

Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

Art as a Speech Act for Marginalized Bedouin Women

**Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
Of the requirements for the degree of
"DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

BY

Ephrat Huss

This research was funded by The Robert H. Arnow Center for Bedouin Studies & Development, at the Ben Gurion University, Be'er-Sheva.

This paper was published in 2005 under the title: *Researching Creations: Applying Arts-Based Research to Bedouin Women's Drawings*, in the *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 4.

This paper was also published in 2007 under the title: *Symbolic Spaces: Marginalized Bedouin Women's Art as Self-Expression*, in the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*.

**This research was enabled by a grant from the center for Bedouin
Studies; Ben- Gurion University:**

“Art helps take down barriers, in that the use of the imagination is the ability to put oneself in another’s place...in this sense, art is moral, because empathy is the ultimate morality” (Dewey 1934, p.10).

In memory of Dr. Tanya Forte, who gave encouragement to this project in it's initial stages.

Thanks to the Center for the Research of the Bedouin Community : Ben Gurion University, for their grant that enabled this research

Thanks to my supervisor, Julie Cwikel, who had the imagination, empathy, and perseverance to guide me in this challenge.

And to my family, Boaz, Michal, Merav, and Eyal, for everything.

ABSTRACT

Researchers working in the Bedouin community have yet to give voice to the experiences of impoverished Bedouin women as subjects rather than as objects of research. The research that exists about Bedouin women tends to describe middle class educated Bedouin women, or to address social and cultural issues along predetermined issues, rather than the women's understanding of their own behaviors within their own cultural context. This lack of research about the experience of marginalized Bedouin women is partly due to the difficulty in accessing impoverished or culturally diverse women and trying to articulate their voices through Westernized verbal methods (Mernissi, 2003; Lawler 2002; Bowler 1997). Phenomenological research methods such as arts-based research are one way to overcome this. The use of arts-based research enables women to both express and interpret their own reality in a way that moves beyond verbal abstractions. This process is also considered integrative or empowering for the participants (Betinsky, 1995; Eisner, 1997; Barone, 2003; Moon, 2002).

This research demonstrates that the place where these 'speech acts' can be heard is not in historical, academic and political writings (that are male dominated), but in the areas of symbolic self expression where resistance is removed from reality, and thus does not threaten the central male discourse (Spivak 1987, pp. 197-219, 241-268). The above concerns have created a dual focus for this research:

One focus of this research is capturing the history of the rapid transition to modernity that the Bedouin culture as a whole is undergoing from the standpoint of marginalized women. Another focus is the theoretical challenge of finding a form of analysis that relates both to the arts as an inherent expression of self (according to humanistic and arts-based paradigms), and also to art as a culturally embedded expression of self in context (according to critical theories).

Methods:

The case studies presented in this dissertation use a multiple case study design (Patton, 1987) of groups jointly run and organized by the Department of Welfare Services and private franchises for impoverished Bedouin women. The groups were

led by the principal researcher and an Arabic speaking social worker who had learned art skills in an MA degree program and who had extensive social work experience in the field with Bedouin women's groups. In an effort to access the concerns and 'natural' meeting places of the women, the art sessions were conducted within part of pre-existing Bedouin women's groups and were customized to meet each group's needs as defined by the women. The research analyzes three groups that were conducted for four sessions of an hour and half each. Each meeting included a period of art making, in which there was no directed subject, unless requested, and a period of explaining and discussing the art works as a group. The group leaders utilized interventions such as clarification, and reflection, rather than re-framing, interpreting, or confrontation, as the art was defined as a form of self expression for the women, rather than as a therapeutic intervention.

The first analysis of each separate case was based on understanding the art product according to the women's own explanation, but within the context of its creation. A conscious effort was made to discard a psychological meta-theory. Three levels of analysis were used with each case study. Firstly, the women's interactions with the art in a personal context were analyzed, secondly, the women's interactions with the art in a group context, and thirdly, the women's interactions with the art in the context of the non Bedouin, Israeli culture.

The second data analysis is integrative across the three case studies, summarizing separately the three levels, individual, group and society.

Results:

The results show how on the first level of reflective content, the subjects that the women drew and talked about were relationships with children, husbands, extended family, within the context of shifting cultural norms that demands re-negotiations. Another area was relationships with Arab and Jewish men and with Arab and Jewish middle class women, within the context of poverty, and of the search for ways of resisting or of utilizing these dominant forces to fulfill their own needs. Another area was the wish for entry into Westernized life-styles (such as having a separate house, being able to study, to drive and to travel, to wear Westernized clothes) from a standpoint of exclusion due to the intersection of poverty and of cultural limitations.

However, this research taught that the above content was not complete when distilled from the context of the art forms used to describe them. The contents follow the literature on the Bedouin transition, but the art forms used reveal the 'lived experience' of these transitions from the position of female marginalization. The women show their constant struggle to overcome these difficulties. In short, the art forms together with their explanation, captured and effectively conveyed to the observer, their inability as impoverished women to utilize the 'gaps' that modernization opens up for middle class women. This flooding of conflicting wishes, beliefs, and experiences creates a constant duality and ambivalence. Others were experienced as both oppressors and protectors, and their experience of self was as strong and as weak, fighting and overwhelmed. The women's art work and explanations convey the emotional pain of economic and social lacks, together with a constant wish for, and struggle towards achieving physical necessities such as houses, cars, food and toys for children, and emotional necessities such as companionship, enrichment through study, travel, and conflict free relationships with children and with husbands. They expressed ambivalent identifications with either traditional or Western values, confusion as to how to reach what they wish for, together with manifestations of struggles, and resistance against their limitations. This use of the arts to tell what is hard to capture in words, but that constitutes the 'experience' of the women, added an additional element to the women's narrative, that is particularly important for women in a marginalized position. The findings constitute the basis for a theoretical model for using and analyzing the arts as communication from a multi-disciplined perspective that analyzes both subjective and contextualized elements of art.

The second analysis of the group interaction around the art, stressed the emotional emphatic level of identification aroused by the projection of emotion into the art. This revealed their experience of isolation and marginalization and allowed the expression of emotion in a culturally compatible yet indirect way. This moves beyond ventilation of emotion to become a cognitive trigger and a basis for re-framing and re-constructing knowledge (Friere, 1987; Belinsky 1986). For example, the women themselves defined their needs as first and foremost, to acquire suitable housing, but also transportation and mobility, ways to be mobile, to get out of the house, and to fill the time in the house with new contents. The women need spaces to re-define new

social avenues for self expression and communication, rather than learning Western skills. The second outcome of this research was a theoretical basis for using art within a group as a phenomenological tool for marginalized women undergoing cultural transition, to create both an empathy base and a narrative form able to contain and to resist both the complexity of living within two cultures, and the need to fight dominant elements in both cultures, as a pre-requisite to defining external aims and battles.

The third level of analysis of the context of the group leaders, symbolizing a culture or class external to the women in the group showed that the inclusion of art does not 'equalize' or rub out differences in power since it is itself part of those power structures. Similarly, reflexivity, the tool recommended to qualitative researchers and art therapists working with different cultures, did not provide a 'quick entry' into another and less dominant culture, as is often presented in the qualitative research and art therapy literature. In Foucault's terms, the power struggles and inter-reactions were not evaded through shifting to art, as they are embedded within the art activities.

A central conclusion of this research is that the use of art enabled a more flexible space for integrations and 'cease fires' between different elements of power, such as combining the researcher's Western and the women's Eastern crafts orientations, enacting a dialogue between weakness and strength, on an individual and on a group level, and creating both identification but also bringing out "subversive messages" from women from a different class and culture. The art page was an additional arena, or a third type of space, in which the above 'battles' were more flexible and new balances could be negotiated, tried out, or 'imagined' in a less direct and threatening manner. This can be described as an interaction between the researcher and the women, in which, for both sides, knowledge of the other is redefined through enriching learning experiences.

This produced the third theoretical outcome, which is how the arts create a 'transitional space' for the meeting between two cultures that is externalized, and enables the examining of different concepts, and of conflicts between cultures to move into a more neutral space.

Conclusions:

The analysis of both power and culture differences and the creation of analytical tools for understanding and for `hearing`, these symbolic and creative `voices` of marginalized women have direct and important contributions for the disciplines of art therapy and of social work, in practice and in research methods, particularly valuable when working with impoverished and marginalized women.

Key Words

Bedouin women; Marginalized women; Inter-cultural communication; Arts based research.