CHAPTER 5
“BEING A COLLAGIST”

This chapter describes the “being a collagist” results of the situation analysis’ phenomenological research component. The first part of the chapter describes the research participants’ experiences of the collage-making process *per se*. The second part describes the actual process of collage-making that the research participants followed in this project. Lastly, I provide a number of researcher remarks regarding the use of collages in research and counselling contexts.

5.1 THE EXPERIENCE OF CREATING A COLLAGE AS A NARRATIVE-FACILITATOR

The research participants reported some initial expectations and reservations regarding the collage-making process (see 5.1.1) that were later displaced by specific positive and negative experiences after having engaged in the phenomenological interview (see 5.1.2).

5.1.1 Initial expectations

The research participants had different initial expectations of what the collage-making process would involve at the onset of the research project. On the one hand, Shirley was reluctant because it meant she would have had to cognitively and emotionally revisit the suicide events, something that she hadn’t done since the suicide events: “I don’t want to face it, that’s why I didn’t want to do this at first ... I thought ‘I don’t want to go back their again’”. Also, she expected (hoped?) it to be a *mechanical process* that wouldn’t elicit intense emotions: “I was alone in my room and I cried ... I didn’t expect that, I was just thinking I’m gonna stick up papers and ... it wasn’t like that”. On the other hand, Annie was eager to express her experiences and emotions in a creative manner: “... I was so eager to do it ... it was if I could exactly remember that thoughts and things ... I just wanted to express it”.

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5.1.2 Ultimate experience

The research participants reported a variety of experiences during and after completing the collage-making process. Some of these experiences were positive, while others were negative. They also reported a number of experiences regarding the ability of the collage-making process to elicit intense memories and emotions.

The most salient positive experiences of the collage-making process involved the following aspects:

- It facilitated and challenged the participants to discover new insights regarding their personal experiences and personhood. As a result, it ultimately contributed to their personal sense of self-pride and self-regard. This indicates that the research project did not just “take” from the participant, but also “contributed” to their personal growth and development. The following quotations illustrate this experience:

  Shirley: “[I learned that] I’m not that weak after all because I didn’t think I was going to be able to do this. I didn’t think I was going to be able to do any of this. But I did ... I’m quite proud of myself ... you have to go through things that you’re not willing to go through again. I didn’t think I’d be able to, but here I am.”

  Megan: “There were stuff that I expressed here that I haven’t thought about ... the picture of the naked girl [Figure 4.4, P6] ... what came out strongly for me was that I hadn’t realised how vulnerable I am ... things can hurt me even if I’m very strong ...”.

  Annie: “[to be part of the research project] was as if I made a positive turn on myself, as if I followed the positive way”.

- It facilitated the healing process. This experience is evident in the following quotations:

  Shirley: “... when I was doing it, I accepted it ... I don’t think I’d never accepted this whole thing before ... OK, he did this, I went through that ... it has happened ... I felt so much better because I had to face up to this whole thing”.

  Maria: “... just talking to somebody about [the collage] ... it was like ‘Wow, this makes sense’ ... it makes you accept it a bit more ... it really did something”.
Megan: “... this collage helped me to better understand how I feel about the situation ... it was very enjoyable ...”.
Annie: “It was good to draw it, just to deal with it ... one also feels better ... it was a very good way to deal with it ...”.

The following are the most important **negative experiences** regarding the collage-making process:

- A collage can only **partially express survivors’ experiences** and emotions. This was described as follows by the research participants:
  - Shirley: “I had this picture in my brain; this is not it, but is what I could come up with”.
  - Megan: “… it is very difficult to make a collage, to express yourself ...”.
  - Annie: “It was so difficult for me to represent people’s emotions ... I tried my best, so now I’m satisfied, but ...”.

- Some of participants were slightly **disappointed in not having enough space on the collage paper** to add more pictures. This forced them to only represent a selection of their many experience aspects on the collage. The following quotations illustrate this experience:
  - Ilze: “… when I got to the end there was still so many things I would have liked to put on”.
  - Megan: “[during the collage-making] I didn’t know what to put on because there was so many”.

The participants’ ultimate experiences regarding the ability of the process to **elicit and express intense memories and emotions** were the following:

- It served as a **stimulus to recall fine detail** regarding their experiences. The following quotations describe this aspect:
  - Ilze: “… actually it helped a lot ... I again remembered everything, the small things I had forgotten”.
  - Shirley: “… when I did this, I remembered every thing ... I had to go back there and try to find everything ... it brought back a lot of memories, painful ...”.


- It elicited vivid memories that were experienced in the here-and-now. This is an indication of the collage-making process’ effectivity to elicit memories of the traumatic events and emotional experiences; something that might not have been the case with an exclusively verbal narrative approach. The vividness of the participants’ memories are clearly evident in the following quotations:

Shirley: “... when it came back, it was just happening then ... it felt like the thing was happening now ...”.

Maria: “... this picture [Figure 4.3, P8], the burning picture, it really got to me ... it was just too much ... I put myself in a position what she was feeling, what she went through just before ... she shot herself ... that burnt me a lot”.

Megan: “It was hard to draw that picture [Figure 4.4, P1] ... at one stage while I was busy drawing, I started to cry because that childlike unconditional hurt came out again”.

- It provided an opportunity for creative and controlled expression of emotions and experiences. Opportunities for artistic expression allow us to come to terms with what is real within ourselves, especially emotional pain, and what resonate with our inner truths (Perschy, 1997:87). For Ilze, “It was a way to express emotions”, while Megan described it as “... ‘A picture tells a thousand words’ ... the collage could tell more than what I could”.

- It facilitated an uninhibited, outward expression of intense emotions, in some cases for the first time since the victim’s funeral. Shirley described it as follows: “When I was doing this collage thing ... I cried ... the last time I cried was my brother’s funeral ... when I made the collage ... everything came back and I didn’t expect that ...”.

- It provided a way to express previously unverbalised, complex and abstract experiences in a concrete way. Many survivors of traumatic events find it easier to express some memories in pictures or drawings than to express it words (Lefler Brunick, 1999:16). In Megan’s words “Previously I merely talked and talked to psychologists, but we didn’t do anything concrete ... this collage made me understand better how I felt about the whole situation ... it is very important to do something physically ...”.
5.2 THE COLLAGE-MAKING PROCESS

The actual process of collage-making that the research participants followed can be divided into two aspects: Creating the collage, and collage composition and layout.

5.2.1 Creating the collage

In some cases the actual collage-making process started with a conscious planning stage. One of the research participants reported that she had intentionally constructed a mental picture of what the collage should look like before engaging in the physical collage-making session: “I couldn’t find the right words that I wanted ... I had this picture in my brain ... this is not it, but is what I could come up with”.

The process of picture selection from magazines involved different approaches and inclinations:

- Some of the participants merely paged through different magazines with an open mind. This allowed for certain pictures to immediately appeal to them with regards to its applicability in representing specific emotions and experiences. For Ilze, “It was easy, I saw pictures and knew precisely where it fits into my life”, while for Megan “I paged through a magazine and merely looked at the pictures ... I used those that spoke to me ...”.

- In contrast to the previous “picture selection” approach, some of the other research participants reported that they searched through a whole lot of magazines without finding any appropriate pictures. The available pictures just didn’t adequately represent their unique lived experiences. Shirley described it as follows: “I tried looking in the magazines and nothing could explain what I was feeling inside ... I had a whole lot of magazines, but nothing had what I needed ... I couldn’t find the right picture because what I was feeling was so different from the picture”.

- In some cases the visual content of the selected pictures or drawings illustrated situations that were not factually identical to the participants’ lived experiences or the actual suicide events. These pictures were selected to represent specific lived
experiences and emotions rather than visually reflect the “correct” situation. This is illustrated by the following quotations: “[Figure 4.5, P13] ... this is how I see her pain ... she was actually on a bed ... but I tried to show her pain by putting her in the room’s corner” and “… here is the shooting [Figure 4.5, P1], but the guy didn’t shot himself in that position ... I had shown the pain that such a person must have had …”.

Some of the research participants reported that the collage-making process took a relatively long time to complete. During the process they took some time to reflect on each of the experiences that they wanted to represent on the collage. A collage picture was only added after considering its adequacy, meaning and representativeness. In Annie’s words: “… it took me a long time because I started as I felt ... then I stopped and thought about it ... then I will get a picture that describes how I feel ... then I will start with the next drawing ... every piece was eventually fit in …”.

5.2.2 Collage composition and layout

The instructions to the research participants at the onset of their participation in the project inter alia stated that “The collage may include anything you like - some examples include the following: personal photos, magazine pictures, drawings, written words or poems”. A visual examination regarding the concrete characteristics of all the participants’ collages yielded the following composition and layout aspects:

- There was no clear preference for either a “landscape” or “portrait” page orientation.
- The number of pictures per collage varies between five and 32 pictures.
- Most of the participants predominantly included magazine images on their collages, while some included drawings and/or painted images to a greater or lesser extend (see Figures 4.4 and 4.5). One participant drew a child-like “stick figure” sketch to represent the friendship characteristics of the relationship she’d had with the suicide victim (Figure 4.4, P1). Barry (1996:426) offers the following remark regarding such artistic expressions: “Working with media familiar in childhood can call up old memories and patterns that might be influencing current behaviour”.
- In one case the collage images cover **100% of the available space** on the collage (Figure 4.5), while in other cases relatively large areas were left open between the images (Figure 4.4).

- In some cases the **sequencing of collage images** were indicated by arrows. This corresponded with the sequencing of narrative themes during the interview (Figures 4.1 and 4.2). In other cases, no sequencing of collage images were indicated. In these cases the collage images from different areas on the collage corresponded with the sequencing of the narrative themes during the interview (Figure 4.5).

- On some collages there are no **overlap between the images** (Figure 4.3), while on others there are a lot of overlap with no clear boundaries between the images (Figure 4.5).

- One participant changed the visual features on some of magazine pictures with a pen to better represent her specific lived experiences (Figure 4.1, P12, P16 & P20).

- Certain areas of some images were framed by one research participant to direct the viewer’s focus onto specific negative emotional experiences (Figure 4.5, P14 & P15).

- The concrete **image content** in all the collages is dominated by pictures that contain **people**.

- The actual **suicide agent** employed by the various suicide victims is represented by explicit images on most of the collages: Pills (Figure 4.1, P1; Figure 4.4, P7; Figure 4.5, P13); hanging (Figure 4.2, P3); and shooting (Figure 4.5, P1).

- Specific **colours** were explicitly used by some of the research participants to express particular emotions and experiences. Annie explained her use of colour as follows: “... I used colour to express some of my emotions ... the darkness of the window ... the uncertainty and darkness ... the hate for Christianity ... I blamed God (Figure 4.5, P17)”; “... I wanted the eyes to be more shiny and blue as if someone started to cry (Figure 4.5, P14)” and “[the frame] and the question mark is just black ... everything felt so black and dark ... (Figure 4.5, P4)”.

- A varying **number of words** appeared on all the collages. In some cases the participants used **magazine images of single words** (Figure 4.2), while in others they used **self-written words** and/or sentences (Figure 4.1). In one case (Figure 4.1) written words were used to “frame” and/or provide comments on specific images.
- One collage contained a **self-written poem** (Figure 4.3), while a centrally-located, written **quote of the suicide victim’s last words** to the collagist appeared in another collage (Figure 4.4).

- The arrangement of the collage images and words according to the **lived mood** that it represented for the research participants followed the following patterns: 1) Predominantly “negative” images and words (Figure 4.1); 2) Mostly “negative” images and words with a few “positive” images (Figure 4.2); 3) “Positive” images and words predominantly grouped on one side with the “negative” images and words predominantly grouped on the other side of the collage (Figure 4.3); 4) “Positive” and “negative” images and words distributed across the collage without any clear grouping (Figures 4.4 and 4.5).

### 5.3 RESEARCHER’S NOTES REGARDING THE USE OF COLLAGES AS A RESEARCH AND/OR COUNSELLING INSTRUMENT

In this last section I want to offer a number of researcher remarks and/or recommendations regarding the use of collages in qualitative research and counselling contexts:

- A context in which collagists are given a **free choice** regarding the **collage-making process and collage image media** (for example magazine pictures, sketches and written words), provide them with an opportunity to express personal experiences that would have been reluctantly offered in talk-only contexts.

- Each collage image serves as a **memory trigger** that assists the collagist to recall and relive specific lived experiences. In a sense, each image “transfers” the collagist back to the emotions, thoughts and events of specific experiences. The implication is that a self-created collage can serve as a powerful recall instrument. This has obvious ethical implications in the research context - elicitation of traumatic memories require therapeutic care and aftercare for the research participants.

- Collage images can serve a “**representation**” function of specific experiences - the collagist has intentionally chosen an images to represent specific events, thoughts, emotions or lived experiences. However, some of the collage images can also perform a “**stimulus**” function - collagists’ reflection on and talking about specific collage
images may elicit new insights regarding their lived experiences and personal characteristics.

- Specific collage images can represent more than one lived experience - an indication of “multiple realities”. The different experiences represented by such an image may be very different from each other. The following example from Megan’s collage (Figure 4.4) illustrate this phenomenon. On the one hand, she used Picture 2 to describe the physical differences between herself and the suicide victim: “I put it there because we were very different, in looks, in ideas, in everything”. On the other hand, the same picture was used to describe her personal inclination to adopt a motherly care attitude: “I always looked out for him ... I hovered above to see what he was doing ... to sweep down and lift him up again”. The implication is that a researcher or counsellor’s qualitative analysis of collage images should always be accompanied by the collagist’s narrative in order to prevent misinterpretation. The meaning of an image is not located in its concrete visual characteristics, but in the collagist’s lived experiences associated and stimulated by it. Thus, a collage should be viewed and interpreted from the collagist’s perspective. The experiences and meanings associated with the different collage images are experiences-and-meanings-for-the-collagist.

- Collages can be utilised as an important element in the healing process of traumatised individuals. The collage creation process and a completed collage can serve as experiential instruments that facilitate the realisation, acceptance and insight into painful experiences and memories. Also, it can serve as an instrument that facilitates the discovery and realisation of personal strengths.

- The collage-making process has some important limitations: 1) A finite number of themes and experiences can be represented on a collage due to spatial limitations; and 2) Collage images have a limited ability to adequately represent and express the collagist’s lived experiences. The implication is that researchers and/or counsellors need to recognise that a specific individual’s collage can only offer a partial expression and representation of their lived experiences. As a result, some collagists may experience a degree of frustration in the process. This may have a detrimental, rather than facilitatory, effect on their trauma narratives. Thus, the decision to include collages in any research or counselling context needs to be a well thought-through one.
This brings me to the end of the two chapters that describe the results of the situation analysis stage in terms of the research participants’ experiences of being an adolescent suicide survivor and being a collagist. The next chapter will address the second stage of psycho-educational programme development, namely the actual programme development stage.