemony...’ (p. 157). The middle- and upper-class cultural hegemony – and along with it, the habitual social and political ‘misrecognition’ of Candeal residents – was interrupted.

Discussion

Mats Alvesson (2010) cautions that one image or root metaphor does not capture everything about a process or concept. He calls the images he identifies ‘reference points’ or ideal types, and acknowledges – as we do – the constructed nature of typologies: there are multiple ways to make sense of the field. In this spirit, we note that various features of the literature on art and social work are missed or under-examined in the analysis we have presented here. In part because our initial review focused on the outcomes of arts-informed projects, we might have under-stated or under-attended to the process-focused aspects of art, the significance of engagement in the creative process per se. Some scholars suggest that particular art forms create particular possibilities for affecting audiences (reader’s theatre, for example, might be an especially effective way to present and juxtapose multiple perspectives) (Glesne, 1999). It is likely no accident that two of the three examples in the section on ‘breaking habits of seeing/knowing’ use visual images. However given our intent to focus on how art ‘works’ on people and communities in terms of broad metaphors of action, we have paid less attention to the specificities of form.

Certain articles provide important correctives or elaborations to our main lines of analysis. An article by Debra Recollet and colleagues (2009) takes up the ‘getting it out’ metaphor. Here, however, the use of art is not primarily to solve a problem with conventional forms of expression (though the authors refer to barriers to communication created by colonization). Rather, the primary virtue of art as a form of expression in this context is that it is congruent with Aboriginal world-views: the creative arts ‘are interconnected with Native spiritual and humanistic value systems and perspectives’ (Recollet et al., 2009: 171). Similar claims are made by those who use particular genres of music with adolescents (DeCarlo and Hockman, 2004; McFerran-Skewes, 2005). These examples remind us that conventional talk-based social work is not always the default setting (against which the arts are rendered ‘better’); rather, in some contexts, artful communication is more central, more familiar, more assumed.

In this article, we have considered three key metaphors of how art works on and for people and communities. In the literature on social work and the arts, art ‘gets stuff out’ – it offers a means to reach and bring forth ‘what’s inside’ the individual or the collective (troubled feelings or memories and oppressive relations, as well as strengths and aspirations). Its particular virtue is in how it avoids or overcomes problems with communication ‘as usual’: it offers an alternative to conventional language or speaking when this is difficult or undesirable; it evades prohibitions against speaking; it sidesteps the defensiveness generated by familiar communication; it captures experiences and phenomena too elusive for words. In this

literature, art is also imaged as a means by which we can inhabit others' worlds, to come to deeply appreciate and empathize with others and their situations. Art engages us in ways that are emotional and embodied as well as cognitive, enabling a complex, nuanced and empathic understanding and solidarity – especially vital in the face of the truncated knowing of positivist science and institutional imperative. Art is also offered as a way to break 'bad habits': to interrupt patterns of seeing and knowing defined by stereotype and prejudice, to bring us to consciousness about these habits, and to create the possibility for new ways of knowing and relating.

While many of the metaphors we identified in the 'getting it out' section can be found in other literatures and conversations – in relation to arts-informed research in non-social work contexts, for example – this metaphor appears to have particular traction in the social work literature. We might imagine that 'interior' troubles and aspirations, carried outside the individual or social body by art, become more tangibly available for social work and social workers. Outside the body, troubles and aspirations can be worked on and with, can be transformed by social workers in a range of ways (healing, solving, reframing, politicizing, advocating, mobilizing etc).

Also significant in this section are ideas about directness. The idea that usual communication deals too 'directly' carries temporal as well as spatial meanings (it is too fast, it is too 'in your face'). In some cases the particular contribution of art to social work appears related to this capacity to modulate (in ways usual social work does not, or not as effectively) the nature and pace of people's engagement with emotional or social troubles. This theme is echoed in the 'inhabiting' metaphor, in that inhabiting carries the idea of slowing down, spending time, looking around more carefully. As well, in Furman's analysis, the potential of poetry to counter stereotypes lies in 'slowing down the interpretive process' (Furman, Coyne et al., 2008: 76). At a historical moment when brief therapy and speedy people processing are increasingly demanded of social work, the relationship between arts-informed projects and more nuanced pacing merits further attention. The 'breaking habits' metaphor evokes a more 'direct' and decisive undoing of dominant images, and indeed some of the work in this genre relies on a certain shocking of sensibilities, a demand that audiences 'see differently.' Yet habits are broken in many ways: against the 'already known,' there is also transformative (habit-breaking) power in the vivid apprehension of different, and more just, possibilities.

One of the ways we might have sorted the literature on arts-informed social work is by its broad social purposes, and its epistemological proclivities. Alan Radley (2009) distinguishes between an aesthetics of activism and an aesthetics of witness. In an activist frame, artworks 'are aimed at repositioning individuals and groups.' The art of compassion (the aesthetics of witness) has a different goal: that of 'creating presence, touching the reader or viewer in the flesh' (p. 83) and establishing what Radley calls 'co-suffering.' The art of activism is shaped by 'politics, the testing or the movement of boundaries between groups' (p. 81); the art of witness 'is associated with a dissolving of boundaries between individuals' (p. 82).

It is possible to see the organization of metaphors in this article (getting stuff out; inhabiting; breaking habits) as conforming, very broadly, to therapeutic; empathic/interpretive (Radley's 'art of witness'); and emancipatory/critical (Radley's 'art of activism') paradigms. Yet to assert this framework too strongly would be to obscure the range of positions taken by writers drawing on each metaphor. For example, the forces arrayed against expression – the forces art counters in this literature – are sometimes imaged as social and political, externally imposed rather than internal or individual/psychological. 'Getting it out' is primarily linked with healing, but it is also linked with the articulation of power relations, and the movement of issues perceived as personal into a more public and politicized space. This is perhaps most obvious in the work of social work scholars like Spratt (2000) and Smith (2008) who explicitly link their use of art to Freire's (1972) pedagogical tradition. Those of us especially interested in the ways art supports social work's commitments to social justice would do well, then, to draw from scholars across all three of the metaphor clusters we offer in this article, as there are activist impulses in each (Sinding and Barnes, Unpublished manuscript).

Finally, and more generally, each of the metaphors discussed in this article contains a theory about what clients/learners/communities 'need,' the intervention that will make a positive difference (emotionally, or in educational or socio-political terms). Each metaphor also contains a theory about how art meets needs or accomplishes change. A heightened appreciation for the metaphors that surround the use of art in social work allows us a better sense of the range and nature of our beliefs about the effects of art. It also allows us to be more alert to the needs-meeting and change-making processes that our use of art assumes but often does not make explicit.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to participants at the workshop *Social Work Beyond Borders, Social Work Artfully* for conversations that deepened the ideas in this manuscript, and to two anonymous reviewers for useful comments. The workshop *Social Work Beyond Borders, Social Work Artfully* was held at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa, and was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Note

1. The authors of this article are not social workers, nor was it published in a social work journal. We include the article because it is one of the very few that focus on the relation between art and policy change, and specify a particular way art 'works' to bring about more robust policy conversations.

References

- Alvesson M (2010) Self-doubters, strugglers, storytellers, surfers and others: Images of self-identities in organization studies. *Human Relations* 63(2): 193–217.

- Bordelon TD (2006) A poem to memorialize an experiential focal group. *Clinical Social Work Journal* 34(3): 373–385.
- Buino S and Simon SR (2011) Musical interventions in group work with chemically dependent populations. *Social Work With Groups* 34(3–4): 283–295.
- Chambon A (2007) Art works: Between social critique and active re-enchantment. In: Witkin S and Saleebey D (eds) *Social Work Dialogues: Transforming the Canon in Inquiry, Practice, and Education*. Alexandria, VA: Council on Social Work Education Inc.
- Chambon A (2008) Social work and the arts: Critical imagination. In: Knowles JG and Cole A (eds) *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 591–602.
- Coholic D, Lougheed S and Lebreton J (2009) The helpfulness of holistic arts-based group work with children living in foster care. *Social Work With Groups* 32(1–2): 29–46.
- Cole EM and Valentine DP (2000) Multiethnic children portrayed in children's picture books. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal* 17(4): 305–317.
- Cox SM, Kazubowski-Houston M and Nisker J (2009) Genetics on stage: Public engagement in health policy development on preimplantation genetic diagnosis. *Social Science & Medicine* 68(8): 1472–1480.
- Craig RW (2007) A day in the life of a hospital social worker. *Qualitative Social Work* 6(4): 431–446.
- DeCarlo A and Hockman E (2004) RAP therapy: A group work intervention method for urban adolescents. *Social Work With Groups* 26(3): 45–59.
- Fraser N (1998) From redistribution to recognition? Dilemmas of justice in a 'post-socialist' age. In: Willet C (ed.) *Theorizing Multiculturalism: A Guide to the Current Debate*. Blackwell Publishers, pp. 19–49.
- Fudge Schormans A (2010) Epilogues and prefaces: Research and social work and people with intellectual disabilities. *Australian Social Work* 63(1): 51–66.
- Fudge Schormans A (2011) *The Right or Responsibility of Inspection: Social Work, Photography, and People with Intellectual Disabilities*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada.
- Furman R, Coyne A and Negi NJ (2008) An international experience for social work students: Self-reflection through poetry and journal writing exercises. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work* 28(1–2): 71–85.
- Furman R, Downey EP, Jackson RL and Bender K (2008) Poetry therapy as a tool for strengths-based practice. *Advances in Social Work* 3(2): 146–157.
- Glesne C (1999) Improvising a song of the world: Language and representation. *Becoming Qualitative Researchers*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Goldstein H (1998) Education for ethical dilemmas in social work practice. *Families in Society* 79: 241–253.
- Gorham LJ (1995) Dance therapy and self psychology. *Clinical Social Work Journal* 23(3): 361–373.
- Grassau P (2009) Resilience and 'turning it out': How the arts engage with relational and structural aspects of oppression. *Canadian Social Work Review* 26(2): 249–265.
- Gunaratnam Y (2007) Where is the love? Art, aesthetics and research. *Journal of Social Work Practice* 21(3): 271–287.
- Houlding S and Holland P (1988) Contributions of a poetry writing group to the treatment of severely disturbed psychiatric inpatients. *Clinical Social Work Journal* 16(2): 194–200.

- Huff D (1998) Every picture tells a story. *Social Work* 43(6): 576–583.
- Lakoff G and Johnson M (1980) *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Lefevre M (2004) Playing with sound: The therapeutic use of music in direct work with children. *Child & Family Social Work* 9(4): 333–345.
- Martinez-Brawley E and Mendez-Bonito Zorita P (1998) At the edge of the frame: Beyond science and art in social work. *British Journal of Social Work* 28: 197–212.
- Mazza N (2009) The arts and family social work: A call for advancing practice, research, and education. *Journal of Family Social Work* 12(1): 3–8.
- McFerran-Skewes K (2005) Using songs with groups of teenagers: How does it work? *Social Work With Groups* 27(2): 143–157.
- Moffatt KJ (2001) *A Poetics of Social Work: Personal Agency and Social Transformation in Canada, 1920–1939*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Nickson A, Dunstan J, Esperanza D and Barker S (2011) Indigenous practice approaches to women, violence, and healing using community development: A partnership between indigenous and non-indigenous workers. *Australian Social Work* 64(1): 84–95.
- Nisker J (2010) Theatre and research in the reproductive sciences. *Journal of Medical Humanities* 31(1): 81–90.
- Patterson FM (2004) Motivating students to work with elders. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work* 24(3–4): 165–181.
- Phillips C and Bellinger A (2011) Feeling the cut: Exploring the use of photography in social work education. *Qualitative Social Work* 10(1): 86–105.
- Radley A (2009) *Works of Illness: Narrative, Picturing and the Social Response to Serious Disease*. London, UK: InkerMen Press.
- Recollet D, Coholic D, Cote-Meek S and Sudbury O (2009) Holistic arts-based group methods with aboriginal women. *Critical Social Work* 10(1).
- Reiter B (2009) Fighting exclusion with culture and art examples from Brazil. *International Social Work* 52(2): 155–166.
- Sakamoto I, Chin M and Young M (2010) ‘Canadian Experience,’ employment challenges, and skilled immigrants: A close look through ‘tacit knowledge. *Canadian Social Work Journal* 10(1): 145–151.
- Schnekenburger E (2006) Waking the heart up: A writing group’s story. *Social Work With Groups* 28(3–4): 149–171.
- Seligson LV (2004) Beyond technique: Performance and the art of social work practice. *Families in Society* 85(4): 531–537.
- Sinding C and Barnes H (Unpublished manuscript) How art works: Hopes, claims and possibilities for social justice. In: Sinding C and Barnes H (eds) *Social Work Beyond Borders, Social Work Artfully* (working title).
- Smith L (2008) South African social work education: Critical imperatives for social change in the post-apartheid and post-colonial context. *International Social Work* 51(3): 371–383.
- Smith L and Nathane-Taulela M (2011) *Social Work Education: Art Toward Student Conscientization in the Post-Apartheid and Post-Colonial Context*. Paper presented at the Social Work Beyond Borders, Social Work Artfully workshop, Johannesburg, South Africa.
- Spratt T, Houston S and Magill T (2000) Imaging the future: Theatre and change within the child protection system. *Child and Family Social Work* 5(2): 117–128.

- Tilly N and Caye J (2005) Using writing and poetry to achieve focus and depth in a group of women parenting sexually abused children. *Social Work With Groups* 27(2–3): 129–142.
- Torre E (1990) Drama as a consciousness-raising strategy for the self-empowerment of working women. *Affilia* 5(1): 49–65.
- Walter UM (2006) *Into the Third Space: Social Work as Improvised Performance*. Dissertation, University of Kansas.
- Webb N (2003) Play and expressive therapies to help bereaved children: Individual, family, and group treatment. *Smith College Studies in Social Work* 73(3): 405–422.
- Westerling M and Karvinen-Niinikoski S (2010) Theatre enriching social work with immigrants – the case of a Finnish multicultural theatre group. *European Journal of Social Work* 13(2): 261–270.
- Wulff D, George SS, Faul AC, Frey A and Frey S (2010) Drama in the Academy. *Qualitative Social Work* 9(1): 111–127.