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Group attachment through art practice: a phenomenological analysis of being seen and showing

Introduction

Through an analysis of a series of interviews this paper presents the story of Eilish, an artist with a diagnosis of Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD). The interviews took place over a period of 5 years and data in this idiographic study form part of two larger studies involving two groups of mental health service users who were all involved in visual arts activity (Sagan, 2015; 2014; 2012; 2011). The study offers pointers regarding the routes to well-being potentially offered through group attachment and the role of art practice in offering a language and experience of containment and connectedness otherwise inaccessible to some.

Eilish is, at time of writing, an articulate, independent woman in her forties with a flourishing social art practiceⁱ. Severely maltreated as a child, with a history of poor attachments, hospital admissions, and a diagnosis of Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) she has, by all accounts, come a long way. In order to grasp her achievement let us briefly consider what the BPD pathology is understood as constituting.

BPD is described as enduring, with character-based patterns of pathology (Battle, Shea, Johnson, Yen, Zlotnick, Zanarini, Sanislow, 2004) and is associated with a range of symptoms (Fonagy, 2000) including suicidal behaviours and self-harm (Posner, Rothbart, Vizueta, Thomas, Levy, Fossela, Silbersweig, 2003). It is closely associated with childhood experiences of neglect or maltreatment (Johnson, Cohen, Brown, Smailes, Bernstein, 1999) and a developmental model of BPD describes it as originating in early defensive inhibition,

damaging the individual's growing capacity to mentalize. Studies also suggest a strong transgenerational aspect, with children of mothers with BPD being at high risk of developing the disorder (Lenzenweger, 2005, Bezirgianian, Cohen, Brook, 1993) but there is no strong evidence that BPD is heritable (Posner et al 2003).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to enter into the debate about the disputed flaws of the DSM-V diagnostic criteria, or indeed whether there is an inherent gender bias particularly in the case of BPD (Eastwood, 2012), but both these areas of contention lead us to be guarded in our research into this area. We are, however, particularly keen to highlight evidence of self-strategies employed by individuals diagnosed with a diagnosis of BPD to gain therapeutic benefit from *relational activities* outside the clinical domain, given its reported "*rocky and tumultuous*" treatment within a clinical setting (Potter, 2009:4). Horn, Johnstone, and Brooke (2007:226) for example, refer to the descriptions given by individuals with a diagnosis of BPD of the value of a "*social context which allowed defining and redefining the self through interactions with others*" and Eastwood (2012:9) describes the positive role for women with BPD of "*A negotiation of the dynamic of the group, a sense of trust*" and the importance of egalitarian, non-hierarchical groups, activity and relationships. This paper describes how the development of an art practice offered the individual in question experiences of attachment, containment, communication, inclusion and agency deemed vital by Haigh (2013) as desirably inherent in, but not confined to therapeutic communities.

Throughout her adult life Eilish has received various types of psychological therapy, as a psychiatric inpatient; day patient; outpatient, and a therapeutic community member, the latter of which she felt was the intervention of most benefit. This experience appears to have

offered her an entry into Mentalization enhancing, socio-cultural processes. In addition, pivotal moments in her engagement with group art therapy opened the way for a vision of non-verbal self-expression for her previously unnarratable experiences. This paper suggests that it was the specifics of attachment and being seen and showing (contained communication) that aided Eilish's progress.

Importantly, neither of these cases of therapy was 1:1 but group-based, within a context where safety, communication and an immersion in the importance of group dynamic were stressed. Each case also appears to have succeeded in propelling Eilish *out* of its embrace and into a larger community where needs can ideally be met as part of routine socio-cultural processes. This propelling enabled entry into what seems finally to have offered Eilish the most in terms of a therapeutic and transformative experience. This was the relationship she developed in later years with a social art practice. The aim of the present study was to try to understand the meaning of this art practice and attachments made through it in the life of someone diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder.

Method

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used as a means by which to explore and interpret the interview data and bring to bear theories of attachment and psychosocial theories of the creative process. During the analytic process we returned repeatedly to the narrative, cross-checking themes in an iterative cycle typical of IPA methodology (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2009) which strives to maintain fidelity to the experience being described. The research has endeavoured to maintain a respectful and inquisitive stance vis-à-vis the

participant and her first person narratives, negotiating at times uncertain boundaries of collaboration and co-constructed histories (Etherington, 2004). Such first person narratives offer a means through which to engage with the story of the participant and may also provide a way for the narrator to make sense of her changing relationships with the social world and her emerging identities.

To understand the role of art practice in the life of someone diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder we have drawn on Attachment Theory for its articulation of the relational challenges to adults who have experienced problematic and abusive primary carer relationships. We have drawn on studies in the area of Mentalization Therapy (Bateman and Fonagy, 2004; Fonagy & Luyten, 2009) and attachment to groups (Eastwood, 2012) to describe the specific ways in which art appeared to function in the life of one artist. Finally, we have looked to the psychoanalytic canon which advances a theory of aesthetics based on an understanding of pre-verbal attunement and mirroring which seemed to most eloquently explain the nuanced and reciprocal nature of artistic production (Wright, 2009).

Interviews with Eilish were conducted over a period of 5 years. Although the original data had been analysed using NVivo software, the sound files of Eilish's interviews were revisited and the transcripts re-analysed with the involvement of a researcher who was not part of the original study. There were three reasons for this. Firstly, there was a sense that software restrictions placed a distance between the listener or reader and the type of experience being described (Langdrige, 2007). Secondly, as many qualitative narrative researchers have found, some interviews remain part of the interviewer, and there is, over a period, an iterative process of play and replay as understanding and thoughts develop in

relation to what has been said, and also in relation to developments in theory (Riessman, 2003). Finally, the involvement of a researcher from outside the original team was desirable in maintaining the trustworthiness of the research and the employment of the hermeneutics of suspicion (Ricoeur, 1970). According to Halling, Leifer and Rowe (2006) such dialogue allows phenomenological bracketing to take place and while we question this, we have found the tabling of assumptions and clear personal agendas in an open but critical forum with at least one other researcher to be vital. That said, this research, like much phenomenological inquiry, treads a necessarily fraught path where fidelity to the narrative, the researchers' own positioning and subjectivity and the application, rejection and reapplication of theory interweave.

The analysis was based on six full length interviews which were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Ethical approval for the research was granted by the host university ethics committee and subsequent renewed consent was requested and granted by the participant, whose name has been changed for the purposes of this paper.

Results

As the transcripts were re-read, the researchers marked emerging themes in the margins, providing their understanding of that theme in the context of their theories of reference. Examples of these themes included experiences of an abusive and neglectful caregiver; an inability to connect with others; art as a facilitator of self-understanding and art as a way of making connections with others. Two super-ordinate themes were agreed upon by the researchers: one indicating the various struggles Eilish had had in the past in attempting to

maintain an order in her life and connect with the world; and the other indicating how Eilish had been able to achieve that, to a considerable extent, since she developed a genuine relationship with art. We have labelled these themes: *being (in)visible and showing* and *being seen and showing* to indicate the shift in the experience of self and others brought about in Eilish through her symbolic use of art. Our findings suggest that through the deliberate, if unconscious requirements of a social art practice, a safe zone of relating and forming group attachments was facilitated.

Theme 1

Being (in)visible and showing : The development of an art practice

In Eilish's first interview, she mentions what was to be a recurrent theme, her battles with finding a language of relating:

I don't know how to negotiate; I don't know how to work as part of a team... I can't read body language or subtle signs, even subtle verbal signs. So where other people would stop and pull back, I would keep going and dig myself a deeper hole. (Interview 1)

She relates this deficit to her upbringing by a volatile mother later diagnosed as paranoid schizoid:

...there would never be any actual parenting in terms of 'this is what's made me cross', 'this is what you need to learn', which I imagine is how most people are

brought up...Not only did I never understand what I was doing that was socially inappropriate or whatever, I certainly didn't understand how you repair stuff...(Interview 2)

When Eilish's upbringing of abuse and rejection emerges in the interviews it is invariably delivered in a perfunctory and somewhat 'rehearsed' tone. Her narrative of this period of her life is routinely shortened and minimised, appearing resistant to modification. This may be one strategy Eilish uses for handling the 'bad stuff' of her narrative, and making the unbearable narratable. Importantly, during this recounted period of her life, Eilish had no recourse to 'telling' and no means by which, at the time, to build up a repertoire of story, through engaging in a telling with a receptive other. She speaks of the continued difficulty in forming social bonds which, had she had them, may have provided her with a forum for such a telling. Eilish described difficulty, too, with understanding social mores and interacting appropriately, and this difficulty was to make schooling difficult, "*horrible*". She speaks of this time reluctantly, while giving the sense, through tone, pace and intonation that this strand of narrative has been performed many times before. She mentions, in the first interview, the 'visibility' she began to fear:

Interviewer: What about primary school?

Eilish: Just completely horrible. Same thing. Went in one group of people then got chucked out of them, went in another group, ended up in a group of misfits. On the one hand I was paranoid about being excluded, and on the other hand I was unable to function as part of a group. Whether I was with people or not with

people, neither met my needs or gave me any sense of being a social being. **I always felt like I stood out like a sore thumb.** Absolutely hated it. I remember every Sunday evening, feeling that feeling in the pit of my stomach just knowing that tomorrow I had to go back to school. Really, really grim.

And later:

I was one of 13 students in a school of 900 that had free school meals so every break time the 13 of us queued up outside the office to get our free meal ticket and **so things like that made me stand out from everybody else anyway.** My mum was really poor. **So it was objective circumstances made me stand outside, as well as my personality was making me do it.** (Interview 1, emphasis added.)

This ‘bad stuff’ from which distance is maintained through relegating it to the flat, the dull and the unconnected, can be heard to contrast in vocabulary, delivery, tone and intonation with the ‘good’, which is always her art practice. This was held in a sharp divide, a point to which we return later. When this art practice is spoken of, the narrative is re-energised and more spontaneous, as when she talks about how in retreat from the difficulties of school, she spends time in her bedroom:

...it was always a very artistic space, dealing with murals and stuff like that... I used to collect junk, household rubbish and make them into collages and things...(Interview 2)

This making of art (very early on involving multi media) gradually becomes an important, escapist activity. As escapist, it offered temporary comfort, but as an activity of retreat and isolation, it could not, as yet be one of connection. It was not until post hospitalization that Eilish is encouraged to try art therapy and an important connection emerges for her, between making art and communication:

... I had nothing to say about my work because I didn't think I was emotionally connected to what I had drawn. And then the art therapist started to suggest – not suggest, ask me – if it represented how I felt about my place in the world, being alone on a desert island...and I just completely broke down. It connected so utterly. (Interview 1)

There is an oscillation in Eilish's narrated memories of the early experience of being seen (literally) but wishing to be invisible (1), through needing to be seen (2), to being 'seen' through her safely controlling what is shown (3):

(1) I was seen a lot...I tried to make myself even less seen, 'cause every time I was seen I was in trouble...so my desire for invisibility...made the paradox come true that I was permanently visible... (Interview 6)

(2) ...as soon as I started my hospital treatment as an outpatient, I now understand that unless I was physically speaking or being seen, I felt invisible.
(Interview 1)

(3) now [through my work] I'm extremely comfortable not being in the spotlight myself....(Interview 6)

A need to be seen, to see one's self reflected in another's face, usually the primary caregiver, was thwarted through Eilish's actual experience of being 'seen', which elicited a frightening maternal reaction. Eilish's response to this repeated negative reaction was to try and make herself invisible, a response which eventually has her doubting her own existence/visibility. This in turn leads, paradoxically, to a *demand* to be seen, through speaking and through gaining a perhaps exaggerated reassurance that she is seen.

Being in a group situation and for the first time being listened to was the beginning of an important journey. Eilish the artist, the artefact and the group (be it the film team, art group or collaborative workshop participants) would gradually become involved in a non-hierarchical dialogue between members who are seen by others and come to show more of themselves. This is something Eilish refers to as always having been lacking:

Because it was only me and my mum, I never had any positive experience of how to negotiate... how to be around other people. (Interview 5)

Wright (2009), drawing on the work of Winnicott and Stern, suggests that artistic activity is rooted in the enduring need as an adult, to provide the self with resonant mirroring forms. Given her confusing, even terrifying, experience as a child of being visible/invisible, needing

to be seen but not finding herself reflected in any positive way in her mother' face, this pursuit, for Eilish, may have been all the more pressing.

Eilish slowly builds up a social art practice, one that involves participants, film, being with others and being seen. It is a complex play of (in)visibility and showing; the play of artist *behind* the lens, showing others, and yet visible herself, as artistic persona. In her latest interview, Eilish describes how her socially engaged practice now contributes to her self-reflection through thrusting her directly into confrontations with aspects of herself she continues to find challenging, the very being with, and exposing herself to, others. Through her social encounters which are the cornerstones of her practice, Eilish tackles both her difficulty with social relations and her lifelong tendency to self-sabotage. She gives several graphic descriptions of how 'good' events in her life, where she should have felt a sense of pride and achievement were followed by suicidal periods and hospital admissions:

I was in serious danger of enjoying anything in fear of potentially catastrophic consequences at my own hands... (Interview 6)

This tendency she attributes to her "*utterly ingrained mother*" (Interview 6) , never deserving or allowing any good into her life. Now, on reflecting on the successful opening night of her latest exhibition, and her newfound ability to:

...have one drink, go home, have a really good night's sleep, get up in the morning, turn my computer on and start work. (Interview 6)

Finally there is this emotive declaration:

I swear to god I behaved like a fucking normal person...and I can't tell you how joyful that made me feel... (Interview 6)

Gradually, over the research period, Eilish's art activity moves into collaborative filmmaking, which provides her with the safety of being '*behind the camera lens*' as she refers to it, yet thrust into the still challenging domain of social relations. There is an interplay in the interpersonal arena where the artefact carries the weight of 'reason' for the interacting and art was to become:

...the primary driver...I would do anything to realise a piece of work. I will do all sorts of things I would never do for any other area of my life. (Interview 4)

For Eilish, the process of coming to a narrative resolution appears linked to this resolving of an ambivalence regarding the experience of being seen. She finally makes the decision to eschew an isolated art practice, for one which thrusts her into collaboration, networks and social interaction, where she is increasingly 'seen'. She braves this, partly from the safety of being behind the camera, partly through having 'the art piece' perform as 'aesthetic third' which "*contains both something of the individual and something of the world, meaningfully conjoined*" (Froggett, Little, Roy & Witaker, 2011:98).

Theme 2

Being seen and showing: the role of the group

In her account, Eilish moves from invisibility or ‘dreaded visibility’ to a more congruent visibility, primarily through art. One senses the relief, then, in Eilish’s memory of the first time she talked about her work. Here, she is not only seen (as artist) but she is also communicating (finally) something authentic about herself, through work which, in turn, is seen:

I just blossomed and discovered that art could enable me to communicate things that I didn’t know how to formulate into words. (Interview 4)

Together with art therapy, the role of the therapeutic community is acknowledged as having helped to provide Eilish with the social skills that enabled an engagement with the art community, providing a vital springboard for development:

...Because you...get to watch people doing repair all the time... You learn it on an experiential level, and I wouldn’t be able to function as I do now and manage to be part of a group at college if I hadn’t had that process. (Interview 2)

In her experience, however, Eilish’s move to visibility has been dominated by her involvement with art. This involvement unfolds in the narrative along two main sub-themes: art as window to the self and art as a community. These seem to describe two intrinsically related processes. On the one hand, there is art as a way of looking into the previously disavowed or unseen corners of the self. Art here offers a way of finding new links with the past and a means of defending the self more effectively against the intrusions of that past into the present.

...making [art] work [enabled me] to externalise the stuff. It gave me physical objects that I could look at that represented myself... So that was allowing me to see the hugely disparate and disconnected parts of me that existed...The parts which were not connected. I was able to see what was the me that I wanted to keep and what was the me that I wanted to let go of... (Interview 5)

On the other hand, there is art as a social process, with its interpersonal demands and opportunities. The two processes are closely intertwined in Eilish's narrative and point to the complex interactions between identity, aesthetic experience and social engagement. This emphasises the social nature of engaging with art and the therapeutic change linked to that engagement. Eilish recalls that in the past,

...when I was meeting new people, I was really standoffish really difficult to communicate with and seemed really negative. So I started making films where I had to approach members of the public ... I would say that was another step forward in that I was able to be with people for a longer period of time and start to build up a real relationship with those people. (Interview 5)

For Eilish, art offers a non-threatening language that allows her to do what no other (verbal, therapeutic) language had allowed her to do so far: to "see" herself without feeling destroyed by her own emotions, and to allow herself to be seen by others.

She speaks, in Interview 4, about having quickly grown out of the parameters of art therapy, *“Eventually the purge is over. Then you can get on and be bigger than a single label”* and starting to focus on what she refers to as autobiographic art. This art did not explicitly ‘show’ herself through its content, but, through its concept and its process, it nevertheless both ‘revealed’ and communicated aspects of her life. In this way Eilish maintains a level of invisibility but also allows exposure in a gradual, contained way.

In a dynamic interpersonal exchange, in which a process of mirroring and attunement appears (Wright, 2009) to be at play, art allows Eilish to present herself to others in a way that they would not be destroyed by her image, making her see-able by others, and enabling Eilish to see herself through the eyes of the others.

...But for me the crucial thing is that when you make art...you can get emotions out that you're too scared of facing and putting words to. You can just look at them as a form and when you look at them they may mean something different to what they mean to me. So I also don't have to be too exposing in the stuff that I put out but I understand what it means to me. (Interview 5)

Eilish becomes visible to herself as she becomes visible to others and she becomes visible to others as she becomes visible to the self. However, the nature of the “other” in these narratives is quite specific. Although the supportive role of her personal tutor in the art college is acknowledged and a fellow student who has become a friend is mentioned in one of the interviews, these references are scarce and appear to occupy a secondary place. These narratives are permeated by the absence of reference to specific individuals with whom Eilish

feels intimate, but connection with others remains a core theme. Eilish's main Other seems to be the *group*. Be it her very first introductory art classes, her university classes, the prestigious Art school itself, the various community-based art groups or the therapeutic community, the narratives are dominated by Eilish's references to individuals grouped around creative activity, with the most successful being those that actively nurtured empowerment and also appeared to enable a communal rejection of psychiatric discourse. It is the group that Eilish feels confident around, it is the group that "sees" Eilish's art, it is the group that makes her art possible, it is the group that makes Eilish visible. In Eilish's experience art and the creative group are two sides of the same coin and she has found her new language through her relationship with the group, and it is this which offers her important support in periods of transition.

Finally, perhaps as further evidence indicating psychological change, we noted that the early narratives differ from later ones in one important respect. While in the early interviews, particularly the first, Eilish's new world of art is presented as almost perfect and is sharply opposed to the 'absolute' awfulness of her past (horrible mother, rejecting peers, ineffective psychiatry, an emotionally disturbed self) which was narrated in a flat, rehearsed delivery, in the later interviews that sharp distinction subsides. Although Eilish's new world is still good and bears no comparison to the past, it can also be frustrating at times. This frustration, however, is experienced as tolerable, as a necessary part of life, and does not compromise the positivity of the new *objects*. Similarly, Eilish's old dysfunctional world still appears upsetting but its negativity is understood and at times moderated:

I'm re-engaging with my mum and my family...I'm never going to look forward to doing that, but I think treating an obligation...doing the right thing is a concept I can connect with now. (Interview 4)

Discussion

Emerging from these data is a sense of the role of art *as* self-narrative and the role of the group in fortifying an agentic narrative identity. Such groups appeared to be most catalytic when they conformed, in sometimes nuanced ways, to the core 'themes' of the original therapeutic community (Haigh, 2002) and when the narrative indicated a felt sense of attachment, containment, communication, inclusion and agency (Haigh, 2013).

The data also stand as an apparent example of what Ricoeur (1977) calls progressive and regressive hermeneutics, whereby both an exploration of one's origins and a necessary dislocation from one's autobiographical experiences fuels creative work. Ricoeur thus argued that art products can therefore be "*not simply projections of the artist's conflicts, but the sketch of their solution.*" (Ricoeur, 1977:175). This particular potency of art practice in this case study is clear.

This movement from the past to a new narrative identity is reflected in the art practice and Eilish's narrative where we can trace her attempts at reconfiguring "*a sense of order, meaningfulness and coherent identity*" (Crossley, 2000:528). This is one that includes a sustained, agentic enterprise of self-development through to better-being. Part of the narrative identity included repudiation both of art through art therapy and of talking therapies, in part,

at least, as resistance against dominant medical/therapeutic discourse and practice (Guilfoyle, 2005).

Eilish's artistic journey takes her from the isolated and insular escapist practice of her youth, where, struggling with invisibility and voicelessness she begins to externalise through an "evacuation" (Ehrenzweig, 1971). This practice may have provided some temporary comfort but, in failing to provide her with a language, the relief was limited; the practice unsustainable. In lacking an audience, an intersubjective element, Eilish's practice also failed to enjoy a 'holding' of her most difficult thoughts (Bion, 1987) until this was provided for her in a 'now moment' (Stern, 2004) in her early encounter with art therapy.

As pointed out by Akerman and Ouellette (2012: 384-5), literature on the artistic narrative identity still falls short of offering an explanation which "*fully accounts for the far-reaching transformations of self and identity that can happen through art*". In Eilish's case, this transformation can be traced and in this paper we offer an interpretation of how it has occurred. Part of her transformation has included dramatic life changes and a strengthened sense of self. But the data suggest that it is Eilish's social art practice, enabled through a reparative emotional experience of the group, which consciously or not, sustains the change. It 'forces' her into confronting specific aspects of her condition, the challenges of interrelating and being seen, and to actively work on them within a practice which allows her to be seen and to connect.

Eilish's account of art as providing a non-threatening language through which she could get in touch with her own experience could therefore be explored in the context of attachment

theory and the role of multiple attachment representations. According to Bowlby and later attachment theorists, attachment insecurity is underpinned by multiple, or contradictory, representations of self and other, as a particular element, for example the mother, is encoded in incompatible ways – perhaps as *both* caring and uncaring in relation to the same event (Bowlby, 1982; Bretherton & Munholland, 2008; Main, 1985). In this schema contradictory representations are constructed, as the genuine experience of the child (e.g. mother is abandoning) in relation to a particular event (e.g. leaving the child alone), is overridden by the parental interpretation of the event that disregards the child’s experience (e.g. mother is caring because she had to go to work). As parental interpretation is internalised by the child as his/her “official” construction of the experience, a second layer of language is created, alienating the child from his/her true feelings. It is possible that our first theme describes aspects of such a process, as Eilish may have adopted alienating maternal interpretations that contradicted first-hand experience, possibly bodily-based, non-verbal or pre-verbal experience. The process of art making, therefore, as the construction of a non-lexical symbolic system, enabled Eilish to access a distorted core of her non/preverbal experience and replace the alienating (parental) discourse with the symbolic representation of genuine experience.

This study also suggests that the process of acquiring a new language was intrinsically linked with a process of relating to an other, consistent with attachment and psychoanalytic accounts of meaning making and the construction of symbolic systems. In these accounts, human development occurs as from the very early moments of life the individual engages in a process of symbol and meaning construction, in his/her interaction with important others laying the basis for ‘epistemic trust’ (Fonagy, Bateman, & Bateman, 2011).

Attachment research also suggests that *social groups* can be regarded as attachment objects since they can offer protection and recognition to individuals (Smith, Murphy, Coats, 1999). This idea appears consistent with Eilish's experience that she reconstructs her symbolic capacity not so much within the context of dyadic relationships, but in the context of her relationship with groups. As those with a diagnosis of borderline experience severe problems with intimacy, consisting of oscillations between symbiotic merger and traumatic distancing through vicious attacks on the object (Gammelgaard, 2010), it may have been indicative of a move towards attachment security and *better* self-regulation that Eilish maintained some emotional interpersonal distance. It is possible that such a distance allowed Eilish to consolidate her identity through artwork and the establishment of less intimate, social and peer relationships which were felt to be safe. There is suggestion in the relevant literature that avoidantly attached individuals tend to turn to their social groups rather than their partners when put under emotional threat (Crisp, Farrow, Rosenthal, Walsh, Blissett, Penn, 2009). Present findings may provide further support for the notion of social groups as attachment objects. Findings illustrate an additional function of such objects in the co-construction of language and other symbolic codes, within a vital context of belonging and trust (Castillo, Ramon and Morant, 2013).

Eilish's narratives of her *use* of artistic practice and the role of groups within her artistic identity concur with current literature that suggests that treatment and change in the case of BPD is possible (Martens, 2006; Levy, Meehan, Kelly, Reynoso, Weber, Clarkin & Kernberg, 2006; Fonagy & Bateman, 2007). Her narratives revealed that efforts at making connections through art were on-going. But there was a tension and oscillation in these

efforts, an ambivalence about being ‘seen’ which may hark back to her experiences, also articulated, of not being seen, in fact being, as an infant *invisible*. This play of invisibility, being seen and showing as part of her artistic persona was concealed at times, then ‘unconcealed’ in the narratives themselves. In this struggle for agency a rejection of ‘outside’ therapy is revealed while a thrust is maintained towards an incremental but insightful understanding of herself in relation to others. This process appears to share parallels with Mentalization based therapies (Fonagy and Bateman 2007) where Mentalization is defined as “*a mental process by which an individual implicitly and explicitly interprets the actions of himself and others as meaningful on the basis of intentional mental states, such as personal desires, needs, feelings, beliefs and reasons*” (Bateman and Fonagy, 2004:21).

From a psychotherapeutic perspective, there are ‘explanations’ for Eilish’s historical lack of engagement with talking therapies in terms of the classic BPD pathology. A possible clue lies in the relative lack for Eilish, of 1:1 intimacy and disclosure, and her ‘rehearsed’ and stilted narrative of the most painful experiences of her life, which may suggest a distancing or splitting off, unsuited to the requirements of psychotherapeutic engagement. Yet a further interpretation is possible; that true to her own narrative, talking therapies made her feel she was going round in circles, a stultifying procedure which disempowered her and relied too heavily on words – with which her relationship remains difficult. Instead, it is her art practice which unconsciously addresses the very aspects to which Mentalization based therapies attempt to bring movement and resolution into, such as metacognitive capacity. Eilish’s case contributes, therefore, to debates about the treatability of BPD, and the self-strategies employed (in this case art), consciously or not, by people with mental health conditions. Such strategies are routinely overlooked and still to some degree marginalised by psychotherapy.

Eilish's distrust of spoken language, 1:1 relationships and doctor/patient dyads in particular, may have led her to seek alternative means of therapy and growth. In nurturing an attachment to groups, she has found a safer and more containing vehicle for practicing inter-relatedness, and in the process and content of her filmmaking she can experiment with being seen and also showing - yet concealing when felt necessary.

Finally, debate over the benefits of engaging with the arts and how the value of publicly funded community arts projects can be assessed (Bakhshi, Freeman & Hitchen, 2009; Kilroy, Garner, Parkinson, Kagan & Senior, 2007; Mirza, 2006; White, 2006) frequently fails to take into account, or be able to develop a measure for, the long term and deeply transformative potential of engaging with arts activity and practice. As Eilish's narratives suggest, such change, when it occurs, may be slow and nuanced, only revealed and understood through close engagement with the lived experience of the person transformed. This remains a challenge for those "*beleaguered by a 'what works?' agenda*" (Haigh, 2005:5) and its demands for quick 'evidence' of the benefits of slow processes. We are reminded that an absence of certain types of evidence does not equal evidence of absence, and that as researchers we are charged with developing the means by which to capture and depict the subtleties of meaningful impact and change.

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ⁱ Social art practice has been variously defined and entering into its contested aspects is beyond the scope of this paper. However, most definitions agree that it connects fine art directly to communities and social networks, and this is the aspect drawn on in this paper with regards to the artist. For a fuller critique of social art and its discontents see Sagan, O., Candela, E., & Frimodig, B. (2010). Insight on Outreach: Towards a critical practice. *International Journal of Education through Art*, 6 (2), 145–161.