

Co-Creating Meaning through Visual Inquiry: Artists' and Non-Artists' Collaborative Analysis of Family Artwork

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how visual artists and non-artists collaboratively engage in the interpretation of family-generated artwork within an arts-based research (ABR) framework. Arts-based research (ABR) has expanded qualitative inquiry by engaging visual, embodied, and affective dimensions of experience. However, limited attention has been given to how family-generated visual data are collaboratively interpreted and how differences in artistic training shape analytic processes. This study examines how visual artists and non-artists analyze family-generated artwork, guided by the research question: What are the experiences of visual artists and non-artists in analyzing family visual data? Informed by social constructivist theory, the study employed an arts-based design integrating visual analysis, response artmaking, memo writing, and collaborative dialogue. Analysis followed an iterative process of independent coding, group refinement, and thematic synthesis. Findings indicate that artist-analysts expanded meaning through symbolic and affective engagement, while non-artists stabilized meaning through categorization and narrative structuring. Meaning emerged through the interaction of these approaches rather than residing in the visual data itself. The study demonstrates that interpretive diversity enhances analytic depth, challenges assumptions about expertise in visual analysis, and underscores the value of collaborative, multimodal approaches in family research..

KEYWORDS: Arts-based research, visual inquiry, family studies, interdisciplinary collaboration, reflexivity

Examining Visual Data: Artists' and Non-Artists' Analyses

In qualitative inquiry, increasing attention has been directed toward methodological inclusivity and the pluralization of knowledge practices (Abdalla Mikhaeil & Robey, 2024). This shift reflects a broader epistemological movement that recognizes diverse ways of knowing beyond traditional text-based and positivist frameworks. Scholars have increasingly called for approaches that engage embodied, affective, sensory, and visual dimensions of experience, particularly when examining complex and relational phenomena such as family life (Archibald et al., 2024; Santoro, 2023).

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Within this shift, arts-based research (ABR) has emerged as a significant methodological and epistemological approach. Rather than treating art as illustrative, ABR positions creative processes as central to inquiry, enabling access to symbolic, sensory, and tacit forms of knowledge (Gerber et al., 2020; Leavy, 2020). This orientation expands conventional definitions of data and analysis by foregrounding meaning-making as an interpretive, embodied, and often non-linear process.

Recent scholarship further demonstrates the growing application of ABR in addressing complex social and health-related experiences, including trauma, caregiving, and family relationships (Bally et al., 2023; Dupuis et al., 2024; Román et al., 2022). These studies demonstrate the capacity of arts-based approaches to surface emotional and relational dimensions that are not easily captured through language alone. At the same time, ABR has been positioned as a site of epistemological intervention, challenging dominant assumptions about what constitutes valid knowledge and how it is produced (Gerber & Siegesmund, 2022).

Despite these advances, attention to how visual data are interpreted within collaborative and interdisciplinary contexts remains limited. There is little research examining how individuals with differing levels of artistic training engage in the analysis of visual materials. Interpretation is not neutral but shaped by analysts' positionalities, disciplinary backgrounds, and cultural frameworks (Goundar, 2025). Understanding these differences is essential for advancing more inclusive and reflexive approaches to visual inquiry.

Addressing this gap, this study examines how individuals with and without formal artistic training collaboratively analyze family-generated artwork. While arts-based methodologies have been widely used to explore individual experiences, there remains a notable absence of research that centers artwork created by families as primary data, particularly in relation to how such data are interpreted within interdisciplinary settings. Informed by social constructivist theory (Walker & Shore, 2015), this study explores how diverse epistemologies, embodied, symbolic, narrative, and analytical, overlap in the co-construction of meaning. By foregrounding family-created artwork as both data and relational expression, this research contributes to expanding methodological approaches in family studies while advancing conversations about epistemic diversity and collaborative visual analysis.

Qualitative Research in Family Studies: Strengths and Gaps

Having established the broader methodological and epistemological context, it is important to situate this study within the specific traditions of qualitative family research. Qualitative research has played a crucial role in advancing understanding of family structures, relationships, and processes. By emphasizing lived experience and contextual nuance, qualitative methods provide valuable insights into the complexities of family life, particularly among marginalized and underrepresented populations (Goldberg & Allen, 2024). Techniques such as in-depth interviews, participant observation, and digital engagement enable researchers to capture multiple perspectives within family systems, challenging assumptions rooted in single-perspective models (Lareau, 2021).

However, despite these strengths, qualitative research also faces important limitations. One important challenge is its reliance on verbal articulation, which may not fully capture the emotional, relational, and embodied dimensions of experience. As recent studies suggest, aspects of family life such as trauma, caregiving, and affective relationships often resist linguistic representation (Dupuis et al., 2024). This limitation has prompted calls for methodological innovation, particularly the integration of visual and arts-based approaches.

Approaching the Unspoken: Arts-Based Interventions in Family Research

In response to these limitations, arts-based research offers a powerful means of addressing the limitations of traditional qualitative methods. By incorporating creative practices such as drawing, painting, performance, and storytelling, ABR enables access to dimensions of experience that are often obscured in text-based inquiry. Gerber et al. (2020) emphasize that ABR captures “sensory-embodied” and “tacit” knowledge that is central to understanding human behavior and relational dynamics.

Extending this perspective, recent empirical research demonstrates the growing application of ABR in family studies. Bally et al. (2023) show how arts-based interventions support emotional expression and communication among families facing medical challenges. Similarly, Dupuis et al. (2024) and Román et al. (2022) highlight the role of arts-based storytelling and performance in exploring caregiving, trauma, and resilience. These studies illustrate ABR’s capacity to humanize research by centering emotion, creativity, and lived experience.

Beyond methodology, ABR also serves as a form of epistemic and social intervention. As Gerber and Siegesmund (2022) argue, ABR challenges dominant paradigms by redefining concepts such as data, evidence, and analysis, thereby expanding the boundaries of qualitative inquiry.

Who Interprets the Image?

As visual and arts-based methods expand, questions about interpretation and expertise have become more prominent. Some scholars argue that meaningful engagement with visual data requires formal artistic training and aesthetic sensitivity (Eisner, 2008; Freeman, 2016).

However, contemporary scholarships increasingly challenge this assumption. Gerber and Siegesmund (2022) highlight ongoing debates about who is qualified to interpret arts-based research and what constitutes adequate competence in visual analysis. Other scholars argue that non-artists can contribute valuable insights, particularly when supported by collaborative and reflexive frameworks (Archibald et al., 2024; Tian, 2023). Non-artist perspectives often bring narrative clarity, contextual awareness, and emotional resonance to the interpretive process.

Simultaneously, challenges such as discomfort, insecurity, and unfamiliarity with artistic practices may limit participation (Meltzer, 2015). Addressing these challenges requires structured facilitation, supportive environments, and transparent methodological processes.

Methodological Integrity in ABR

Alongside questions of expertise, concerns about rigor, validity, and generalizability remain central to debates about ABR. Despite its growing acceptance, it continues to face critiques related to rigor, validity, and generalizability. Critics often question how works of art can be evaluated within established academic frameworks (Hodgins & Boydell, 2013). These concerns reflect broader tensions between dominant research paradigms and emerging methodological approaches.

In response, researchers offer strategies for addressing these concerns. Gerber et al. (2020) advocate for integrating ABR with traditional qualitative methods to enhance credibility while maintaining its distinct epistemological foundations. Similarly, Archibald et al. (2024) emphasize the importance of triangulation, reflexivity, and theoretical transparency.

Further extending these efforts, alternative evaluation criteria have been proposed. Barone and Eisner (2012) suggest concepts such as coherence, generativity, and social significance, while Leavy (2020) highlights the importance of aesthetic impact, audience engagement, and ethical

practice. These frameworks reflect a broader shift toward recognizing multiple forms of legitimacy that align with diverse epistemological traditions.

Social Constructivism and Meaning-making

Given these methodological and epistemological considerations, a theoretical framework is needed to account for how meaning is generated across diverse forms of engagement. The theoretical lens of social constructivism provides important foundation for understanding how meaning is generated from visual data. This theory posits that knowledge is constructed through interaction, experience, and observation within specific cultural and social contexts (Bruner, 1986; Vygotsky, 1978). It assumes that while reality is subjective and shaped by individual perspectives, it can still be systematically studied (Shute & Slee, 2015). Social constructivism closely aligns with arts-based research, which emphasizes interpretive and experiential engagement with human experience through visual and performative means (Ewing & Hughes, 2008; Topolovčan, 2016).

Within visual analysis, constructivist principles position interpretation as an active, experiential process. In visual arts education, and by extension, in visual data analysis, constructivist principles frame interpretation as an active, experiential process. Rather than replicating styles, learners and analysts construct meaning based on their prior knowledge and social context (Tomljenović & Vorkapić, 2020). This aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) emphasis on the role of cultural and pedagogical environments in shaping understanding. Interpretations of visual data, therefore, vary across individuals: a trained artist might focus on formal elements such as composition and technique, while a non-artist may respond more strongly to emotional content or personal resonance.

By emphasizing co-construction of meaning, social constructivism affirms the value of multiple perspectives in arts-based research. In this study, diverse analyst backgrounds underscore how meaning emerges through dialogue, reflection, and creative engagement. ABR, grounded in constructivist thought, promotes collaborative knowledge-building and validates the subjective interpretations of both artists and non-artists. This approach not only fosters inclusivity but also enriches the analysis of visual data by embracing the complexity of interpretation.

Ultimately, applying social constructivist theory to arts-based research supports deeper engagement, critical inquiry, and collaborative understanding. It encourages analysts to recognize the cultural, emotional, and relational dimensions of meaning-making. Acknowledging that artistic meaning is fluid and contextually embedded, this framework helps integrate diverse contributions and interpretive styles, leading to a more holistic and reflective understanding of visual data (Tomljenović & Vorkapić, 2020).

Rationale

Building from the identified gaps in the literature and the guiding theoretical framework, this study responds to an urgent need for greater diversity and equity in research methodologies by examining how arts-based analysis of family data is enriched by varying degrees of artistic experience. While diversity is increasingly acknowledged as essential to innovation, few studies have explored how artistic skill, or its absence, shapes interpretive processes in ABR.

The research question guiding this study was: What are the experiences of visual artists and non-artists in analyzing family visual data? To address this question, we adopted an ABR design grounded in social constructivist epistemology. This design was selected because the study seeks to understand how meaning is co-constructed through interaction, interpretation, and creative engagement rather than discovered as fixed or objective truth.

ABR was particularly appropriate for this study for three reasons. First, the phenomenon under investigation, interpretation of visual family data, is inherently visual, affective, and relational, making traditional text-based analytic approaches insufficient. Second, ABR allows for the integration of multiple modes of knowing, including embodied, intuitive, and symbolic forms of interpretation. Third, the study aims to examine differences in interpretive processes across varying levels of artistic expertise, which requires a design that accommodates both artistic and non-artistic ways of engaging with data.

Rather than viewing analysis as a detached or purely technical procedure, this study conceptualizes analysis as a relational, creative, and iterative process. The research design therefore intentionally integrates artistic production, reflective writing, and collaborative dialogue as interconnected analytic practices.

Methodology

This study employed an arts-based research (ABR) methodology to examine how a diverse team of analysts, artists and non-artists alike, engaged collaboratively in interpreting visual family data. ABR integrates creative processes and artistic media, such as visual arts, performance, and narrative, into the research process to explore complex emotional realities and lived experiences (Leavy, 2020). Consistent with the analytic approach outlined in the subsequent section, this study positions artistic engagement not as supplementary but as central to knowledge production.

To operationalize this approach, the research team included two analysts with formal visual arts training and two without. This intentional combination of disciplinary backgrounds functioned as a purposeful sampling strategy, designed to generate variation in interpretive approaches. By bringing together analysts with different levels of artistic expertise, the study created conditions for examining how interpretive meaning emerges across diverse epistemological orientations. In alignment with the study's emphasis on interpretive diversity, team composition functioned as a methodological mechanism for producing analytic depth.

Our primary data consisted of analysts' reflective artworks, written memos, and individualized codebooks. While both visual and textual data were analyzed, the visual was privileged as the main source of meaning-making. This decision was theoretically grounded in ABR's emphasis on non-linear, embodied, and sensory forms of knowledge, which are often marginalized in traditional qualitative analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Given the dual role of researchers as participants within the analytic process, ethical considerations were integral to the study design. This study received approval from the University Institutional Review Board (IRB Approval No. STUDY00003034) prior to data collection. All procedures adhered to institutional and federal ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. Because the study also examined the analytic process, members of the research team functioned as participants. All analysts provided informed consent for the use of their reflective artworks, analytic memos, and codebooks as data. Participation was voluntary, and individuals retained the right to withdraw their contributions at any stage without penalty.

To protect confidentiality, all data were de-identified prior to analysis. Identifying information was removed from textual materials, and visual data were reviewed to minimize potential identifiers where possible. All data were stored securely on password-protected systems

accessible only to the research team. These procedures supported both ethical responsibility and the transparency required for rigorous arts-based inquiry.

Analysts Positionality

Reflexivity was foundational to our analytic process. Following Griffiths (2011) and Leavy (2020), we made explicit the identities, cultural orientations, and epistemological commitments that shaped our interpretive work. The research team's diversity across geography, culture, language, training, and worldview deepened our dialogue and challenged us to remain alert to assumptions and blind spots.

The first author, a cisgender Caribbean-born female, collected the visual data from families and facilitated the team's collaborative analytical process. Her dual expertise in marriage and family therapy and art therapy shaped the project's relational and visual emphasis. Her shared cultural background with some participant families positioned her as both insider and guide.

The second author, a cisgender female doctoral student in art therapy, was born and raised in China and now lives in the U.S. Although she lacked formal ABR training prior to the study, her work across clinical, educational, and museum contexts in both Eastern and Western cultures informed her perspective. Her limited familiarity with Caribbean culture added a necessary outsider lens that sparked rich interpretive conversations.

The third author, a cisgender Taiwanese female graduate student in art therapy, also had no prior ABR training but immersed herself in foundational texts before the analysis. Her clinical experience spanned inpatient and outpatient settings, and her understanding of Caribbean culture emerged through collaborative dialogue and volunteer work in regional community art therapy.

Two undergraduate analysts participated in the study through a faculty-mentored research assistantship program. One was a cisgender Latinx male political science major; the other a cisgender Afro-Caribbean female psychology major with direct cultural familiarity. Neither had formal training in visual arts or ABR prior to the project, yet both contributed meaningfully through reflective engagement and cultural insight.

Data Collection

To explore how individuals with different artistic backgrounds engage with visual family data, this study collected multiple types of data that captured both the process and products of analyzing art. In this project, the analysts themselves functioned as participants, and the data consisted of the materials they generated while interpreting family-created artwork. This design allowed the study to examine the analytic process from within that offered insight into how meaning is constructed through engagement with visual data.

The data included reflective artworks, analytic memos, and codes. Reflective artmaking was treated not as illustration but as an epistemological tool. Drawing on Skukauskaite et al. (2022), artmaking functioned as a mode of thinking with the data, inviting intuition, gesture, and affect into the analytic process. This approach enabled analysts to engage with the visual material in embodied and imaginative ways, extending beyond purely cognitive interpretation. Analytic memos complemented visual responses by capturing moments of insight, uncertainty, and interpretive development. Together, the artworks, memos, and codebooks formed a layered and evolving archive of meaning-making that reflected both individual perspectives and the broader collaborative analytic process. Individual codes were collected by each analyst before collaborative team meetings for synthesis of coding.

Analytic Process

Analysis unfolded over a two-month period and followed a three-stage iterative design that integrated independent reflection with collective engagement. Each stage was framed by weekly team meetings that created space for dialogue, feedback, and fluid re-interpretation. At the outset, the research team established a shared conceptual foundation focused on family resilience and the cultural context of Caribbean families from which the visual data were drawn. This process was informed by relevant literature on family resilience and coping. To ground ourselves in arts-based research methodology, we reviewed foundational texts including *Method Meets Art* (Leavy, 2020) and *Arts-Based Research Methods for Educational Researchers* (Tian, 2023). The first author facilitated a series of training sessions that introduced core ABR principles, visual analysis strategies, and reflexive techniques.

In the first phase, analysts independently engaged with the visual data through close observation, reflective artmaking, and memo writing. During this phase, initial codes were generated inductively from both visual and textual responses. Analysts identified recurring visual elements, emotional tones, and symbolic meanings, documenting these insights in their individual codebooks. This phase prioritized intuitive and embodied engagement with the data, allowing analysts to develop personal interpretations before being influenced by group discussion.

The second phase involved collaborative coding and interpretive dialogue through weekly team meetings. During these sessions, analysts shared their artworks, memos, and preliminary codes, engaging in discussion to compare interpretations, refine codes, and explore differences in perspective. This process functioned as a form of analytic triangulation, as multiple viewpoints were brought into dialogue to deepen understanding and enhance analytic rigor. Through constant comparison, codes were revised, expanded, and organized into broader conceptual categories. The recursive nature of this phase reflects the nonlinear temporality of arts-based analysis, where meaning evolves through repeated engagement and relational interaction.

In the third and final phase, the team synthesized findings into overarching thematic categories that addressed the central research question. This process involved grouping related codes and images, identifying patterns across visual and textual data, and integrating individual and collective insights into cohesive interpretations. Although narrative description was used to articulate findings, visual meaning remained the primary analytic anchor. When discrepancies in interpretation arose, these were not resolved through consensus alone but were treated as analytically generative. Divergent interpretations were discussed and documented, and in some cases retained as parallel readings rather than collapsed into a single code. Final thematic categories were developed through iterative comparison across individual codebooks and group discussions, with attention to both convergence and divergence in meaning.

To enhance credibility and ensure cultural resonance, the first author conducted member checks with three participating families via email. Participants were invited to review interpretations and provide feedback, for confirmation, clarification, or revision of findings.

Rigor and Trustworthiness

Rigor and trustworthiness in this study were established through criteria aligned with qualitative and arts-based research traditions, including credibility, dependability, and reflexivity. In arts-based research (ABR), rigor is not assessed through positivist notions of validity and reliability but through transparency of process, depth of engagement, and the coherence of interpretive meaning-making (Barone & Eisner, 2012).

First, in establishing analytic rigor, a clearly structured, multi-phase analytic process involving independent coding, collaborative refinement, and thematic synthesis. As outlined earlier in this article, analysts engaged in iterative cycles of observation, response artmaking, memo writing, and code development, followed by dialogic group discussions. This iterative and non-linear process reflects the flexible and emergent nature of arts-based inquiry, where rigor is achieved through sustained engagement and transparency rather than rigid procedural standardization.

Building on this structured approach, triangulation further strengthened credibility. Triangulation was achieved across multiple data sources, including visual artworks, written memos, and collaborative discussion notes. The integration of visual and textual data aligns with ABR's emphasis on multimodality, which enhances interpretive depth and supports the credibility of findings by engaging multiple ways of knowing (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Leavy, 2020). The use of individual codebooks alongside collaborative coding further strengthened dependability by allowing analytic decisions to be traced across stages of analysis.

In parallel with triangulation, reflexivity functioned as a central mechanism for ensuring trustworthiness. Analysts documented their assumptions, emotional responses, and interpretive decisions through memoing and ongoing team dialogue. This aligns with qualitative principles of navigating between subjectivity and reflexivity, where researchers critically examine how their positionalities shape interpretation (Williams & Morrow, 2009). In ABR, reflexivity is particularly important as knowledge is understood to be co-constructed through relational and embodied engagement rather than discovered as objective truth.

Finally, extending these strategies, collaborative analysis further enhanced trustworthiness. The analytic process created a dialogic space in which interpretations were negotiated, challenged, and refined across researchers with diverse epistemological and experiential perspectives. Rather than seeking consensus alone, the study embraced interpretive multiplicity as a methodological strength, consistent with ABR's commitment to epistemological plurality and the coexistence of multiple meanings (Gerber et al., 2020).

Results

This study explored how both artists and non-artists engaged in the analysis of family-generated artwork, with the aim of understanding how different relationships to visual expression shaped interpretive processes. Across the analysis, a pattern emerged: meaning-making varied systematically according to analysts' experiences with visual information, while also being influenced through collaborative interactions. Using ABR within a social constructivist framework, we engaged with the data through observation, reflection, coding, and artmaking. This iterative and relational process generated diverse insights, demonstrating that meaning-making in visual analysis is not fixed but dynamically co-constructed.

Analytic Strategies and Coding Practices

A main result of this study was the variety in how analysts approached visual data, which became evident through the range of analytic strategies employed across the research team. These strategies were shaped by analysts' backgrounds and theoretical orientations, resulting in distinct yet complementary modes of engagement. The second author, an artist, emphasized formal qualities, such as color, line, and spatial arrangement. Her process involved creating response art alongside layered written descriptions, which were then organized into evolving interpretive categories through iterative engagement with the data and participant narratives.

Meanwhile, the third author adopted a multimodal approach grounded in ABR, integrating theoretical readings, team dialogue, and response art as interconnected forms of interpretation. One of her pieces visualized a road and cross to represent spiritual direction and connection identified in the original artwork (Figure 1).

Figure 1
Artist's Reflection of a Family's Artwork



Another response translated emotional intensity into monochromatic imagery, evoking themes of surveillance, tension, and internalized distress (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Artist's Art reflection on a Family's Artwork



In contrast, non-artist analysts primarily engaged the visual data through structured observation and textual interpretation. Their analyses often involved identifying visual motifs, organizing elements into categories, and integrating family narratives into descriptive accounts. While visual engagement was less frequent among non-artists, one analyst experimented with response art as a way to extend his reflections.

This pattern suggests that artistic engagement operated not only as a mode of representation but also as a form of analytic reasoning. Rather than extracting meaning from the image, artist-analysts generated meaning through interaction with materials, gestures, and symbolic associations. In contrast, non-artist analysts tended to construct meaning through sequencing, categorization, and narrative structuring. These differences indicate that in ABR, interpretation may be inseparable from creation, challenging distinctions between data analysis and artistic production.

Expressive Engagements through Artmaking

These differences in analytic orientation became more pronounced through artmaking, which functioned as a primary site of interpretation for artist-analysts. Building on these analytic strategies, most of the team members deepened their inquiry through artmaking, a hallmark of ABR. The third author produced two visual responses that captured abstract and symbolic dimensions of the data, one using a road, paper airplane, and cross to represent spiritual movement, and another depicting ominous figures and observers to explore emotional vulnerability. These works functioned as sites of affective insight, where meaning emerged through visual and material exploration rather than solely through verbal articulation.

Another artist-analyst created a clay sculpture titled “Strengths” (Figure 3), using colorful, unrefined materials arranged in spiral and wave forms. The sculpture represented emotional connection, familial resilience, and life's unpredictable rhythms, emerging directly from the analyst's sensory and interpretive dialogue with one family's artwork.

Figure 3

Artist's Art Data Response titled "Strengths"



Figure 4 highlights a non-artist's engagement with visual reflection, in which he reimagined elements of a family's artwork through his own visual language. Although less frequent, this example demonstrates that non-artists can also engage meaningfully in visual interpretation when given space to experiment. This response exemplified how non-artists can participate in visual inquiry through personal expression, even without formal artistic training.

Figure 1

Non-Artist Art Data Response



Textual and Sensory Interpretations

While artmaking provided interpretive pathways, textual and descriptive analysis also offered contributions to understanding the visual data. One non-artist analyst developed detailed memos that traced his perceptual and emotional responses to each piece. His writings about most of the visual art began with descriptions of color and form, evolving into abstract themes and interpretive codes. For example, he wrote:

“a complex and mind-provoking piece compared to all the other pieces. I first began to deconstruct the piece by color and then form. The brighter colors captured my attention faster and subconsciously I created sections of the piece. I saw 3 major sections: red, blue, and yellow. Afterwards. I followed the direction of the arrows, letters, and droplet-like forms on the bottom left. The illustration is organized like a process chart used to convey chronological series. Seeing all these forms gravitating towards this sun-like enflamed shape denotes a sense of greater importance for an idea this shape represents. I followed these motifs of emotions to then create a phrase or word that establishes categories within the qualitative data set.”

This excerpt illustrates how non-artist analysis moved from perceptual organization toward conceptual abstraction. Rather than relying on symbolic transformation, meaning emerged through sequencing, segmentation, and the identification of relational patterns within the image. Although he produced fewer visual responses than the artist-analysts, his work reflected embodied perception and intuitive engagement consistent with ABR principles.

In contrast, another non-artist contributed primarily through a list of codes submitted late in the process without accompanying visual or narrative reflections. While more limited in scope, these codes contributed to team discussions and informed the overall interpretive framework.

Interpretive Differences and Thematic Alignment

Taken together, these patterns highlight differences in interpretive orientation across analysts. Artist-analysts emphasized symbolic meaning, visual metaphor, and emotional resonance, whereas non-artists focused more on descriptive labeling, narrative structure, and explicit visual cues. These differences reflect not only variation in analytic strategy but also distinct epistemological approaches to meaning-making. Non-artists leaned toward descriptive labeling, narrative structure, or explicit visual cues. These variations influenced code development and application, particularly in later stages, where some individually generated codes were not taken up by the group.

Final decisions regarding the organization of codes into broader themes, particularly those related to family resilience, were initially made collaboratively by the first and third authors. These themes were subsequently shared with three family participants for feedback, allowing for confirmation, clarification, and refinement of interpretations.

Team Process and Collaborative Dynamics

Collaboration itself emerged as an important analytic aspect that shaped how meaning was produced. The research team met weekly over a two-month period to facilitate reflection, dialogue, and analytic refinement. However, engagement varied among members. One artist and one non-artist consistently attended meetings and contributed reflective codes, while another artist participated primarily through submitted visual responses rather than discussion. Another artist regularly submitted visual reflections but was less present during discussions. Inconsistent documentation and limited sharing of coding notes, particularly toward the end of the process, constrained some aspects of collaborative momentum.

Moreover, not all team members engaged in artmaking. Non-artist analysts expressed hesitation about visual production, highlighting the role of comfort and familiarity in shaping participation. These dynamics suggest that engagement in ABR is influenced not only by epistemological orientation but also by confidence, training, and perceived legitimacy of different forms of contribution.

Across these findings, a clear analytic pattern emerged in the movement between expansion and stabilization of meaning. Artist-analysts tended to expand meaning through symbolic and affective exploration, while non-artist analysts worked to stabilize meaning through categorization and narrative structure. The interaction between these processes enabled the team to move iteratively between ambiguity and clarity, suggesting that rigorous visual analysis may depend on maintaining this productive tension rather than resolving it.

The findings suggest a conceptual model of collaborative visual analysis in which meaning emerges through the interaction of distinct but interdependent interpretive processes. Within this model, artistic engagement contributes generative, symbolic, and affective insights, while non-artistic engagement contributes structure, coherence, and analytic organization. Rather than privileging one mode over the other, the model highlights the necessity of their interaction. This reframes ABR from a focus on artistic expertise to one of relational and process-based rigor.

Discussion

This study explored how visual artists and non-artists engage in the collaborative analysis of family-generated artwork. Guided by the research question, what are the experiences of visual artists and non-artists in analyzing family visual data? The findings demonstrate that interpretive processes diverge systematically based on analysts' orientations toward visual data while also

converging through collaborative interaction. Specifically, artist-analysts tended to expand meaning through symbolic, affective, and embodied engagement, whereas non-artist analysts worked to stabilize meaning through categorization, narrative structuring, and descriptive clarity.

Rather than functioning as competing approaches, these directions interacted dynamically throughout the analytic process. Meaning emerged not from any single interpretive stance but through the movement between expansion and stabilization identified in the Results. These findings position interpretive diversity not as variation to be managed, but as a central mechanism of knowledge production in arts-based research.

Building on this overarching pattern, three major findings emerged from this study. First, artist and non-artist analysts engaged in distinct yet complementary interpretive approaches, reflecting different ways of knowing. Second, meaningful contributions to visual art analysis were not limited to those with formal artistic training but were distributed across participants through varied modes of engagement. Third, meaning was co-constructed through collaborative, multimodal interaction rather than residing in the visual data itself.

Different Ways of Knowing

Extending from these core findings, the results demonstrate that artist and non-artist analysts engaged in different yet interdependent interpretive processes. Artist-analysts created meaning through symbolic transformation, affective resonance, and material engagement, while non-artist analysts constructed meaning through sequencing, categorization, and narrative coherence. These differences reflect not only variation in analytic technique but different epistemological orientations toward how meaning is produced from visual data.

These orientations did not function in isolation. Instead, they interacted through ongoing dialogue and iterative engagement with the data. Symbolic and affective interpretations introduced by artist-analysts were often clarified and grounded through the narrative and structural contributions of non-artists, while non-artist-generated codes were expanded and deepened through artistic reflection.

This divergence was most evident in the movement between expansion and balance of meaning identified in the results. Artist-analysts expanded interpretive possibilities through abstraction and metaphor, while non-artist analysts organized those interpretations within structured categories. The interaction between these processes enabled the research team to engage in ambiguity without prematurely resolving it, which suggests that analytic rigor in ABR may depend on supporting, rather than reducing, interpretive tension.

This finding extends previous scholarship on ABR, which has emphasized embodiment and multimodality (Gerber et al., 2020; Leavy, 2020), by demonstrating how epistemological differences function in practice within collaborative analysis. Interpretive diversity is not simply a characteristic of interdisciplinary teams; it is a way through which meaning is actively created.

Assumptions about Expertise

In addition to highlighting epistemological differences, the findings also challenge conventional assumptions about expertise in visual analysis. The study strongly supports and extends social constructivist theory. As outlined in the literature, social constructivism conceptualizes knowledge as co-constructed through interaction, context, and shared experience (Bruner, 1986; Vygotsky, 1978). The results provide clear empirical support for this perspective: meaning did not reside within the visual data itself but emerged through iterative dialogue, visual production, and collaborative interpretation.

It is important to recognize that this process was multimodal. Analysts engaged not only through verbal discussion but also through artmaking, memoing, and embodied interaction with materials. These findings extend constructivist theory into explicitly visual and sensory domains, that demonstrates meaning-making in ABR is not only dialogic but also tangible and process-oriented.

Additionally, the collaborative nature of the analysis further highlights the role of intersubjectivity in knowledge creation. Interpretations were not simply shared but transformed through interaction, as analysts responded to, challenged, and built upon one another's perspectives. This reinforces the idea that knowledge is negotiated rather than discovered, particularly in contexts involving complex and relational data such as family-generated artwork.

Collaborative Meaning-Making and Social Constructivism

Building directly from these insights, the findings affirm and extend the study's use of social constructivist by demonstrating that meaning in visual analysis is co-constructed through interaction, context, and shared engagement (Bruner, 1986; Walker & Shore, 2015). As evidenced in the results, meaning did not exist in the visual data itself but emerged through ongoing dialogue, negotiation, and collaborative interpretation among analysts with differing perspectives.

Importantly, this process was not exclusively dialogic but also multimodal. Analysts engaged with the data through visual, textual, and embodied practices, including artmaking, memoing, and team discussions. These types of engagement worked together to influence interpretation to show that meaning-making in ABR is relational. In this way, the study extends social constructivist theory by demonstrating that knowledge is constructed not only through interaction but through multisensory and process-oriented engagement with data.

The findings also highlight the role of intersubjectivity in collaborative analysis. Meaning emerged through the interplay of multiple perspectives, as analysts responded to and built upon one another's interpretations. This dynamic reflects Gerber and Siegesmund's (2022) view of ABR as an iterative interplay between theory and practice, where knowledge is continuously redefined through collaborative engagement.

Furthermore, the results suggest that analytic depth is enhanced through the integration of diverse interpretive approaches. The interaction between symbolic, affective, and structured approaches of analysis supported the team in moving between ambiguity and clarity, reinforcing that meaning is negotiated rather than fixed. For family research, this highlights the importance of designing studies that incorporate multimodal forms of engagement and prioritize collaboration as a central site of knowledge production.

Interpreting through Tension

While the preceding sections emphasize collaboration and co-construction, the findings also point more specifically to the productive role of interpretive tension. As identified in the results, artist-analysts tended to expand meaning through symbolic and affective exploration, whereas non-artist analysts worked to stabilize meaning through categorization and narrative organization.

This tension was not resolved but continued throughout the analytic process. Rather than converging on a single interpretation, the research team moved iteratively between ambiguity and clarity, allowing multiple interpretations to coexist and inform one another. This process suggests

that rigor in ABR analysis may depend not on reducing interpretive differences but on maintaining the dynamic interplay between them.

In extending existing understandings of ABR, this model specifies how interpretive diversity operates in practice. Rather than viewing artistic and non-artistic approaches as separate or hierarchical, the findings indicate that their interaction is necessary for deeper analytic engagement. In this sense, meaning emerges not from consensus alone but from the relational negotiation between differing ways of knowing.

Implications for Family Research

Given these theoretical and methodological insights, the findings of this study offer several implications for family research, particularly in relation to how visual artists and non-artists experience the analysis of family visual data. Overall, the results suggest that interpretation is strengthened when research designs intentionally prioritize epistemological diversity, multimodal engagement, and collaborative meaning-making. Aligning analytic practices with these principles allows family research to more fully capture the emotional, relational, and cultural complexity of lived experience.

First, the study highlights the importance of intentionally incorporating interpretive diversity into research design. Artist-analysts tended to expand meaning through symbolic and affective exploration, whereas non-artist analysts worked to stabilize meaning through categorization and narrative structuring. This interplay suggests that differing epistemological orientations generate distinct yet complementary insights. For family research, this indicates that analytically diverse teams are not only inclusive but also function as a methodological strategy for deepening the interpretation of complex relational data.

Second, the findings demonstrate that meaningful engagement with visual data does not require formal artistic training. Non-artist analysts contributed narrative, structural, and culturally grounded interpretations that were essential to the analytic process. This challenges assumptions about who is qualified to interpret visual material and broadens participation in arts-based research. For researchers working with family-generated artwork, these findings support more accessible and inclusive analytic practices.

In addition, the study highlights the value of collaborative and multimodal analytic processes. Meaning emerged not from visual data alone, but through interaction, dialogue, and the integration of visual, textual, and reflective forms of engagement. The dynamic movement between expansion and stabilization of meaning further suggests that analytic depth is enhanced when multiple interpretive approaches are held in productive tension rather than reduced to a single perspective. For family research, this reinforces the importance of designs that support iterative and dialogic meaning-making across modalities.

Lastly, the findings emphasize the need for structured facilitation in interdisciplinary visual analysis. Differences in comfort, expertise, and engagement influenced how analysts participated, indicating that inclusive ABR requires supports to enhance analytic outcomes, such as training, reflexive practices, and clearly defined analytic frameworks. For example, research teams might pair analysts with varying levels of artistic experience and structure sessions to incorporate both visual responses and verbal reflection. Providing scaffolding for non-artists, such as guided prompts or low-stakes artmaking exercises, may reduce hesitation and support fuller participation.

Limitations and Future Directions

This inquiry was shaped by several intersecting limitations that invite ongoing reflection rather than closure. The research team was composed of individuals with varying educational levels and disciplinary backgrounds, including undergraduate and graduate students. While such diversity offered a richness of perspectives, it also introduced inconsistencies in analytic depth and fluency with arts-based research (ABR). In particular, analysts' differing degrees of familiarity with thematic analysis may have influenced the language used in code development, at times privileging accessibility over theoretical nuance. These tensions underscore the need for ongoing dialogue around knowledge translation within ABR, especially when diverse forms of expertise converge.

Gender composition and cisnormativity also marked the analytic process. With three cisgender female analysts and one cisgender male, the group lacked broader gender diversity, and all analysts identified as cisgender. This homogeneity likely shaped the interpretive lens, particularly in relation to themes involving gender identity and expression. While ABR aims to hold space for multiple ways of knowing, this study reiterates that the identities of those who engage with the data remain deeply consequential to the knowledge produced. Future work would benefit from intentionally assembling more gender-diverse teams to trouble normative interpretations and enrich critical reflexivity.

Cultural location further complicated the research encounter. The visual data emerged from Caribbean families, yet most of the analysts were situated outside of this cultural context. Except for one analyst with direct Caribbean experience, the rest approached the data as cultural outsiders. This positionality offered moments of fresh insight but also carried the risk of misreading or oversimplifying culturally embedded symbols. Rather than viewing this as a methodological failure, we regard it as a call to deepen relational accountability in cross-cultural visual research that highlights humility, ongoing cultural consultation, and the ethical tension between interpretation and appropriation.

Temporal constraints also shaped the inquiry. The analysis unfolded over a two-month period, which, while generative in its intensity, limited opportunities for prolonged engagement and iterative re-visioning. Given that ABR often thrives on slow thinking, embodied reflection, and recursive sense-making, future projects might consider elongated timelines that allow for deeper integration of visual, narrative, and affective data.

Power relations within the team added another layer of complexity. While the project was designed to be collaborative, dynamics of facilitation, disciplinary capital, and research experience inevitably influenced whose interpretations carried more weight. For example, the first author's dual role as data collector and team facilitator, while necessary for cohesion, may have unintentionally shaped analytic direction. Similarly, less experienced analysts sometimes deferred to more senior members, potentially limiting the epistemic breadth of the findings. These dynamics highlight the importance of reflexive tools, such as positionality mapping or shared authorship negotiations, to unsettle hierarchies and make room for polyvocality within the research collective.

Moving forward, future research should further examine how training, facilitation, and methodological design influence participation in arts-based research. Longitudinal studies could explore how analysts' comfort with visual methods evolves over time, particularly among non-artists.

Also, future studies should expand the diversity of research teams, including greater variation in cultural, gender, and disciplinary backgrounds, to further investigate how positionality shapes interpretation. Research could also explore different artistic modalities, such as digital media or performance, to examine how these forms influence analytic processes.

Finally, there is a need for continued development of evaluation frameworks for ABR that balance artistic integrity with methodological rigor. Advancing such frameworks will be critical for

addressing ongoing concerns about validity and generalizability and strengthening the position of ABR within broader research paradigms.

Conclusion

This study examined how visual artists and non-artists collaboratively analyze family-generated artwork, with particular attention to how differing orientations shape interpretive processes. Across the analysis, the findings demonstrate that meaning-making in arts-based research is both divergent and convergent: analysts approached visual data through distinct epistemological lenses, yet meaning ultimately emerged through collaborative interaction. This positions interpretive diversity not as a challenge to analytic consistency, but as a central mechanism of knowledge production.

Three main contributions inform the study's conclusions. First, artist and non-artist analysts engaged in distinct yet complementary ways of knowing, with artists expanding meaning through symbolic, affective, and embodied engagement, and non-artists stabilizing meaning through categorization, narrative structuring, and descriptive clarity. Second, meaningful engagement with visual data was not limited to those with formal artistic training, as non-artist analysts made essential contributions to interpretation. Third, meaning did not reside within the visual data itself but was co-constructed through collaborative, multimodal interaction.

Taken together, these findings underscore the importance of recognizing epistemological diversity as foundational to analytic practice. The interaction between symbolic, narrative, embodied, and structured approaches illustrates that different ways of knowing are not only compatible but interdependent in generating depth of interpretation. This reinforces the need for methodological frameworks that intentionally support the integration of multiple analytic orientations.

In extending social constructivist theory, the study demonstrates that meaning-making in arts-based research is not only dialogic but also multimodal and process-oriented. Knowledge was constructed through the integration of visual, textual, and embodied forms of engagement, highlighting that interpretation emerges through relational and intersubjective processes. This contributes to a more expansive understanding of constructivism that includes sensory and material dimensions of analysis.

At the same time, the findings highlight the productive role of interpretive tension. The ongoing movement between expansion and stabilization of meaning suggests that analytic rigor in arts-based research depends on maintaining, rather than resolving, differences in interpretation. Meaning emerged through this dynamic interplay, indicating that ambiguity and negotiation are not limitations but necessary conditions for deeper analytic engagement.

These insights carry important implications for family research. Designing studies that intentionally incorporate epistemological diversity, multimodal engagement, and collaborative analytic processes can enhance the interpretation of complex relational and cultural experiences. Additionally, expanding participation beyond those with formal artistic training supports more inclusive and accessible approaches to visual data analysis. Structured facilitation, including training, reflexivity, and scaffolded engagement, further strengthens the effectiveness of interdisciplinary analytic teams.

Overall, this study contributes to qualitative and arts-based research by demonstrating how collaborative, multimodal analysis of family-generated artwork can generate rich, reflexive, and contextually grounded interpretations. In addressing a gap in research on how family-created visual data are analyzed, the study positions interpretive diversity as both a methodological resource and a necessary condition for advancing knowledge in family research.

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Ethical Approval

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