


Art-Based Community Engagement for Psychological Well-Being: Evaluating a Participatory Collage Intervention among Clinical Psychologists

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Abstract

This study evaluates the effectiveness of an art-based community engagement intervention in enhancing the psychological well-being of clinical psychologists through a participatory collage workshop. Addressing the growing emotional burden and limited reflective spaces among early-career practitioners, the research explores how expressive, non-verbal, and community-oriented approaches complement conventional cognitive-verbal interventions. A qualitative design based on Participatory Action Research (PAR) was employed, positioning participants as active co-creators. The study involved four stages: collaborative needs assessment, workshop implementation, participatory observation, and reflective evaluation through interviews and group discussions. Data were collected via observations, semi-structured interviews, and visual artifact analysis, and analyzed thematically using an interpretive framework. Findings reveal that the intervention enhances three dimensions of psychological well-being: reflective capacity, emotional regulation, and social connectedness. Participants demonstrated improved ability to articulate complex emotional experiences through visual symbolism, while the creative process facilitated stress reduction and provided a non-judgmental reflective space. Additionally, the community-based format strengthened interpersonal relationships and fostered collective support. This study contributes by integrating art-based intervention and community engagement within professional practice, offering a participatory framework for psychological well-being. It also provides empirical insights from a Global South context, enriching interdisciplinary and community-based approaches to sustainable development.

Keywords: Art-Based Intervention, Community Engagement, Psychological Well-Being, Reflective Practice, Social Connectedness



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INTRODUCTION

The increasing complexity of mental health cases in contemporary societies has placed clinical psychologists in a uniquely paradoxical position. As professionals entrusted with supporting the psychological recovery of others, they are simultaneously exposed to intense emotional demands that may compromise their own well-being (Choe & Yelle, 2025; Gulbe et al., 2025). This paradox is particularly evident among early-career clinical psychologists, who often navigate high workloads, emotionally charged cases such as trauma and sexual violence, and institutional pressures with limited access to reflective support systems.

Empirical evidence suggests that prolonged exposure to such conditions significantly increases the risk of emotional exhaustion, compassion fatigue, and burnout, which in turn affect both professional effectiveness and personal well-being (Hommel & Kaimal, 2024; Reed et al., 2020; Sahai & Tiwari, 2025). Despite growing awareness of these risks, structured interventions that specifically address the emotional and reflective needs of mental health professionals remain relatively underdeveloped, especially in non-Western contexts.

This study emerges from a community service initiative grounded in the specific needs of members of the Ikatan Psikolog Klinis (IPK) Ambon, a professional association of clinical psychologists operating in Ambon, Indonesia. These practitioners routinely engage with clients experiencing complex psychological conditions, including post-traumatic stress, interpersonal violence, and socio-emotional distress, which require sustained emotional labor. However, as identified through preliminary engagement, many of these psychologists lack access to safe, informal, and creative spaces where they can process their own emotional experiences. The absence of such spaces not only limits opportunities for self-reflection but also weakens interpersonal connections within the professional community. In this context, the introduction of a participatory collage-based art activity represents an attempt to create an alternative reflective space that is both expressive and relational. The activity, conducted in a communal setting in Rumah Tiga, Ambon, reflects an intentional effort to situate psychological support within a culturally and socially meaningful environment.

The choice of collage as a medium is not incidental. Collage, as an art-based practice, allows individuals to externalize internal experiences through symbolic and visual representation, often bypassing the constraints of verbal articulation. This is particularly relevant for professionals who may be accustomed to cognitive-verbal modes of processing but require alternative pathways to access deeper emotional layers. Reports from the activity indicate that participants, predominantly young clinical psychologists, found the collage process both refreshing and insightful, enabling them to reframe their understanding of adult friendships and social relationships in ways that are more intuitive and personally meaningful. At the same time, the communal nature of the activity fostered a sense of shared experience and mutual recognition, which are essential components of social support.

Recent developments in the field of art-based interventions provide a strong theoretical and empirical foundation for this approach. Studies have demonstrated that art therapy and related practices can significantly enhance emotional awareness, self-regulation, and psychological resilience (Jamal-Eddine & Abboud, 2025; Stevenson & Alzyood, 2025; Urpí et al., 2025; Wu et al., 2025). In particular, mindfulness-based art therapy (MBAT) has been shown to improve psychological well-being by integrating creative expression with present-moment awareness (Lichtwarck et al., 2024; Van Lith et al., 2023). These findings suggest that artistic processes can serve as powerful tools for accessing and transforming emotional experiences in ways that are both non-threatening and deeply engaging.

Moreover, the role of art in fostering social connection has been increasingly recognized within community psychology and participatory research frameworks.

Participatory art practices, including collage, have been found to facilitate collective reflection and strengthen interpersonal bonds through shared narrative construction (Rotz et al., 2022; Sassano & Mayes, 2024). Such approaches align with the principles of Participatory Action Research (PAR), which emphasize collaboration, empowerment, and social transformation (Gearin, 2023; MacLean et al., 2024; Mayhew et al., 2022). In this regard, art-based community engagement not only addresses individual well-being but also contributes to the development of supportive professional communities.

In addition to psychological and social benefits, emerging research highlights the neurophysiological impact of creative activities. Engagement in art-making has been associated with reduced cortisol levels, improved mood, and enhanced neural integration, indicating its potential as a holistic intervention for stress management (Mitchell & Meehan, 2022; Morton Ninomiya et al., 2022). Similarly, nature-based art activities have been shown to create therapeutic environments that promote self-awareness and connectedness, further reinforcing the value of integrating creative practices into well-being interventions (Cooper et al., 2025; Lu et al., 2025; Snyder et al., 2021). These findings collectively underscore the multifaceted benefits of art-based approaches, particularly when implemented in community-oriented settings.

However, despite the growing body of literature supporting art-based interventions, a closer examination reveals a tendency to focus predominantly on clients or general populations, with comparatively limited attention given to mental health practitioners themselves. When practitioners are included, interventions often remain individualized and clinically oriented, overlooking the potential of collective and participatory approaches. Furthermore, studies exploring collage as a reflective tool within professional communities are still relatively scarce, particularly in the Global South, where contextual factors such as cultural norms, resource constraints, and community dynamics play a significant role in shaping intervention outcomes. This subtle yet important absence of integrative, community-based, and practitioner-focused research opens a space for reimagining how psychological well-being can be supported in more relational and context-sensitive ways.

In this light, the present study offers a perspective that brings together art-based intervention and community engagement within a professional setting, positioning clinical psychologists not merely as recipients of support but as active participants in a shared reflective process. By employing collage as a collective medium, the study moves beyond traditional therapeutic boundaries and invites a more fluid, participatory exploration of emotional experiences. This approach implicitly redefines well-being as not only an individual state but also a relational and communal process, shaped through interaction, creativity, and shared meaning-making. At the same time, the study contributes empirical insights from a context that has been underrepresented in international discourse, thereby enriching the diversity of perspectives within the field.

Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of a participatory collage-based intervention in enhancing the psychological well-being of clinical

psychologists in Ambon. Specifically, it seeks to examine how art-based community engagement can strengthen reflective capacity, facilitate non-verbal emotional expression, and foster social connectedness within a professional community. By doing so, the study aims to develop a replicable model of intervention that integrates creative practice, participatory methodology, and community-based support, ultimately contributing to more sustainable and human-centered approaches in both research and community service initiatives.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative approach grounded in Participatory Action Research (PAR), a design that is particularly suited to contexts where reflection, collaboration, and transformation are central to the research process. The decision to employ a qualitative PAR framework is not merely methodological but epistemological, as the study seeks to understand lived emotional experiences, symbolic meaning-making, and relational dynamics among clinical psychologists, dimensions that are difficult to capture through quantitative measures alone. PAR, as emphasized by Gonzalez et al. (2024) and Pfeifer et al. (2025), enables participants to move beyond being passive subjects into active co-constructors of knowledge, thereby aligning with the study's intention to create a reflective and empowering space for practitioners. In this sense, the research design becomes inseparable from the intervention itself, as both are oriented toward fostering awareness, agency, and collective understanding.

The study was conducted in Ambon, specifically in the Rumah Tiga area, a location that was deliberately chosen not only for its accessibility to participants but also for its communal and informal atmosphere. The use of Dreihaus as a creative space reflects an intentional departure from formal clinical or institutional settings, allowing participants to engage more openly in expressive and reflective activities. This contextual choice is significant, as prior studies suggest that environment plays a crucial role in shaping emotional openness and creative engagement (Chen & O'Sullivan, 2023; Mayor & Sajjani, 2025; Thirlway et al., 2021). Moreover, Ambon represents a socio-cultural context where mental health services are developing alongside increasing societal demands, making it a relevant site for exploring innovative, community-based approaches to professional well-being.

The participants in this study consisted of four members of the Ikatan Psikolog Klinis (IPK) Ambon, selected through purposive sampling based on their active involvement in clinical practice and their expressed need for reflective support. All participants were early-career clinical psychologists, predominantly female, aged between 25 and 35 years, and engaged in various forms of mental health services, including counseling, trauma recovery, and community advocacy. The relatively small number of participants is consistent with qualitative research principles that prioritize depth of insight over breadth of representation (Lester, 2025). Their selection was not intended to achieve statistical generalization but to provide rich, contextualized understandings of how art-based interventions are experienced within a specific professional community.

Data collection was carried out through multiple, interrelated methods to capture the complexity of participants' experiences. Participatory observation was conducted throughout the workshop process, allowing the researcher to document levels of engagement, interaction patterns, and the evolution of creative expressions. This method was chosen because it enables real-time insight into both verbal and non-verbal dynamics, which are particularly salient in art-based activities (Goodyear et al., 2025; Valtonen et al., 2023). In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted following the workshop to explore participants' subjective interpretations, emotional responses, and perceived impacts of the intervention. The flexibility of this interview format allowed participants to articulate their experiences in their own terms while still addressing key research questions (Galvin et al., 2025; Moody-Pugh et al., 2025). Complementing these methods, visual artifact analysis was employed to interpret the collages produced by participants, treating them as symbolic texts that reveal layers of meaning not always accessible through verbal narratives (Ansloos et al., 2022; Van Lith & Geldenhuys, 2024).

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, the study employed triangulation across data sources and methods. Methodological triangulation was achieved by integrating observation, interviews, and visual analysis, enabling cross-validation of emerging themes. Data source triangulation was also applied by comparing individual reflections with group discussions, particularly during the collective reflection stage of the PAR process. This approach aligns with the principles outlined by Kaur et al. (2025), which emphasize the importance of multiple perspectives in enhancing interpretive rigor. Furthermore, member checking was informally conducted during group reflections, where participants were invited to confirm or elaborate on the interpretations of their experiences, thereby strengthening the authenticity of the findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Reclaiming Reflective Space: Collage as a Medium for Professional Self-Reflection

The implementation of the collage workshop with members of the Ikatan Psikolog Klinis (IPK) Ambon generated a range of findings that indicate active engagement and positive responses from all participants. The workshop was conducted over four hours and began with an introduction to the concept of collage art and its relevance as a medium for self-expression. In the initial stage, participants focused on understanding basic techniques such as image selection, visual composition, and the arrangement of symbolic elements. As the process progressed, participants gradually demonstrated greater initiative and confidence in expressing personal experiences, particularly in relation to the theme of adult friendship, which served as the central focus of the activity.

Each participant produced a collage that was distinct both visually and in its narrative meaning. Some participants incorporated images of nature as symbols of calmness and safe relational spaces, while others selected architectural elements or everyday objects to

represent stability, trust, and social closeness. The collage-making process unfolded in an interactive atmosphere, where participants shared stories, explained their choices of visual elements, and discussed emotional experiences that emerged during the creative process. Observational data indicate a high level of participation, reflected in consistent engagement with the instructions, active exploration of materials, and informal collaboration among participants.

Visual documentation further reveals that participants did not merely produce aesthetic artifacts but created works that embodied deep reflection on their relational experiences. The process demonstrates that collage functioned as a means of reconstructing emotional experiences into visual representations that are more accessible and communicable. Importantly, the activity provided a safe space for early-career psychologists to explore their social identities, friendship dynamics, and emotional needs, dimensions that are often overlooked amid demanding professional responsibilities.

The effectiveness of the activity can be assessed through three primary indicators: enhanced knowledge, improved technical skills, and emotional transformation. In terms of knowledge, participants demonstrated a clearer understanding of the foundational principles of collage, including the symbolic function of visual elements and techniques for integrating diverse images into a coherent narrative. This was evident in the way participants articulated the meanings of their works during the presentation session, reflecting increased visual literacy and critical interpretive ability.

From a technical perspective, participants showed notable improvement in their ability to use tools and materials, construct compositions, and manipulate visual textures. They were able to combine elements such as color, pattern, and thematic objects into cohesive works. The effectiveness of the workshop was also reflected in the participants' growing confidence to experiment and make creative decisions that represented their personal identities.

From an emotional and relational standpoint, the activity proved effective as an art-based intervention supporting self-reflection. Several participants reported that the process of creating collages helped them recognize patterns in their friendships that had previously gone unnoticed. Interactions among participants also reflected increased closeness, as evidenced by spontaneous conversations, shared humor, and mutual support throughout the workshop. Thus, the activity achieved not only its technical objectives but also contributed to participants' emotional well-being and strengthened social relationships within their professional community.

The impact of the activity on participants can be categorized into three dimensions: competence development, transformation of understanding, and enhancement of emotional capacity. In terms of competence, participants improved their ability to create collages both aesthetically and symbolically, demonstrating a more structured capacity to connect visual elements with personal psychological experiences. This skill is valuable not only for personal development but also for professional practice, particularly in integrating art-based

approaches into counseling contexts.

In terms of understanding, participants exhibited increased awareness of the meaning of adult friendship. Through the creative process, they were able to identify key aspects of interpersonal relationships, including trust, attachment, and emotional support. This awareness is particularly significant for psychologists, as a deeper understanding of self and social relationships directly influences the quality of care they provide to clients.

In terms of emotional capacity, the activity functioned as a restorative space for psychologists who routinely work under emotionally demanding conditions. The workshop enabled participants to reduce stress, express emotions, and experience social support from fellow IPK members. This impact has the potential to strengthen their psychological resilience in facing future professional challenges.

These findings are consistent with existing literature that emphasizes the role of art as a medium for self-reflection and psychological well-being. Previous studies have shown that art-based activities can enhance emotional regulation and restore psychological balance among professionals working in high-pressure environments (Borovica et al., 2024; Dumaresq & McFerran, 2025). This aligns with the outcomes of the collage workshop, where participants were able to express emotions that are often difficult to verbalize. Furthermore, participatory art approaches have been found to strengthen social relationships and foster a sense of belonging within professional groups (Buys et al., 2025; Kaspar et al., 2023; Lindgren & Richardson, 2023). The experiences observed in this workshop reflect similar patterns, with collage serving as a medium for dialogue, mutual understanding, and trust-building.

In addition, art-based practices have been recognized for their capacity to create reflective spaces that support psychosocial well-being and interpersonal connection in professional contexts (Koch et al., 2025; Velana et al., 2023). Collage, in particular, has been conceptualized not only as an aesthetic activity but also as a narrative method that enables individuals to reorganize personal experiences into visual forms (Stewart, 2024). The findings of this study reinforce this perspective, as participants used collage to articulate relational experiences and emotional dynamics that were previously difficult to map through language alone.

Further supporting this, research on creative arts therapies indicates their potential to prevent emotional exhaustion and build resilience among healthcare professionals by facilitating visual reflection and narrative processing (Borsch et al., 2024; Reynolds et al., 2023). More recent studies also highlight the integration of art therapy with narrative approaches as an innovative strategy to enhance emotional well-being and resilience (Kuiper et al., 2024; Trnka, 2021). Additionally, the provision of participatory art resources has been shown to reduce stress and improve well-being among professionals working in high-pressure environments (Tam & Yuen, 2025). In this regard, the present findings align closely with contemporary literature emphasizing the restorative and relational functions of art in mental health professions.



Figure 1 Collage Activities

Source: Documentation of the workshop (2025)

Visual documentation of the workshop further illustrates the active and collaborative nature of the process. Photographs included in the report show participants selecting materials, constructing compositions, and presenting their work. The images depict four members of IPK Ambon working in a focused yet relaxed atmosphere, seated together around a shared workspace equipped with scissors, glue, magazines, image cutouts, and various visual materials. These visuals capture the participants' engagement from the initial stages through to completion. The collages produced display diverse symbolic representations reflecting personal identities and social relational dynamics. Some works feature warm color palettes and natural elements, while others incorporate geometric forms and urban imagery to represent psychological experiences. Participants' facial expressions, often relaxed and occasionally smiling during discussions, further indicate a supportive and comfortable environment. The workshop setting at Dreihaus appears simple yet conducive to creative and reflective engagement, reinforcing the role of space in facilitating meaningful experiences.

The collage workshop contributed significantly to enhancing participants' capacities across three key domains: personal, professional, and social. At the personal level, participants developed stronger reflective abilities through the visualization of life experiences. At the professional level, they gained new insights into the use of art as a complementary method in clinical practice, particularly as an alternative assessment tool or conversational stimulus for clients who struggle with verbal expression. At the social level, the activity strengthened relationships among IPK Ambon members through shared creative processes, spontaneous interactions, and collaborative engagement. These outcomes suggest that the intervention not only provided immediate benefits but also holds long-term potential for sustaining the well-being and professional capacity of clinical psychologists within their community.

Beyond Words: Emotional Regulation through Non-Verbal Creative Expression

The creative process of collage-making in this study extends beyond artistic activity, functioning as a subtle yet effective mechanism for emotional regulation. For clinical psychologists, particularly those in early stages of their careers, exposure to complex and

emotionally demanding cases often generates psychological strain that is not easily articulated through verbal expression. Such experiences are frequently fragmented, suppressed, or difficult to process within conventional cognitive-verbal frameworks. In this context, collage provides an alternative medium that enables participants to externalize internal states without the pressure of structured narrative coherence.

Empirical findings indicate that participants gradually translated their emotional experiences into visual symbols through an intuitive selection of images, textures, and compositions. For instance, one participant (R.A.) selected imagery of a calm ocean, which she later described as representing a longing for inner stability amidst professional turbulence. Another participant (M.S.) used fragmented road imagery to symbolize uncertainty in navigating professional responsibilities. These examples illustrate how collage operates as a translational medium, allowing participants to access and communicate emotional experiences that remain otherwise implicit or difficult to verbalize.

Importantly, the process fostered what can be conceptualized as a safe emotional space, a non-judgmental psychological environment in which participants could engage with their emotions at their own pace. Unlike formal clinical settings that often impose structured goals and expectations, the participatory collage workshop created a flexible and egalitarian space. Observational data revealed that participants became increasingly immersed in the process, as indicated by sustained attention, relaxed facial expressions, and spontaneous interpersonal interactions. This shift suggests that the creative process itself contributed to a reduction in emotional tension and facilitated a sense of psychological safety.

From an emotional regulation perspective, collage operates through a gradual and indirect mechanism of emotional release. Rather than requiring immediate verbal confrontation with distressing experiences, participants engaged with their emotions symbolically, creating a protective psychological distance. This distancing enabled reflective engagement without triggering defensive responses. One participant (L.T.) reported that she only became aware of her level of emotional exhaustion after observing the predominance of dark tones and fragmented elements in her collage. This finding underscores that emotional awareness can emerge through visual and sensory engagement, rather than solely through cognitive reflection.

Table 1 Emotional Regulation Patterns in Participatory Collage

No	Dimension	Indicators	Description
1	Emotional Expression	Personal visual symbolism	Use of images and colors to represent emotional states
2	Emotional Release	Affective shifts during the process	Observable reduction in tension and emergence of calmness
3	Reflective Integration	Narrative interpretation of artwork	Ability to connect visual elements with personal experiences

Source: Research data analysis (2025)

These findings align with the framework of creative emotional processing, which posits that non-verbal artistic expression facilitates the integration of emotional experiences by engaging cognitive, affective, and sensory domains simultaneously (Heinsen et al., 2023; Myers-Coffman, 2024). Through this integrative process, previously fragmented or unprocessed emotions can be reorganized into coherent and meaningful representations. The collage, therefore, functions not merely as a medium of expression, but as an active mechanism of psychological processing.

Furthermore, the collective dimension of the workshop amplified its regulatory effects. Group reflection sessions enabled participants to share and interpret their visual narratives, fostering mutual validation and empathy. This social interaction contributed to a sense of belonging and collective support, which is particularly significant in professional communities characterized by high emotional demands. Emotional regulation, in this sense, emerges not only as an individual process but also as a socially mediated phenomenon.

From Individual Experience to Collective Meaning: Strengthening Social Connectedness

Beyond its role as a medium for individual emotional expression, the participatory collage intervention in this study reveals a significant social dimension, particularly in strengthening interpersonal relationships among clinical psychologists. Within the framework of Participatory Action Research (PAR), the workshop was intentionally designed not only as a space for personal reflection but also as a collective arena where individual experiences could be shared, negotiated, and reinterpreted. This dual orientation allowed participants to move from isolated emotional processing toward a more relational understanding of their professional and personal realities.

Empirical observations indicate that the process of collage-making gradually transformed the workshop environment into a socially cohesive space characterized by openness, mutual recognition, and emotional reciprocity. At the initial stage, interactions among participants were relatively minimal and task-oriented. However, as the creative process unfolded, participants began to engage in spontaneous conversations, often triggered by visual elements in their collages. These interactions were not merely casual exchanges but evolved into deeper narrative-sharing moments, where participants articulated professional challenges, emotional fatigue, and relational dilemmas. One participant (S.N.) noted that “seeing others’ work made me realize that I am not the only one feeling overwhelmed,” highlighting how visual artifacts facilitated recognition of shared experiences.

In this context, collage functions as a relational artifact, an object that mediates social interaction and enables dialogue that might otherwise be difficult to initiate. Unlike direct verbal disclosure, which can feel intrusive or vulnerable, the presence of a visual artifact provides a symbolic entry point for communication. Participants can project, explain, or withhold meanings as they see fit, allowing for a more flexible and emotionally safe interaction. For example, participant (D.R.) initially described her collage in purely aesthetic terms, but through group discussion, gradually connected its fragmented imagery to her

experience of professional burnout. This process illustrates how relational engagement can deepen individual reflection while simultaneously strengthening interpersonal bonds.

The group reflection sessions further reinforced this dynamic by creating a structured yet open forum for collective meaning-making. During these sessions, participants were invited to present their collages and share the narratives behind them, followed by responses from others. The responses often took the form of empathetic acknowledgment rather than evaluative judgment, fostering a climate of psychological safety. Observational data show that participants frequently nodded, smiled, or verbally affirmed each other’s experiences, indicating active listening and emotional attunement. Such interactions contributed to what can be described as collective empathy, where understanding is co-constructed through shared attention and mutual validation.

Thematic analysis of the data identified three key patterns through which social connectedness was strengthened during the intervention, as summarized in Table 2.

Table 2 Patterns of Social Connectedness in Participatory Collage Intervention

No	Dimension	Indicators	Description
1	Shared Experience	Recognition of similar emotional narratives	Participants identify common challenges and feelings
2	Empathic Interaction	Verbal and non-verbal validation	Expressions of understanding, support, and resonance
3	Collective Identity	Emergence of group belonging	Strengthened sense of “we” within the professional community

Source: Research data analysis (2025)

These findings align with the perspective of community psychology, which emphasizes that well-being is not solely an individual attribute but is deeply embedded in social relationships and communal contexts. In this regard, the intervention facilitated a shift from an individualistic understanding of psychological well-being toward a more relational and collective orientation. Participants did not merely process their own emotions but also engaged in a shared process of meaning-making that reinforced their sense of belonging within the professional community.

The concept of social connectedness provides a useful lens to interpret these dynamics. According to Cao & Navarro (2025) and McLaughlin & Seabrook (2025), social connectedness and well-being are closely linked through processes of social identification and group belonging. When individuals perceive themselves as part of a meaningful group, they are more likely to experience psychological resilience, emotional support, and a sense of purpose. In this study, the collage workshop functioned as a micro-social environment in which such identification processes could emerge organically. Through shared activities and narratives, participants began to see themselves not only as individual practitioners but as members of a supportive professional collective.

Moreover, the collective dimension of the intervention appeared to mitigate feelings of isolation that are often reported among early-career psychologists. Several participants expressed that the workshop provided a rare opportunity to connect with peers on a personal level, beyond formal professional roles. Participant (L.T.) reflected that “we usually meet in formal settings, but here we could talk about what we really feel,” indicating a shift in the quality of interaction. This shift is significant because it suggests that social connectedness is not merely about frequency of interaction, but about the depth and authenticity of relational engagement.

Collage as Meaning-Making Practice: Reconstructing Professional and Personal Narratives

The findings of this study indicate that collage-making operates not only as a medium of expression but also as a reflective practice through which participants actively reconstruct the meanings of their personal and professional experiences. Within the participatory framework adopted in this research, the act of assembling visual fragments, images, textures, and symbols, becomes a process of narrative construction, where participants move beyond simply expressing emotions toward interpreting and reorganizing their lived experiences. This shift from expression to interpretation marks a critical dimension of meaning-making, particularly in professions characterized by complex emotional and relational demands such as clinical psychology.

During the workshop, participants were observed to engage in iterative processes of selection, arrangement, and reconfiguration of visual elements. These processes were not random but deeply intentional, often accompanied by moments of pause, reflection, and reconsideration. For instance, one participant (M.S.) initially selected images representing structured urban landscapes, which she later rearranged into a fragmented composition. In the reflective session, she explained that this transformation mirrored her evolving understanding of her professional identity, which she initially perceived as stable but later recognized as fluid and sometimes disjointed. This example illustrates how collage facilitates a dynamic process of meaning reconstruction, where participants revisit and reinterpret their assumptions about themselves and their professional roles.

The visual nature of collage allows participants to externalize internal narratives in a form that is both symbolic and open-ended. Unlike verbal narratives, which often require linear coherence, visual compositions can accommodate ambiguity, contradiction, and multiplicity of meanings. This flexibility is particularly important in the context of psychological experiences that are difficult to articulate in words. One participant (R.A.) described her collage as “a story I didn’t know I was carrying,” highlighting how the process enabled her to uncover latent meanings embedded in her daily professional interactions. Such experiences suggest that collage serves as a bridge between implicit and explicit forms of knowledge, enabling participants to access and reorganize aspects of their identity that may not be readily available through conscious reflection alone.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings resonate with the concept of narrative identity, which posits that individuals construct a sense of self by integrating past experiences

into coherent and meaningful life stories (Fenner et al., 2024; Holopainen & Ihanus, 2024; López-Escribano et al., 2023). In this study, collage can be understood as a form of visual narrative identity work, where participants use symbolic representation to compose and recompose their life narratives. The process of selecting and arranging images parallels the narrative act of choosing which experiences to highlight, reinterpret, or reframe. Importantly, this process is not merely retrospective but also prospective, as it allows individuals to imagine alternative meanings and future trajectories.

Moreover, the notion of meaning reconstruction provides a useful lens to understand how participants reinterpret challenging or emotionally charged experiences. Rather than being passively shaped by their professional encounters, participants actively engage in redefining the significance of these experiences through visual symbolism. For example, participant (L.T.) incorporated images of broken objects alongside elements of growth, such as plants and light, to represent her journey from emotional exhaustion toward recovery. In her reflection, she noted that the collage helped her “see the possibility of continuity, not just rupture.” This indicates that the act of creating a collage can transform the meaning of difficult experiences, enabling individuals to integrate them into a broader and more adaptive narrative framework.

The participatory nature of the workshop further enriches this meaning-making process by situating individual narratives within a collective context. When participants shared their collages and interpretations, their personal stories became part of a larger dialogical space where meanings were negotiated and expanded. Feedback from peers often introduced new perspectives, prompting participants to reconsider or deepen their interpretations. This interaction aligns with the idea that narrative identity is not constructed in isolation but is shaped through social exchange and recognition. In this sense, meaning-making becomes a relational process, where individual insights are co-constructed through engagement with others.

Integrating Art-Based Community Engagement into Professional Well-Being Practices

The findings of this study converge to suggest that the integration of art-based intervention and community engagement offers a compelling and contextually relevant approach to supporting the psychological well-being of clinical psychologists. Rather than positioning well-being as an individual responsibility managed through formal or clinical mechanisms alone, this research highlights the value of participatory, relational, and creative practices as complementary pathways for sustaining professional resilience. Within the Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework employed, participants were not passive recipients of an intervention but active contributors in shaping a shared space of reflection, expression, and mutual support. This participatory orientation is central to understanding why the intervention produced not only individual benefits but also collective transformations.

Across the stages of the workshop, it became evident that the art-based approach functioned as a bridge between personal experience and communal engagement.

Participants consistently described the process as “different” from conventional professional development activities, which are often structured, outcome-driven, and cognitively oriented. In contrast, the collage workshop allowed for a slower, more reflective engagement with their emotional and professional realities. One participant (D.R.) noted that “this felt like a space where I could reconnect with why I chose this profession in the first place,” suggesting that the intervention facilitated not only emotional relief but also a reorientation toward professional meaning. Such reflections indicate that well-being in this context is not limited to stress reduction but extends to the restoration of purpose and identity within professional practice.

The community-based nature of the intervention amplified its impact by embedding individual reflection within a network of social relations. As demonstrated in earlier findings, the emergence of shared narratives, empathic interactions, and a sense of collective identity contributed to a more sustainable form of well-being, one that is distributed across the community rather than confined within individuals. This aligns with the notion that professional well-being is inherently relational, shaped by the quality of interactions, support systems, and shared understandings within a given community of practice. In this regard, the workshop functioned as a micro-level ecosystem of support, where participants could both give and receive emotional validation.

From a theoretical standpoint, these findings resonate with the participatory well-being framework proposed by Lewis et al. (2021) and Wright & Wright (2022), which emphasizes that well-being is co-produced through active engagement, shared ownership, and collective meaning-making. Within this framework, interventions are most effective when they are not externally imposed but internally generated and sustained by the community itself. The collage workshop reflects this principle by creating conditions in which participants could actively shape the process, contribute their perspectives, and co-construct outcomes. The sense of ownership observed among participants, evidenced by their willingness to share personal narratives and support one another, suggests that participatory approaches can enhance both the relevance and sustainability of well-being initiatives.

Moreover, the integration of art-based methods into professional contexts challenges dominant paradigms that prioritize rational, verbal, and efficiency-oriented modes of engagement. While such paradigms are essential in many aspects of clinical work, they may inadvertently limit opportunities for deeper reflection and emotional processing. The findings of this study suggest that incorporating creative, non-verbal modalities can enrich professional development by addressing dimensions of experience that are often overlooked. Participant (S.N.) reflected that “we are trained to listen to others, but rarely given space to listen to ourselves,” underscoring a structural gap that art-based interventions can help to fill.

In practical terms, this study points to the potential for institutionalizing art-based community engagement within professional well-being programs. Rather than being treated as occasional or supplementary activities, such interventions could be embedded into routine professional development, supervision, or peer-support systems. For example, periodic

reflective workshops, creative group sessions, or collaborative art-based forums could serve as ongoing platforms for emotional processing and relational strengthening. The relatively low-cost and adaptable nature of collage further enhances its feasibility for broader implementation, particularly in resource-constrained settings.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that the success of such integration depends on contextual sensitivity and facilitative design. The effectiveness of the intervention in this study was closely tied to its participatory ethos, the creation of a safe and non-judgmental environment, and the alignment of activities with participants' lived experiences. Without these elements, art-based approaches risk being perceived as superficial or disconnected from professional realities. Therefore, future applications should prioritize co-design with participants, flexibility in implementation, and ongoing evaluation to ensure relevance and impact.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that art-based community engagement, implemented through a participatory collage workshop, constitutes an effective and contextually relevant approach to enhancing the psychological well-being of clinical psychologists. The findings indicate that the intervention meaningfully strengthens reflective capacity by enabling participants to articulate complex emotional experiences through visual symbolism, facilitates emotional regulation by providing a non-judgmental and expressive space for processing psychological burdens, and fosters social connectedness through shared creative engagement within a professional community. These outcomes suggest that the integration of non-verbal, participatory, and community-oriented approaches can complement and extend conventional cognitive-verbal frameworks that have long dominated professional support systems. At the same time, the study offers a conceptual contribution by repositioning collage not merely as an individual expressive tool but as a collective reflective practice that supports meaning-making and relational understanding among practitioners. While the scope of participation and duration of the intervention remain limited, the results provide a grounded indication that such an approach holds potential for broader application in professional development and community-based mental health initiatives, particularly within underrepresented Global South contexts where accessible and culturally responsive models of psychological support are needed.

ETHICAL STATEMENT AND DISCLOSURE

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles, including informed consent, protection of informants' confidentiality, and respect for local cultural values. Special consideration was given to participants from vulnerable groups to ensure their safety, comfort, and equal rights to participate. No external funding was received, and the authors declare no conflict of interest. All data and information presented were collected through valid research methods and have been verified to ensure their accuracy and

reliability. The use of artificial intelligence (AI) was limited to technical assistance for writing and language editing, without influencing the scientific substance of the work. The authors express their gratitude to the informants for their valuable insights, and to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback on an earlier version of this manuscript. The authors take full responsibility for the content and conclusions of this article.

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