

# HEURISTIC INQUIRY INTO INTERSECTIONAL ASPECTS OF THE SELF, AN ART-BASED EXPLORATION

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**HEURISTIČKO ISTRAŽIVANJE U INTERSEKCIJSKE  
VIDOVE SEBSTVA, ISTRAŽIVANJE TEMELJENO NA  
UMJETNOSTI**

Završni rad poslijediplomskog specijalističkog studija

Osijek, 2022

**IZJAVA**  
**O AKADEMSKOJ ČESTITOSTI, PRAVU PRIJENOSA INTELEKTUALNOG**  
**VLASNIŠTVA, SUGLASNOSTI ZA OBJAVU U INSTITUCIJSKIM**  
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Potpis Leonilda Conti

# **A Heuristic Inquiry into Intersectional Aspects of the Self, an Art-Based Exploration**

## **ABSTRACT**

This research explores the path of growth and definition of Self-Identity; through the lens of Erikson's (1968), stages of psychosocial development, giving space to external influences, crises and adaptation strategies towards which man tends. The study will apply heuristic research, in the tradition of C. Moustakas (1990) and arts-based methodology (McNiff, 1998; Allen, 1995) to which an intersectional perspective overlaps (Hays, 2016).

Addressing the Identity of the person, respecting personal and contextual variables, offers a more complex and complete perspective of the human being.

The methods of this study follow a heuristic, arts-based approach to carry out qualitatively in-depth research on human experience. The author uses autobiographical material as sources of data in the form of memos and artworks. This study seeks to inform art therapists of the processes that might be useful for clients to use artworks through introspection, self-exploration and the integration of diversity and cultural influences on one's sense of self.

*Key terms: Heuristic research / Art-based research / Intersectionality / Psychosocial develop / Self-Identity / Identity vs identity crisis: identity diffusion, disruption's self, moratorium) / Autobiographical memory*

# Heurističko Istraživanje u Interseksijske Vidove Sebstva, Istraživanje Temeljeno na Umjetnosti

## SAŽETAK

Istraživanjem se namjerava istražiti smjer i odrednice samo-identifikacije (sebstva) kroz prizmu Eriksona (1968.) psihološkog razvoja, ostavljajući prostor za vanjske utjecaje, krize i prihvaćanje strategija kojima čovjek teži.

U istraživanju će se primijeniti heuristički pristup C. Moustakasa (1990.) i metodologije utemeljene na umjetničkom izričaju (McNiff, 1998.; Allen 1995.), na kojem pripada i interseksijsko preklapanje (Hays, 2016.).

Pogledom u identitet osobe, poštivanje osobnosti i kontekstualnih varijabli, pružiti složeniji i potpuniji uvid u ljudsko biće.

Metode ovog istraživanja slijede heuristički pristup temeljen na umjetničkom izričaju kako bi se provela kvalitativna dubinska analiza ljudskog iskustva. Autorica koristi autobiografski materijal kao izvor informacija u formi sjećanja i umjetničkih radova. Ovo istraživanje želi informirati art terapeute o procesima koji bi mogli biti korisni za klijente, da koriste art terapiju kroz introspekciju, samo-istraživanje i integraciju različitosti i kulturnih utjecaja na njihov osjećaj sebstva.

Ključni pojmovi: *Heurističko istraživanje / Istraživanje temeljeno na umjetnosti / Psihosocijalni razvoj / Intersekcija / Sebstva / identitet nasuprot krizi identiteta: poremećaj sebe, difuzija identiteta, moratorij) / Autobiografsko pamćenje*

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

As I began my journey in art therapy, in a new phase of my life, I emphasized the importance of reflecting on my own life's experience as a form of research, with the intention of bringing new knowledge to this field. During my studies, I realized that the socio-cultural context as well as other aspects external to the person (work, events, interpersonal dynamics) actually play an important influence in defining a person's identity and knowledge. Psychosocial development theory (Frost, 2015) also offers a version of identity which can explain both the ability to and the reluctance to change. This study has the intention of deepening the dynamics that contribute to the formation of identity, exploring processes that use artworks to foster introspection, self-exploration and the integration of different aspects of Self. Personal reflections, following the heuristic process within an arts-based exploration and an intersectional perspective, have shaped this research project. Without taking away the authenticity of subjective experience, the research aims to offer a framework for universal reflection (Englander, 2012).

## 1.1. Statement of the problem

The search for the Self in this study conceived as a multilevel interactive system of the individual and social Self (Thagard, 2014); it is a long and demanding path. The search in the course of life for a sense of fulfillment, of personal well-being, defined with the concept of identity synthesis (Erikson, 1968), presents different states of identity: diffusion, moratorium, foreclosure and achievement (Erikson, 1959; Marcia, 1966). It's an existential path which all people live, but not all of them have the skills or the competence necessary to overcome difficulties, that can persist as discomforts. Erikson had already pointed out that unresolved challenges in childhood drag on into adulthood as unresolved problems (Erikson, 1950, 1968). Recent studies on the search of Self and the sense of belonging in adolescents have highlighted an amplification of their state of disorientation, creating strong challenges between the inner world and external forces, as well as situations of dramatic impact for the development of the person (Parisian, 2015). Again, "In Western cultural contexts, it is important to be the same person, at home, at work or at school, and with friends" (Schwartz et

al., 2009, p.143) requesting efficiency and guarantees of continuous performance. The image and sense that everyone has of themselves constantly seeks correspondence in the external world - family or society in the broad sense to give continuity to themselves (Thagard, 2012). The contemporary world, given the mobilization of people, favors continuous exchanges of people with different cultural, socio-economic and political backgrounds. The globalization within the “internet age” (Kay, 2018) and the virtual communication of social networks, requires the person to be flexible, efficient, resilient to sudden changes and to take on different roles, sometimes simultaneously (Coté, 2018).

Precisely the possible discrepancy between the needs of an individual path in its individuation process, and the realities of increasingly complex and not very supportive socio-cultural-economic contexts, mean that different generational histories and cultural values tend to intertwine and overlap. These factors can influence the development of identity by making it a more passive receptor, unable to make a proper intrapsychic contribution. This situation includes a lack of self-direction and a clear sense of purpose. The person is unable to identify himself as distinct from others (seeking instead to belong to a constantly evolving group) and does not mature in the awareness of his own individual personality (Erikson, 1963). Diversity and complexity can trigger confusion and disruptions, both for the individual and for the community. The prime danger of these last decades, therefore, is identity confusion, which can express itself in excessively prolonged moratorium (Erikson 1963), causing symptoms such as anxiety or depression (Schwartz, 2002). Diffusion status or identity crisis are individual and collective responses to situations experienced as oppressive, which increase the sense of inferiority, lack of self-esteem, inadequacy (Marcia, 1966; 2002). Class, gender, ethnicity, religion and other social structural determinisms are part of identity and the impact on action (Frost, 2015).

Being able to define one's own identity as holographic beings, accompanying it in its psychosocial growth through the various stages of life, lining multiple stories, re-valuing richness and multiplicity (Allen, 1995), is very important to reach a sense of achievement, avoiding being overwhelmed by others, their ideas or expectations.

## **1.2. Relevance**

This heuristic, arts-based research seeks to qualitatively explore the richness of Self-identity and the complexity in the path of growth, training and in its response to the world. The growth of the individual, in its complexity and diversity as a social being, is a relevant theme

in contemporary time. This topic can influence the field of art therapy by the educational, psycho-pedagogical, psycho-social, cultural fields, as well as all sectors that address the problems and aspects related to evolutionary processes of adaptation, integration, adjustment of individuals. The psychosocial theory is second Frost (2015) “in the process of a re-emergence, because it considers where it is being generated, and in what contexts” (S95). Within the need to relate individual and collective, the intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) emerges with its ability to understand the simultaneity of different aspects, accepting the complexity of the world. Identity is a set of complex, often contradictory and conflicting psychological, physical, geographical, political, cultural, historical, and spiritual factors (Parisian, 2015). Research evidence has revealed that what is critical for developing a healthy, coherent, and meaningful sense of identity is the use of social-cognitive processing that is characterized by self-exploration, self-reflection. The balanced use of assimilation and adaptation processes together with a high level of commitment to one's self-constructed identity (Schwartz, 2001), greatly increases self-knowledge. As Talwar (2015) pointed out, discourse surrounding multiculturalism and cultural competence are now an accepted fact, even central to the education of art therapists: culture diversity and identity are essential concepts in art therapy. Within the intersectional framework, identity and difference are not viewed in isolation from each other (Talwar 2010). The increasing popularity of the concept of intersectionality in the social sciences, as an emerging approach to explore power, privilege, and oppression (Parisian, 2015), represents an opportunity also for art therapy fields to explore and affirm its possibilities and potentiality.

McNiff (2009) explained: “In a pluralistic contemporary society cultural differences are present within age groups, genders, races, people of different sexual preferences, and political and religious values. If therapy is approached with sensitivity to differences, then all relationships between therapists and clients can be viewed as meetings between cultures (p.103)”. Facilitating situations and encounters in which diversity is the theme of reflection and deepening becomes an interest in social policies, and within this horizon “Art Therapy is a fine avenue to the developmental task of identity formation” (Rubin, 2010, p.175).

### **1.3. Purpose of study**

This research endeavors to increase the interest towards an understanding of complexity and diversity applied to the identity through different qualitative approaches: heuristic design and arts-based method. This study intends to contribute to a deeper and more complete knowledge

of the Self. Self is understood in the original sense of wholeness (Jung, 1928), experience of being, unifying the consciousness and unconsciousness, integrating various aspects of one's personality and realizing the process of individuation.

Considering the lens of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; Hill Collins, 1995), concept originally advanced by feminist authors for whom the crossing of multiple forms of oppression produces consequences among individuals, this study proposes a therapeutic space in which to redeem all the effort required by the person to overcome difficulties and moments of crisis, reviewing his path, enhancing it and entrusting it to the next step, re-creating his story (Allen, 1995).

The heuristic method, as well as the arts-based research, are precise choices for this area. As the author / researcher of this article, I believe that through artistic creation and visualization, it is possible to tap into personal information that has remained unexpressed and participate in the internalization processes necessary for the search for the Self. As McNiff has confirmed (1998), artworks can capture non-verbal and unconsciousness experience. The non-verbal image captures the inexplicable essences of relationships - past and present - giving them shape and meaning at the same time (Harter, 2007).

It is a contribution to continue the construction of identity, giving a current meaning to events that have already happened, to feelings already experienced, to actions that have already taken place. As Beaumont (2009) mentioned the self-reflective style of identity processing predicts wisdom, self-actualization, self-transcendence, and the presence of life meaning in emerging adults. All the information acquired from this research is intended to contribute to the process of consolidating a healthy identity. Indeed, the field of art therapy provides a context in which it is possible to explore and synthesize emotional states (Rubin, 2010), which are extremely important for the psychological integration necessary for the identity process. Welcoming the different facets in the different roles that life offers, is a path that strengthens the subject in the sense of continuity, and strengthens his self-esteem, and therefore his social function, in the context that surrounds him (Tavitian-Elmadjan et al., 2019).

With identity achievement-synthesis, the issues of identity formation decrease (Schwartz et al, 2009). Following what Erikson wrote in 1968, Burt (1982) confirmed that "A healthy personality shows a certain unity of personality, and is able to perceive the world and himself correctly" (p.7).

Furthermore, the combination of these three research methods, within a qualitative investigation, offers many insights and reflections on intra and interpersonal relationships, which contribute to the construction of the Self.

Therefore, this approach can also benefit the understanding of the therapeutic relationship based on the phenomena of transference and countertransference, which occur between the client and the therapist in guiding the treatment. In a socio-cultural reference framework, which Hays hopes for art therapists for better training (2016), it is possible to deepen the mechanism of subjective responses due to unresolved intrapsychic conflicts (Talwar, 2010), thus favoring a greater understanding of identity and of its complexity.

#### **1.4. Research Questions**

A qualitative research aimed specifically at identity, as at the aspects that emerge from it, participates in that universal process that seeks to complete the human experience to the existential question: who am I. As an open question cannot find an answer immediately, due to the complexity of the content, but “Creating discovery-oriented questions can help a researcher use the process of developing and refining questions as a basis for a more rigorous and reflexive inquiry” (Agee, 2009, p. 435).

The dimensions of my experience as author, as individual, researcher, participant, and art therapist overlap during the whole explorative process. The personal experience of a self-reflective process is made available to fully contribute to the exploratory part; “Heuristic research involves all aspects of the person who seeks” (Moustakas, 1990, p.12).

In wishing to investigate the aspects that contributed to my growth and that are relevant in my identity, in all the different dimensions (singular and social, rational and emotional, spiritual and physical), I aimed to explore the correspondences between the individual and social Self (through intersectional aspects) and the sense of well-being (Thagard, 2014).

The specific research questions that will guide this heuristic and artistic study, relating to the field of art therapy, are:

1. How do arts-based methods help individuals explore the intersectional aspects of the Self through various life stages?
2. How do arts-based methods help explore the role of females in different moments of life through different contexts?

Exploration of these questions will highlight strengths and weak points of Self and will help to understand the dynamic of current situations. Past experience is not something that has happened in history with no relation to the present moment in time, but it is a living and breathing part of one's way of being in the world here and now. The heuristic investigation is the exploration of life experience (Sultan, 2019).

This study aims to be an adventure, as a pilot-project, to explore through art making the dynamics that occur between the Self, the context and the relationship of the role.

As this project follows qualitative research, and therefore generates open questions (Agee, 2009), it is assumed that new questions and insights will emerge from the artworks and reflections throughout the process, offering insights for further research or insights.

### **1.5. Definition of key terms**

*Heuristic Research*, is qualitative research. Methodologically theorized by the primary researcher C. Moustakas (1990) as autobiographical experience; it resides at the highly complex intersection of human experience, perception, memory, language, history, culture and other social systems, relational interactions and social justice (Sultan, 2019).

*Arts-Based Research*, is a rapidly growing methodological genre. The idea of using artistic expression by researchers as ways of knowing and methods of inquiry is introduced. It intends to include all artistic disciplines - creative writing, dance, drama, music and visual arts - in accord with the universal sense of art and artists (McNiff, 1998a).

*Intersectionality*, a term that emerged in the legal field to highlight the disadvantaged position of female role (Crenshaw, 1989; Hill Collins, 1995); is a theoretical framework highlighting how the various dimensions of an individual's identity can shape one's life experience. Within this perspective there is the ADDRESSING framework (Hays, 2016). It is a practitioner-oriented approach to therapy that conceptualizes multicultural work in two broad categories: introspection and interpersonal work.

*Psychosocial development of identity*: Erikson's theory is based on the concept that the individual completes his development and growth both psychically (intrapersonal dynamics) and socially (interpersonal). Erikson provided a model for thinking about the life cycle as a series of eight successive tasks, the mastery of which he considered integral to the living of a satisfying life.

*Self-identity*: the concept of the Self (Jung, 1928) has been theoretically important in philosophy, psychology, and related social sciences, including sociology, anthropology, and

political science. The author proposed that the Self is best understood as a multilevel system, encompassing mechanisms that interact across interconnected levels: individual Self and social Self. To understand the Self-identity in its achievement (Self), it is necessary to recognize the critical moments, which according to Erikson are obligatory steps to be overcome for growth, present in every phase of life.

***Identity synthesis vs Identity crisis:*** the identity in tending to its fulfillment (achievement status) experiences different states which can repeat themselves if not overcome:

*Identity diffusion* is a state of confusion of the individual involving the lack of resolution of different perceptions of the Self, the lack of clear goals or beliefs about the world.

*Disruptions Self-identity* disturbance in ability to maintain a reliable sense of individual identity in adulthood: remain a sense of insecurity and low self-esteem issues.

*Moratorium - foreclosure* is a period during which the individual tests out different identifications (with ideals, parents, cultural heroes and others) that had been developed overgrowth, leading to the introjection or repudiation of different identifications and self- perceptions (Erikson, 1968, p. 159); active and purposeful identity exploration.

***Autobiographical memories*** (see *autobiographical reasoning* in McLean & Pasupathi, 2012, p. 12), are relevant to many areas of psychological functioning. Autobiographical memories have been associated with three broad functions: Self, social, and directive. The self-function contributes to continuity of the Self, preserving a sense of being a coherent person over time as well as regulating emotions.



## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This research aimed to use an approach that identifies deep investigation of personal human experience of author-researcher as participant: qualitative (Carolan, 2011; Leavy, 2009) and autobiographical inquiry (Haertl, 2014; Bird, 2016). The heuristic design, the arts based method, the theory of the development of psychosocial identity, the intersectional framework (Crenshaw, 1996; Hays, 2016) are processes that correspond to the challenge of internal pathways, discovering and knowing more about the nature of the researcher-participant, in its whole and complexity, about the *living experience* (Sultan, 2019) that is interrelated, interconnected, continuing experience. To address the issue of the development of the Self-identity, in its various phases and facets, as author of this research, I have chosen the approach of qualitative heuristic, arts based research.

### 2.1. Heuristic Inquiry

“The heuristic process is a way of being informed, a way of knowing. Whatever presents itself in the researcher's consciousness as perception, sense, intuition or knowledge represents an invitation to further clarification” (Moustakas, 1990, p.10). From the beginning and throughout an investigation, heuristic research involves self-search, self-dialogue and self-discovery, the research question and the methodology flow out of inner awareness, meaning and inspiration. In fact, very importantly, the researcher has an active role with the full involvement of his person and his experience during the research process may be entranced by visions, images, and dreams that connect to inquiry. “When I consider an issue, problem or question, I enter into it fully. I search introspectively, meditatively, and reflectively into its nature and meaning.” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 11).

The heuristic approach supports “the interweaving of inner and outer- intrapersonal and interpersonal, individual and collective, personal and professional” (Sultan, 2019, p. XV). This choice allows a synergistic relationship between the content of inquiry and the approach itself. Heuristic process moves from whole to part and back to whole again from the individual to the general and back again; from the feeling to the word and back to the feeling, from the experience to the concept and back to the experience (Moustakas, 1990). It is precisely this movement, which feeds a continuous reflection between two polarities: in-out, subject-object, individual-collective, material-spiritual, real-imaginary, body-feelings, I and

others, micro-macro, entry-exit, also horizontal-vertical that metaphorically offers a research approach that corresponds to the needs of this identity exploration. Once again, heuristic investigation as social constructivism is “both a philosophy of life and a research paradigm; that is, it is both a way of being and a way of knowing” (Sultan, 2019, p. 53). The Heuristic Inquiry is “qualitative research that resides at the highly complex intersection of human experience, perception, memory, language, history, culture and other social systems, relational interactions, and social justice” (Sultan, 2019, p. XIV).

The researcher may come into touch with new regions of himself, and discover revealing connections with others: self-reflection, self-discovery and self-transformation gives the opportunity to increase knowledge, meaning and growth (Sultan, 2019).

*Identifying with the focus of inquiry*, engaging in the process of *Self-dialogue*, acknowledging the importance of *Tacit knowing*, honoring individual *intuition* in coming to find answers, engaging in a process of *Indwelling* involving the search for deeper meaning in the answers, creating conditions that allow the focusing on inner and outward data to clarify the questions and the answers, and acknowledging the importance of the *Internal frame of reference* are the key concepts, the processes for a deep understanding of the phenomenon.

Applying these heuristic research concepts, Moustakas (1990) identified six methodological stages. In the first phase called the *Initial engagement*, a topic or theme that leads to the research question is identified and clarified. Then follows the *Immersion* phase in which the participant is fully involved in finalizing all data to answer the research question. The third phase is called *Incubation* and corresponds to a suspension time of the exploration; the duration of the incubation is variable, predefined by the researcher himself, and during this time activities unrelated to the research topic are deliberately carried out. Later, when the research question is revisited, the *Illumination* phase begins, so called because new intuitions often emerge, which together with the data help to understand the answers to the research question.. The fifth phase of the *Explication* follows, which through a process of codification deepens what has "awakened in consciousness to understand its various layers of meaning" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 31). The sixth and last phase is the *Creative synthesis*, in which all the answers are put together in a form of creative expression such as a drawing, a painting or a poem (Haertl, 2014).

Embracing the topic through all the tools allow to understand what the researcher-participant knows about the topic, at what level he has experience (kinesthetic, cognitive, emotional, spiritual and relational), and what meaning it continues to have: "the internal frame of reference serves as a catalyst for the various processes of heuristic investigation as researchers

return, again and again, to seek within themselves a deeper understanding of their perceptions, feelings, thoughts, decision and actions" (Sultan, 2019, p. 92). Knowing, deepening, relying on creative processes to bring out new knowledge is the mission of the researcher who decides for heuristic research, all the more for a search for Self. Again, the inquiry process often expands the individual perspective of the researcher to questions of universal significance. Englander (2012) asserted that a purely individualistic inquiry would equate with a philosophical endeavor which therefore can extend to universal meaning; just as Haertl (2014) continued pointing out that phenomenological approaches often include others, in order to attain varying and broader perspectives of a phenomenon.

## **2.2. Self-identity and Self discovery**

For this paper I took the reference in several articles that could offer more elements to address the issue of the Self, of the identity in a more complete way. The Self and identity are conceptualized through various theoretical and conceptual perspectives. These views are outlined below.

### **2.2.1. Psychosocial development theory**

To explore how the identity forms itself over time, it was considered important to use a frame of reference. Accepting the process of identification as an evolutionary process (in the context of psychodynamic theories) from childhood, through youth, to the adult stage, this study follows the Self-formation in the different phases of life. Erikson pays particular attention to the development of identity at the intersection of intrapsychic processes of the ego (Self) and external social contexts (Schwartz, 2009). The structure of identity is also important with regard to its relationship to indexes of psychosocial functioning. Erikson's theory included eight stages of life. During each phase the individual possesses strengths or weaknesses with which he responds to the relational challenges between himself and the context. From the point of view of development, the sequence of phases illustrates the specific attributes that the human being must develop individually, and strengthen in subsequent generations (Hoare, 2009). For Erikson's theory the eight strengths are: trust, hope, will, purpose, competence, fidelity, love, generativity and their completion in wholeness. In every period of the life cycle the person experiences a psychosocial crisis that contributes to re-formulation of the identity;

the crisis can have a positive or negative outcome (Erikson, 1959): if the specific challenge is not resolved, the difficulty remains present and the continuity of the personality development is compromised. Each stage is concerned with becoming competent in an area of life; if it is handled well, the person will feel a sense of mastery (ego strength, ego quality); if the stage is managed poorly, the person will emerge with a sense of inadequacy, in that aspect of development (Meeus, et al, 2012). The value of identity as a social-psychological construct lies in its relevance for healthy and maladaptive functioning (Schwartz, 2005).

Self-esteem, purpose in life, internal locus of control (Beaumont & Seaton, 2011), understood as an individual perception of having control in one's life, and ego strength represent both a sense of well-being and a sense of self-direction that is essential for "getting ahead" (Coté, 2002). Anxiety and depression, on the other hand, represent aspects of maladaptive functioning that can undermine progress towards paid work, committed partnership, parenting, and other adult responsibilities (Schulenberg & Zarrett, 2006; Schwartz et al 2009). The Self- Identity lives in the dynamics of being and becoming, considering moments of crisis, transformation and growth, in relationships with oneself, with family, peers, partners, colleagues (cultural and social context). Indeed, it is very important that Erikson has considered identity linked to all phases of life, understanding the functioning in relation to the wider personality along the span of life. This concept is very important for this paper, which wants to consider precisely the changes and transformations over the course of life, respecting the importance of each phase. Arnett (2000) highlights the need for a new concept: the "emerging adulthood" which bridges adolescence and full adulthood; it is critical as a time in which individuals must find their own way in many western cultural contexts.

Hoare (2009) exploring published and unpublished writing of Erikson, affirms that the best of maturity is the ego identity of what Erikson called the moral-ethical, spiritual human. This human is one with a horizontal, earthly identity and vertical, transcendent identity: "Both realms pervade the adult's inner conflicts and existential paradoxes. The earthly, horizontal region and the divine, vertical region are two personalities and two callings that one maintains concurrently, a dichotomy holding an essential tension that cannot be fractured" (Erikson, 1958, p. 214). Hoare (2009) mentioned the sense of Self as a spiritual being is certainly an integral part of the vitality and adult ethics within a mature identity.

Another approach within Erikson's psychosocial model of lifespan development considers emotions as organizers and motivators in the dynamics of life cycle identity constructions (Strayer, 2002); an emotion-focused perspective can help to understand different phenomena of identity development, attributing capacity to exploration and commitment during the crisis

phases. “E-motions, movement forth, are inherently goal directed and adaptive” (Strayer, 2002, p. 49).

Deepening the theme through Eriksonian theories and better understand the mechanisms of identity formation, it considered valid the opposition of two positions or concepts. Assuming the polarity as a parameter, the dynamism of the identity’s research is better perceived. Erikson (1968) presented the state of identity confusion vs identity synthesis: identity confusion represents a sense of feeling “mixed up,” that is, being unable to enact and maintain lasting commitments to life alternatives and lacking a clear sense of purpose and direction. Erikson (1950, 1968) had proceeded from the assumption that identity synthesis and identity confusion represent opposing ends of a single continuum. In other words, increases in identity synthesis are assumed to be accompanied by equivalent and opposing decreases in identity confusion and vice versa (Schwartz, Zamboanga, Wang, Olthuis, 2009).

Schwartz (2002) conceptualizes the self-construction, as a construction and additional path, vs self-discovery where the Self is the optimal destination. Again the concept of the self-flexible versus the self-fixed, in which the characteristics and capacities of each part are explored, according to the changes, challenges of life (Rabinovich & Morton, 2016).

### 2.2.2. Identity’s Crisis

This paper takes into account the psychosocial development of the Self, in its holistic nature, engaging many dimensions: the cognitive, the emotional, the sensory-kinesthetic, the perceptual, the spiritual and the social-relational dimension. Erikson's theory (1950; 1968), in dealing with man's life considering the different phases, takes into account the complexity of man as an individual and a social being. The crisis can therefore manifest itself affecting only one dimension of the person including physical, psychological trauma, or the transition from one phase of life to another, contributing progressively to re-formulation of the identity. Feeling inadequate, unable, confused, in contradiction, depressed, out, down: life presents many challenges to the human being, asking him to respond positively, remaining integral or consistent with his values: concept of health or well-being in one's life (Erikson, 1968).

Since childhood the individual can experience difficulties inherent to the family structure, role of the parents, incessant need to attend all expectations from the family, school, friends, and society. Following psychosocial development theory, and the ego identity development, it is important to explore the concept of crisis through the differentiation of identity states. Researchers of this theory (Coté, 2002; Schwarz, 2001; Marcia, 1996) continue to make use

of some useful concepts: identity diffusion is a state of confusion, involving the lack of resolution of different perceptions of the Self, the lack of clear goals or beliefs about the world, inability to be close to others; the moratorium status is a period during which the individual tests out different identifications, with ideals, parents, cultural heroes and others, that had been developed over growth, leading to the introjection or repudiation of different identification and self-perceptions (Erikson, 1968).

The individual in moratorium actively struggles with such issues as who he or she is, what he or she believes in and what to do with his or her life. Erikson (1968) pointed out that moratorium is a period granted or allowed by society for the adolescent to move toward the assumption of adult roles without immediately taking on adult obligations and responsibilities (Burt, 1982). It is a period during which the person is not fully adapted to his or her world (Schachter & Galliher, 2018). Confusion and moratorium are steps that should lead to the state of achievement, but they can persist longer, not be resolved and create identity crises in the individual.

“Several authors highlighted the ongoing applicability of Eriksonian theory in contemporary social contexts, with specific attention to evolving cultural and societal influences on youth development.” (Schachter & Galliher, 2018, p. 248). Also Coté (2018) commented on changing cultural conditions, how the current delay on the part of young people in transitioning to adulthood aggravates them and prolongs their identity crisis. Changing conditions for young people, the need for higher education, are likely to cause problematic person-context adjustments and hinder the active and meaningful involvement of young adults in identity processes. These aspects can contribute to the crisis of the identity’s role, not being able to use their own experience to help younger people, and vice versa. The sense of identity needs to be reformulated and may not stand up to comparison for lack of personal references: social relation is virtual, the relationships maintained at a distance etc.. The individual space becomes a social space, the others can have a dominant role, even virtually, to the individual. Depending on the psychological structure of the person, many defensive mechanisms are triggered and the people have disruption in their identity continuity, feeling of confusion, incompatibility, contradiction, unsafe environment, and low self-esteem. The achievement of identity requires further efforts to cope with psychosocial functioning by becoming capable of making and maintain enduring commitments for life alternatives, founding new sense of purpose and direction. Erikson assumed that the synthesis of identity was on the same path of formation as the state of identity confusion, marking the two opposite extremes. (Schwartz, et al., 2009).

Self-awareness, self-regulation, self-control, self-esteem, adaptation to conflict are some examples of operations and skills that the individual (individual Self) learns to implement with himself and in the relationship with the other (social Self) to tend to a personal well-being situation (Thagard, 2014).

“That is, a coherent sense of identity is valuable only inasmuch as it is associated with adaptive mental health outcomes such as self-esteem, resilience, and life purpose” (Schwartz, et al., 2009, p. 144). Reaching this state of one's identity is certainly a path that requires knowledge and recognition of various aspects belonging to the Self, which influence and shape it.

### 2.2.3. Artistic inquiry, art therapy

“Art is a way of knowing who I am”. (Allen, 1995, p. ix). All cultures have evolved art-making practices to discover, transform and celebrate life affirming one's identity, presence. From prehistory to contemporary society, from the simple child to the famous artist, art making is expression of the individual Self and/or social Self within different levels of understanding, language and communicative power.

Visual art and art making can offer more elements to address the issue of the Self, of the Identity in a more complete way. Art can access inner life through stories, metaphors and symbols, which are recognized as both real and valuable (Allen, 1995). “Taking one image of self as the sum of who we are is an unnecessary sacrifice. We often get stuck in one view of self and lose the richness of our multiplicity” (Allen, 1995, p.10).

Using the image-making process one can explore the many levels, dissolve outdated ideas and try new images for each. Allen (1995) asserted that the conflicts and contradictions encountered in everyone's stories are good opportunities to look deeper.

“They are more than narrative and verbal ideas. Art can provide unique access to interior life, it becomes a conduit to intimate self-knowledge and knowledge of others, accessing meta-verbal ways of knowing that are particularly effective in evoking empathy and transformative understanding” (Chilton & Leavy, 2014, p. 407).

Again, if the text is read in a prescribed sequence, affording experience along a dimension of time, the images are experienced in space, allowing them to be experienced as a *place* (Henzell, 1995). “This non-discursive quality of images, allowing simultaneous experiencing of the juxtaposition of elements from a variety of directions, may better capture the perceptual and emotional immediacy of living.” (Harter, 2007, p. 176).

Henzell (1995) compared the practices of art and psychotherapy as uniquely evolving endeavors, rather than the simple application of others' research. "Both aim to reveal what is hidden and to create what has not yet been" (p. 201). Not only does art allow a way to communicate the implicit in an explicit form, it allows experimentation with new configurations of experience.

A psychology of art develops that views artistic explorations as psychological research of the highest order (McNiff, 1981). Art can be a powerful meeting point as well as primary source of identity in itself (McNiff, 2011).

### **2.3. Intersectionality**

The science of psychology, sociology, neurology, medicine, but also philosophy, develop more specific fields of studies and research, favoring an intersectional approach understanding the complexity of the systems: incorporating an intersectional lens enriches a researcher's understanding of the social world (Misra, Vaughan Curington & Green, 2020).

The multicultural complexity, cross-cultural and intercultural are key categories (starting with Crenshaw, 1989 to Tarshis & Baird, 2021) that accentuate problematic situations where traditions, culture identities need to be explored, known, accepted and integrated. Living in a new and oftentimes unfamiliar culture brings about an array of challenges to the Self. Human beings must remain open to the news, and to the incidents that may occur, ready to refine or define their stories of interaction with the world (Kaimal, 2019). People face challenges to their self-concept, which could compromise their self-integrity; for example, due to the prejudice of belonging to a particular social group, or the fact of having to manage conflicting demands of different social roles. "The solution may lie in adopting a different perspective on how much stability, coherence and uniformity are desirable within oneself and in reconstructing the notion of incompatibility and conflict in terms of variety and diversity (Rabinovich & Morton, 2016, p. 19).

Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; Hays, 2016) is a theoretical framework also applicable to art therapy. This framework highlights how the various dimensions of an individual's identity can shape one's life experience. The intersectional perspective recognizes that the multiple complexities of race, class, gender and other variables can work together, or intersect- to create a distinctive experience of oppression and marginality (Wilder, Koro-Ljungberg, Bussing, 2009). Furthermore, intersectionality requiring self-reflectivity and work on one's own biases can bring new insights on the subject of countertransference, which is central in



understanding the subjective responses of art therapists in guiding treatment (Talwar, 2010). Taking into account the complexity of human experience and identity means being able to understand and build a positive therapeutic alliance (Hays, 2016).

The approach and integration of the theories presented in this chapter converge to define the author’s theoretical orientation, that guides this study to conceptual framework and then to the methods.

**2.4. Theoretical / conceptual framework**

The theoretical orientation applied to this research project is outlined by the concept of author as researcher and participant, through heuristic and arts-based design. The figure 1 below shows the role of the author, who works in the first person “I” and with a frontal position, focuses on the research theme of the identity in its intersectional aspects.

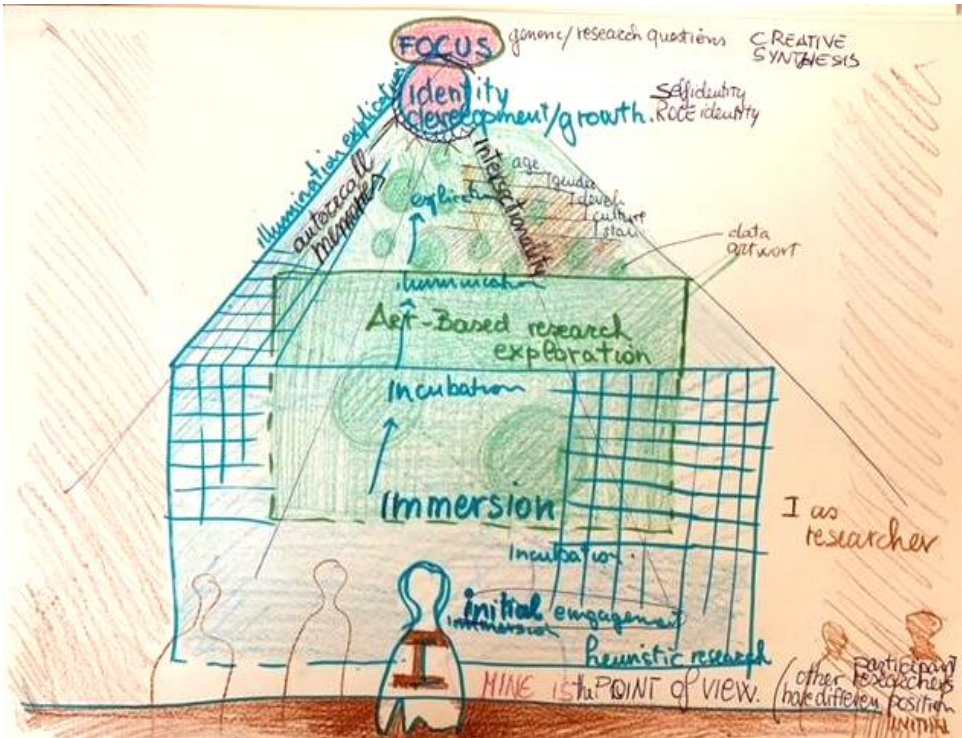


Fig.1 Author as researcher

The approach path is marked chronologically by successive heuristic stages, the arts- based method allows to highlight more or less the salient intersectional aspects. The researcher's point of view is unique, potentially similar to that of other researchers. The researcher shares

the perspective space of the *living experience* that converges on the focus, maintaining a certain distance.

One of the primary tasks of the heuristic researcher is to place himself within the research task. It is important to disclose personal interests, motivations, prejudices, values and goals; relationships, dialogue and the creation of meaning are fundamental to my way of being in this world ” (Sultan, 2019).

As author-researcher, I aim to explore the Self in a profound form and respecting the complexity of identity, hence the choice of qualitative and autobiographical research. I feel close to the heuristic approach, that supports the interweaving of inner and outer-intrapersonal and interpersonal, individual and collective, personal and professional” (Sultan, 2019, p. XV). Heuristic search incorporates creative self-processes and self-discoveries (Moustakas, 1990); its design proposes six phases during which the researcher is always present with her own experience. The six phases within a heuristic research design are: *initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication* and *creative synthesis*.

They are briefly explained in table 1.

**Table 1.** The Six Phases of Heuristic Inquiry

Initial engagement	Researcher makes contact with a topic that holds personal meaning, as well as possible social and universal significance
Immersion	Researcher lives the question in every sleeping and waking moment, “in every thought, feeling and sensation” (Sultan, 2019, p. 95)
Incubation	Researcher temporary withdraws from the intense and focused attention on the question, to engage in activities unrelated to the research
Illumination	The unconsciously knowledge generated in precedence (artwork as process of tacit knowing) coming to the surface into awareness
Explication	Researcher continues deeply exploration, increasing awareness through indwelling, focusing and self-disclosure
Creative synthesis	The <i>Creative synthesis</i> is a realization of the comprehensive essences of the topic of inquiry (Sultan, 2019, p.99).

By reliving the individual processes within the heuristic research phases is described a dynamical movement, that involves every cognitive, sensitive, perceptive, metaphorical and symbolic level, separately and together.

This flexibility and fluidity of passages, the fluctuation between different dimensions, is what I considered important to link the field of art therapy with the framework ETC (Lusebrink, 1990) as sources of information.

#### 2.4.1. Expressive Therapies Continuum

The Expressive Therapies Continuum (ETC) is elaborated to classify interactions with artistic media or other experiential activities in order to process information and forming images (Kagin & Lusebrink, 1978b; Lusebrink, 1990). ETC organizes media interactions into a developmental sequence of information processing and image formation, from simple to complex. This framework is made known by Lisa D. Hinz (2020) to respond and try to understand in a structured way the communicative power of the artworks, which are created during the therapeutic session. It is a method that allows access to the client, both following his affinities, but also to implement materials and artistic processes that respond to his needs (Hinz, 2020). It offers an explorative space for both, the therapist and the client, and enhances the process in all its components, individuating different levels: from the kinesthetic, sensorial level, through the perceptual and emotional phases to the cognitive symbolic approaches. It is a method that allows fluidity and flexibility of thought and action.

It is a method that reminds to the heuristic fluctuation, the possibility of approaching and moving away from the event, allowing to know its characteristics with more objective parameters: since the heuristic researcher is fully involved, ETC provides external elements. This method observes processes and contents at the same time, opening to new reflections but also confirm previous thoughts or intuitions.

Arts-based exploration increases the power and depth of this research, because the artwork is a witness of the process, holds the complexity of *living experience* and has the potentiality of the synthesis, to connect different dimensions, conscious and unconscious, and levels of the identity itself. The artworks manifest themselves through visual material (forms, shapes, metaphors, symbols) even without knowing their meanings, so on the whole they strongly express aspects of the Self at that given moment.

As conceptualized by Erikson (1950), personal identity represents the amount of self-knowledge, synthesis and coherence that a person possesses over time and across situations. Furthermore, the unresolved problem in the past phases persists in the present life (Erikson, 1959), continuing to return in the form of crisis, dissatisfaction, incompleteness, adding new elements because the person has grown in the meantime.

In support of this exploration, therefore, Erikson's theory of psychosocial evolution is the frame of reference for organizing the topic considering the different roles of identity during the different stages of life, from infancy to adulthood, adding a spiritual dimension to research. The phases will be recreated recalling memories; autobiographical memories have been associated with three broad functions: self, social, and directive (Tavitian-Elmadijan et al., 2019) dedicating time to observation, questions, suspending any judgment.

This paper seeks to capture these variations in their profound insidious presence; the heuristic process with artistic expression and the analysis of artworks, must be able to free the intrinsic relationships of personal psychosocial history.

To complete this research, to enrich the understanding of this exploratory path, it is added the intersectional framework as a self-reflective tool about different cultural, religious, social categories, theorizing differences: precisely the “ADDRESSING” model is the included framework. The word addressing serves as an acronym to identify intersectional aspects of the self: A stands for Age generational influences and includes not just chronological age, but also generational roles that are important in a person’s culture. The letter D stands for Developmental or Disability, the letter R for Religion and spiritual orientation, E stands for Ethnic and racial identity. It continues with the double letter S, the first stands for socioeconomic status and then the second S sexual orientation. The letter I refers to the indigenous heritage, while the N stands for national origin. Finally the letter G stands for Gender (Hays, 2016, p.8).

To comprehend everyday experiences of identity, an analysis of diversity and complexity is necessary as social constructs (Weber 2001; Talwar, 2010). It is very important to train reflection to understanding how to categorize, taking into account presuppositions or possible prejudices inherent in the observer and not as elements of observation. It is also important that the researcher must be able to question himself first, in order not to project himself into the situation, recognizing on himself the influences of external categories, and therefore evaluating everything that can come into play in the formation of identity of a person, and their way of feeling in that context. (Hays, 2016).

The methods and frameworks described above are processes that contribute to reinforce an overview about Self, the identity develop, increasing awareness, knowledge and stimuli about the cyclicity of efforts and life. All together are important synergistic resources for this study: heuristic research defines the exploratory process and phases with the full involvement of the researcher-participant just as art-based exploration allows continuity and depth in expressive and reflective visual language. The theory of Psychosocial Development, which

includes Erikson's theory of Stages of Psychosocial Development, offers the basis to accompany the evolution of the person through life, just as the intersectional perspective allows one to understand the influence given by other factors to the life experience.

“With virtually every question that matters personally there is also a social-and perhaps universal-significance” (Moustakas, 1990, p.15), and with this theoretical conceptual approach I want contribute to the enrichment of universal meanings about the Self and the identity.

### 3. METHODS

This study applied the methods of heuristic research and arts-based research into the intersectional aspect of the Self, using autobiographical recalls of the author-researcher.

Qualitative research was utilized because it can help to increase awareness of Self-identity, from individual to universal aspects of the Self. “In many ways, heuristic research is empowering and emancipatory in that it gives voice to those who may have kept their personal experience to themselves, inspiring them to highlight their expert knowledge about the topic of inquiry” (Sultan, 2019, p. 167). Again, a broader view of the Self into autobiographical and intersectional research (like this study) emphasizes a sense of self-empowerment (self-affirmation), capable of meeting the challenges of the self-concept within a social context. (Tavitian-Elmadijan, et al., 2019).



Fig.2 Personal visualization of heuristic, arts-based, intersectional method through life span

#### 3.1. Heuristic method

Heuristic research (Moustakas, 1990) identifies methodological phases that occur also in the course of this exploration. Moustakas affirms that heuristic methods incorporate creative self-processes and self-discoveries (1990). Heuristic approach lends well to the affinity of research focusing toward personal discovery. It goes in depth, and it gives voice to the various aspects of the author’s identity, similar to Moustakas’ description of the researcher being involved

with his whole person, emphasizes the internal frame of reference (1990). As author-researcher I used this method in an effort to approach my personal life: with total engagement and curiosity, using different instruments to perceive and translate my feelings and my understanding: associations, metaphors, symbols, narrative forms are privileged forms. Each has the sense of existing for the author-researcher, and in this attention must be treated (Moustakas, 1990). I wore the heuristic methodology as part of my being, recognizing concepts that I did not know before by their name, but that I intuitively applied during the creative process (immersion, incubation, illumination are phases of the artistic making). Making use of the concept of *identifying with the focus of the inquiry* (Moustakas, 1990), I worked to redefine the design for this study step by step. Salk (1983) called this identification "the inverted perspective": the focal point is on the observer. It concentrates and attracts all points of the external world to itself. As writes Moustakas, the "initial data is within me" (Moustakas, 1990, p.13). The figure 3 (below) depicts the author-researcher's viewpoint and role in the heuristic method.

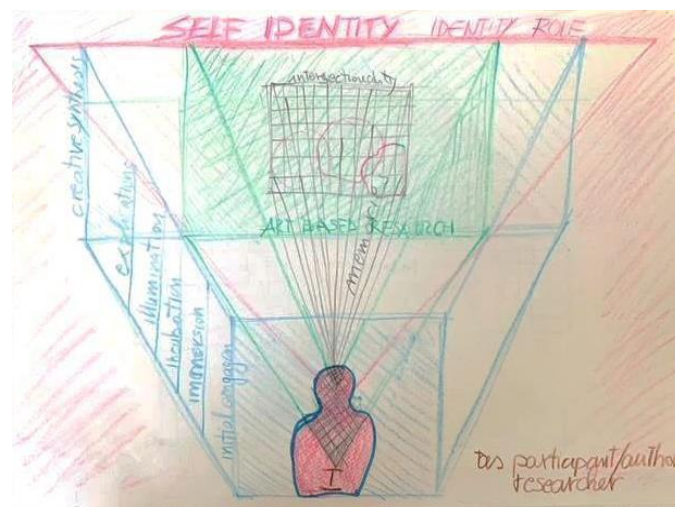


Fig.3 Inverted perspective - author as researcher/participant

Heuristic method is a very delicate process, giving space to *tacit knowledge*. "It is just this swimming into an unknown current" (Moustakas, 1990, p.13), given continuous emergence of autobiographical aspects and related dense emotions that will re-emerge step by step. In this study I have given great importance to autobiographical memories, by incorporating them as an active part in the heuristic phases, entrusting them with a role of catalyst for information relating to the research topic (inquiry into intersectional aspects of the Self-identity). This

study addresses all the phases of the heuristic method that Moustakas (1990) and Sultan (2019) illustrate in their works.

The *initial engagement* phase started from the first ideas of wanting to face a self-referential research work which offers clarifications, elucidations about the person and its identity. The *initial engagement* involves the researcher-participant in depth to dissect the theme in its essentiality, through what it deems necessary: images, written, thoughts and notes. *Immersion*, with the realization of eight artworks through the predefined phases of life, focusing to the intersectional aspects of the identity; *incubation*, a detachment of time and space from the research theme, *illumination*, time of analysis, observation, reflection, association, self-dialogue, *explication*, with the revealed finding, when the relationship and correlations find their reason, the forms their meaning and the process can satisfy the demands of the research. At the end the *creative synthesis*, which condenses the experience of all the heuristic phases, of their artistic processes, of their meanings, in complete confidence of the creative process of the arts-based method (McKniff, 2004; Allen, 1995), combining all the elements as if they were the fingers that intersect of two crossed hands.

### **3.2. Arts-based Methods**

“*Art is a Way of Knowing*” by Pat Allen (1995), it was like a slogan that immediately attracted my attention as of this research, both because art was at the center of my university education, both because it confirms itself as a therapeutic tool in the choice of becoming an art therapist. Images have been a means of communication since the beginning of human history: man has created them to know and to express himself. Images are a universal phenomenon, which everyone experiences in their own life: before writing, knowledge and self-awareness passes through graphic representation, drawing. Everyone has many internal images of themselves and artistic creation is the process of shaping these images (Allen, 1995). This research makes use of the arts-based method in all its phases. In the role of participant-researcher, I entrusted images to be supportive, to mediate, to express and to inspire during all the phases of this study, creating data and artworks, capturing the perceptual and emotional immediacy of living (Harter, 2007).

Again, the images can translate the explication in a visual form, better: the images, how confirm McNiff in his thirty years of art-therapy experience, can communicate what the words can't (2004). This study uses the arts-based methods inspired by McNiff, S. and Allen, P., who entrust to the creative artistic process the power of discovering, recognizing,



understanding the Self and the world. Arts-based research has focused on exploring the person, exploring his emotional-social context in his complexity. It uses all the aspect of the images, from the physical, motor, sensorial level in their “material being”, to the symbolic, abstract, philosophical and theoretical level in their meaning, making use of the framework of the Expressive Therapies Continuum (Lusebrink, 1990; Hinz, 2020). It uses the artwork as an image, as object-witness, as expressive form and a source of information. Alongside the creative process of artmaking, the arts-based method therefore includes the analysis and search for meaning, so the artistic work serves the researcher to deepen the forms of communication of the human being and the human being himself.

### 3.3. Intersectional lens

Intersectionality is used to create more information about the aspects that affect the perception of life both on a personal level and in relation to a community, applying various perspectives to formulate questions. This approach allowed me (sole author and researcher of this study) to better explore the evolution of my identity within numerous changes and choices of considerable magnitude. Different questions overlap, move and remain in personal spaces to seek answers (see fig.4) involving the author-participant within an internal dialogue, in a present real living experience (Sultan, 2019).



Fig. 4 Personal questioning

In this research, the intersectional framework is applied continuously, during all heuristic phases of this research, the various stages of life and also within the analysis and discussion of the artworks.

Specifically, I started from a first fact: to be born female. This is a very important factor of my intersectional identity, so the intention is to explore my identity in the physical, psychological and spiritual evolution in the field of femininity. I will explore the process of accepting becoming a woman up to the desire to become a wife and mother (however fulfilled). Moreover, the need for comparison with others, even in diversity, which has characterized my life and my choices in a conscious way, have been a reason for encountering cultures, nations, roles and contexts. The intersectional framework therefore becomes indispensable to address the identity dimension in its complexity and in the diversity of contexts that the person can be called to live (Blankenship & Stewart, 2017).

### **3.4. Autobiographical recall**

Recalling autobiographical memories becomes important in a heuristic and art-based research that investigates the identity Self in the course of life. The memory supports a narrative chronology, in order to follow a biographical order, at the same time the memories allow to let emerge those aspects that have remained important over time. Recalling to memory is therefore an intrinsic process in the whole exploratory path, both in the moment of making art and in the process of analysis and explications. By recalling the memory the function of the Self (McLean & Pasupathi, 2012) contributes to the continuity of the Self, preserving the sense of being a coherent person over time and regulating emotions. Within the self-function, autobiographical memories also serve the self-improvement motive of maintaining an overall favorable view of the Self. Autobiographical recalls also promotes the development, strengthening and maintenance of social bonds, intimacy in relationships and empathy where people use their experiences of the world to understand others and better predict their behavior (Tavitian-Elmadijan, Bender, Van de Vijver, Chasiotis, Harb, 2019, p.40). Using memory is certainly a valuable tool, and integral part of the heuristic and arts-based methods for this research.

### 3.5. Procedures

The heuristic method (Moustakas, 1990; Sultan, 2019) and arts-based approaches (McNiff, 1998, Allen, 2005) allow the researcher to enter in depth even with a range of tonalities, expressions, associations and intuitions. The intersectional lens permits to create new questions, different perspectives on how to observe the subject in the psycho-emotional-social phase, keeping in mind the Self and the context.

During the *initial phase of engagement*, to focus the research questions by identifying with it, "discovering an intense interest, a passionate concern" (Moustakas, 1990, p.27) and several steps are needed to create a methodological space that is clear.

First of all, I have created a "rational" subdivision of my life's stages, recalling autobiographical memories, considering the age and the corresponding important events as external changes (criticality, traumatic personal situations, physical relocation, socio-cultural changes). Change is explored simultaneously with the inner search for myself, in the various states: crisis, confusion, moratorium, success (Erikson, 1968; Burt, 1982; Marcia, 2002). The role and the sense of Self deserve to be taken into consideration at the same time, both in internal and external relationships, in order to be able to grasp the variations, the changes in their complexity.

This grid (see the table 2) is important to organize all the study, specifically the immersion phase as a personal reminder.

**Table 2:** Subdivision of author researcher' s life stages

AGE	IDENTITY	ROLE & FEELING	PSYCHOSOCIAL I. & EVENTS
0-12 y. old	I as child	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>daughter (female)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Events: physical trauma. Relationships with family as whole and with individual members; socio-cultural spaces: house, school</li> <li>Events: physical trauma.</li> </ul>
12-15 y. old	I as pre-adolescent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>daughter-sister</li> <li>confusion about role and place</li> <li>conflict about own image.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Relationship with family, with peers; begin social life outside the family dynamics</li> <li>Events: physical trauma</li> </ul>
15-25 y. old	I as adolescent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>daughter young woman</li> <li>student-works</li> <li>deep existential question; conflict between the assigned role (assertive daughter) and wishes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Relationships, social and cultural/work space</li> <li>Events: eating disorder; los of peer; los of father, family develop with wedding' s four brothers and sister</li> </ul>
25-30 y. old	I as young - emergent adult	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>worker student</li> <li>sense of whole, acceptance within religious being, excited, curios</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Relationships, international, multicultural and religious environment</li> <li>Events: broken love relationship spiritual conversion traveling in Europe and out</li> </ul>
30-33 y. old	I as adult	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>missionary</li> <li>moratorium phases - discernment</li> <li>exploration of vocation being woman in the Church</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Relationships with new social cultural categories</li> <li>Events: mission in Brazil, in Rome; agam physical trauma</li> </ul>
33-40 y. old	I as woman adult	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>wife, mother, worker</li> <li>different feelings: inner achievement, conflict between private and public, sense of minority</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Relationships with work-place, new socio-cultural environment</li> <li>Events: marriage, move to Croatia, creation new family, social role (museum employee)</li> </ul>
40-48 y. old	I as adult	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>director museum, role of management</li> <li>confusion, difficult to manage public image;</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Relationships with new social cultural categories</li> <li>Events: mission in Brazil, in Rome; again physical trauma</li> </ul>
48-49 y. old	I as woman of middle age	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>wife and mother, recovered the role of daughter</li> <li>confusion, frustration, need to balance, need to priorities - care for family health</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Events: move to original country, Italy, pandemic crisis- reduction of physical-relational spaces</li> </ul>
49 y.  old	who I am, today	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>who I am, today</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>who I am, today</li> </ul>

During the *Initial engagement* stage I have undertaken an inner search and made contact with a topic of intense and compelling interest that holds great personal meaning (Moustakas, 1990) and it needs a deep clarification to have universal significance. I explored the research inquiry through art-making until I exhausted personal need for clarification of the topic. Next to the artwork there is the written explanation of the intentions and of the ongoing process to complete the personal exploratory process.

During *Immersion*, I began to live the question with my own whole being, in every thought, feeling and sensation (Moustakas, 1990). In the planning of this research, aligning with the stage of *Immersion* (Moustakas, 1990; Sultan, 2019) the artwork has central role, which for Carolan (2001) corresponds to the process of *Tacit knowledge*. This heuristic phase involves eight artworks and expressive writing tasks; the re-enactment of autobiographical memories allows for one to remember further aspects and relive (Moustakas, 1990; Sultan, 2019). Each phase of life is explored by creating an artwork, of equal size, in two-dimensional format, with material and artistic technique at my discretion as researcher-participant. After each artwork, the memories and reflections were put in writing in three successive times, at a short distance between them, after having looked at the work with a rested gaze from the artistic work itself. This is a procedure of the arts-based method to allow me to perceive new input for thought and reflection, at whatever ETC level they are. The *Immersion* of each phase of life, with the execution of an artistic work, is followed by the next so that a long-term *Immersion* takes place, maintaining the inner attitude on all phases of life for a profound qualitative research.

After these *Initial engagement* and *Immersion*'s phases, the next one is the *incubation*: to the completion of the 8 phases of the immersion I have withdrawn from the intense and focused attention on the question and/ or data to engage in activities unrelated to the research (Moustakas, 1990; Sultan, 2019). So, the creation phase of art making paused while I revisited the artworks and resumed exploration of the meanings.

The *Illumination* phase follows: I allowed intuition to guide me so that the unconscious knowledge emerged in the conscious awareness. "The experience of *illumination* occurs naturally when the researcher is open and receptive to tacit knowledge and intuition" (Moustakas, 1990 p.29); it can also occur in a separate moment from the heuristic phase itself, adding new dimensions of knowledge or it may involve correction of distorted understanding (Moustakas,1990).

After the *Illumination*, the phase of *Explication* follows: I entered into a phase of deep exploration of what I have become aware of, and wrote it down into words. "The purpose of

this phase is to fully examine what has awakened in consciousness, in order to understand its various layers of meaning” (Moustakas, 1990, p.31). By implementing the process of focusing and indwelling, I rediscovered an inward space to give new meanings to each texture and features involved with the topic. After finalizing the art-making experience and reflective memo-writing of all phases in my life, creating clusters of themes and intersectional aspects during the analysis, finally the process of *Creative synthesis* (Moustakas, 1990; Sultan, 2019) took place. I considered and revisited the themes that emerged in response to the research question, on the intersectional aspects of my being and on my identity as a woman. I considered and revisited the themes that emerged in response to the research question, on the intersectional aspects of my being and on my identity as a woman. I considered and revisited the themes that emerged in response to the research question, on the intersectional aspects of my being and on my identity as a woman. The artwork of *creative synthesis* gave a voice to me as a person who has evolved over time (in different cultural, socio-economic contexts). It included meaning condensation also of “who I am”, reviewing all of the collected experience and condensing it to core elements and meaning categorization (Carolan, 2001). I explored these various heuristic phases over a period of 12 months, starting from the first interest in working with the heuristic and arts-based method, refining the methodology with the subdivision of the phases respecting the theory of psychosocial development and the intersectional framework.

### **3.6. Data Collection**

In heuristic research, “data collection, organization and analysis, are not discrete processes, data analysis begins as soon as you start collecting your data” (Sultan, 2019, p.122), whether they are perceived in a conscious form or not. Data collection for heuristic research transcends the mere idea of gathering information. In heuristic inquiry, data collection is about immersing yourself within your topic through self-dialogue (Sultan, 2019). In heuristic research, everything that can emerge from the person is important. Starting from the first engagement, and especially during the immersion phase, data of different kinds and nature can be collected (Moustakas, 1990). Everyone has the sense to exist for the author-researcher, and must be carefully treated. Thanks to the collection and analysis of data it is possible to create and organize emerging categories, concepts that are common, not only quantitatively but also evocatively.

This study used two sources of data generated from the researcher-author: artworks and writings such as note, biographical, poetic and reflective writings. Important is the authenticity and heuristic attitude that underlies the need for this expression. *It is equally important to ask what the "subject" thinks is being done, and what he considers evidence of what* (Moustakas, 1990, p. 46). Starting from the *initial engagement*, I created images that would visualize particular moments of reflection and search for clarification as is usually done in art-based research. I wrote everything I considered important as a participant and therefore as a researcher. The sum of this visual and verbal material becomes exploration material, legitimizing its importance as the investigations proceed.

The table below (table 3) outlines the theoretical frameworks used in the research to explore the identity theme.

**Table 3.** Theoretical framework of research

Heuristic approach	Psychosocial development		Arts based approach Art making	Intersectionality ADDRESSING
	Life's stages	Identity's phases Personal experience		
<i>Identifying with the focus of Inquiry</i>  <b>1. Initial engagement</b> <i>Self-dialogue</i>  <b>2. Immersion</b> <i>Tacit knowing</i>  <b>3. Incubation</b>  <b>4. Illumination</b> <i>Intuition</i> <i>Self-dialogue</i>  <b>5. Explication</b>  <b>6. Creative synthesis</b>	<b>Child</b>  <b>Pre-adolescent</b>  <b>Adolescent</b>  <b>Young</b>  <b>Adult</b>  <b>Emotive cycle</b> during lifespan: emotion as factor for development	Formation <i>Family</i>  Crisis identity <i>Eating disorders</i>  Confusion- Diffusion <i>Search</i>  Disruption  Moratorium <i>Foreclosure</i>  Achievement <i>/synthesis</i> _____	Kinesthetic-sensory aspect: movement direction space  Emotive-perceptual aspect: artistic material shape color dimension feeling  Cognitive-symbolic aspect emergent figure emergent theme symbol-metaphor	<b>Age/generational influences</b>  <b>Developmental</b> Family structure  <b>Disability</b>  <b>Religion/ faith/ spiritual orientation</b>  <b>Ethnic/ racial identity</b>  <b>Social economic identity</b>  <b>Sexual orientation</b>  <b>Indigenous heritage</b>  <b>Nationality, Culture environment/language</b>  <b>Gender</b>

## 4. PROCESS AND RESULT

This section intends to summarize the results that emerged during the survey. Each paragraph will outline the results of the enlightened one through the six-step heuristic method.

The artwork represents the result of art-based methods accompanying psychosocial development through my life, recalling memories; emerging themes and intersectional aspects find expression and meaning for a deeper exploration of identity.

### 4.1. Initial engagement

During the *initial engagement* phase, the beginning presented a sort of research in the research: I tried to understand the tools at my disposal, the reflection processes of the heuristic method, such as self-dialogue and indwelling and using artistic expression to explore the salient aspects of the topic. The following artwork, *I and the Other* (fig.5), carried out at the beginning of the theoretical phase of development of the research method, significantly presents the close relationship between a heuristic approach, based on art, the intersectional perspective and the self-referential theme. In the poetic expression, elements emerge (the role of blue, yellow, the presence of the mountains, the house, the heart and so on) which become part of the codes in subsequent phases. Image and writing overlap in the role of source of information, enriching communication.



Fig.5 I and the Other - living experience





The first work presents a sort of face, a simplified oval shape. The lines seem to repeat the same movement in search of definition. The eyes are not seen, replaced by a faded line, the internal and external part of the face share the same background made of lines and drips. Even the written words in different colors, involve the two spaces. A yellow circle is positioned in the forehead area, a larger one is external to the profile of the face. They share light rays. The question of *who I am* seems to require an external response, divided between what we want and what we don't want.

In response to the numerous questions that emerged in this artwork in a self-referential form, I created a second image, *I-myself* (fig. 7), proposing a curvilinear, monochrome figure, created with a single blue color of different intensities. A fluid defined form that extends sort of wings and dilates those outwards. The figure is almost symmetrical and tries, from her central position, to occupy the space of the sheet. This work visually offers a definite starting and expanding position.

The research about Self Identity begins with the personal questioning and an initial statement.

#### 4.1.2. Response to the initial feelings of anxiety

In tackling this research, I found myself facing a series of unexpected situations (such as the move to another country with my family, the coincidence of the Covid 19 pandemic). The concomitance of the facts and the awareness that the heuristic, arts-based approach undertaken would have made me relive in a profound way different moments of my life, as an author-participant, I felt an intense tension within me. Thus, in accordance with the flexibility of the heuristic method of being close to the needs of the participant (Sultan, 2019), I allowed myself a support space: a short daily time to familiarize oneself with all the emotions that emerged, expressing them by artmaking.

For about twenty days I created small circular images on a square space (dimensions 5.5 "x 5.5").



Fig.8 Support

The small drawings above (see the image 8) were created to respond to the tension that arose. Checking myself on the question: “where I am, and what I need” (suggested by Sultan, 2019), the images of the “here and now” expressed the corresponding feelings. A written part follows the realization of the image, every day.

I used the *shape* of the circle as a defined space in which to concentrate. The circular shape becomes an important theme, bringing with it an emotional need for concentration, as well as self-identification, energy saving, and the ability to reflect.

During this process the emergent themes were: *feelings, shapes, subjects, materials, words*. The most present *subjects* can be divided into: humans figure parts - face, eye, body, mouth, throat -which are mediators of my biographical memory evoking emotions, linked to anxiety and fear; and natural themes - such the tree, the earth, the mountains, the leaves, represented both in a stylized form and in a realistic way as still life, inspirations for calm and peace.

An analysis of the written parts also revealed that the most expressed current *emotions* were certainly anxiety and fear, which I attributed to having to with the personal expectations to this research. During the twenty days the emotional states alternate: they try to self-regulate, they contain themselves in the space of the circle, but they also break into the external one. When I became aware of this emotional state, the small drawing served to transform this feeling into what I needed: energy, hope, strength, a request for acceptance of my-self (no self-judge). Twice, in two artworks, elements of rupture occurred: without the circular shape

and with different artistic material. The need for transformation also shines through. The latest work defines an absolute transformation, presenting ready-made materials such as string and duct tape, perhaps to indicate that research must go further.

That certain performative anxiety dissolved in the making of these small images, making the process of artmaking more transparent and familiar to me as author-participant.

A sort of passing the baton to the successive phase.

#### 4.1.3. Reflection about concept of “development” in artmaking visualization

Before starting the process of recalling autobiographical memories and making an artmaking connection to the focus of the investigation, I tried to exclusively explore the evolutionary aspect of the process itself, considering the fact that the heuristic method is made up of several consequential phases and that research itself follows its own intrinsic evolution.

I decided to focus on a narrative language based on *visual artistic aspects* such as *technique, color, shape, space*, interaction and transformation of the same. I decided to create a path of six images. Both series consist of six square spaces with a basic neutral tone. Each image has its own title and the written description that follows the art-making process.



Fig.9 Centering



Fig.10 Transformation

The first sequence is called *Centering* (see the fig. 9) and it is done with soft pastels. The second one, *Transformation* (see the fig. 10) is realized with temperas.

*Centering* shows an exploration of space through primary colors. All images, as well as colors, rotate around the center: they move and overlap. They take up the entire space. In the second, third and fourth images, through the protective application of the adhesive tape, shapes of the original neutral tone's paper are preserved, as if to remember the need to keep intact the beginning and the origin. It is a series that has an emotive communication through full tone colors, also inserting words, some readable, others as a secret alphabet to be deciphered. Warm, almost explosive tones that want to expand with respect to the given space are evident in the last two images. In fact the last image is full of light, yellow in tone in the center of which, a white square reads the word "ME", with two symmetrical green signs in the shape of a chalice that welcome the center.

*Transformation* has another imaginary: the tempera technique creates a greater rigidity of the forms that interact with each other, distinct against the neutral background. They are of more defined tones, which remain constant: red, black, blue and white are the protagonists of the first four images. The circular and curvilinear shapes seem to aggregate, divide and recompose new shapes. A change occurs with the insertion of a yellow tone that gives a natural appearance to the geometric shapes in the last two images, ending the sequence with the image of a white flower, resting on green leaves.

Both sequences show a beginning, a development and an end.

In this simple simplification of a process, an interaction has been created between image formation and information processing. It is observed that in both sequences the colors take on a symbolic value, each color corresponds to a role: eg. white indicates light to lighten, while black to divide, create shadows, yellow to give energy, transforming blue into green, a symbol of life.

These two examples were an opportunity for me to better metabolize the concept of heuristic, arts-based research, offering a reflection of existential aspects and symbolic language through images.

#### 4.1.4. Thematic artworks with 2D images

During the *initial engagement* I worked with the artistic materials, using memory as a filtering tool. I faced the different evolutionary phases of life, following a certain emotional priority until I felt I had exhausted this exploratory part. In this first heuristic phase, the memory was the input for the artwork, and sometimes it was the artwork that triggered memory. The fact of not having imposed a chronology of events in the *initial engagement* phase made it possible

to detect my urgencies as participant, it emerged an emotional need to communicate personal traumatic events or crisis state and an intimate need for “belonging”. Many memories evoked pain and feelings of suffering, loneliness, not understanding. These emotions prevailed over the positive ones.

*Consciously voiced the feelings and emotions that emerged in the unfolding of my identity, knowing that it was going to be a multi-stage journey and that many emotions needed to be appeased.*

Memories are an important medium soliciting self-dialogue, despite the maximum freedom of materials and format, the variations were not excessive: the format concerned ease of execution, while watercolor was the preferred technique, alongside pastels and graphite. Watercolors are used in their versatility: being intense or almost transparent, defined or borderless, offering a range of chromatic variations, transparencies, overlaps, request for drying times, creating a rhythm of execution. The technique offers a wide range of colors and intensities: the possibility of layering the chromatic tones allows the author to gradually define and consolidate the shapes and aspects that seem to take on more importance during the formation of the image. The intuitive choice of watercolors technique corresponded to my needs at this stage, more at affective perceptual level (Hinz, 2020).

The artworks made during the *Initial engagement* (see fig. 11 and fig.12) emphasize that “trauma” plays a relevant role within an introspection of my life. It is present and needs to be integrated.

When the artwork touched very deep aspects, it took more time for the passing of the baton. For me it was necessary to look at the artistic work at different successive moments in order to recompose some personal aspects with concrete visual elements.

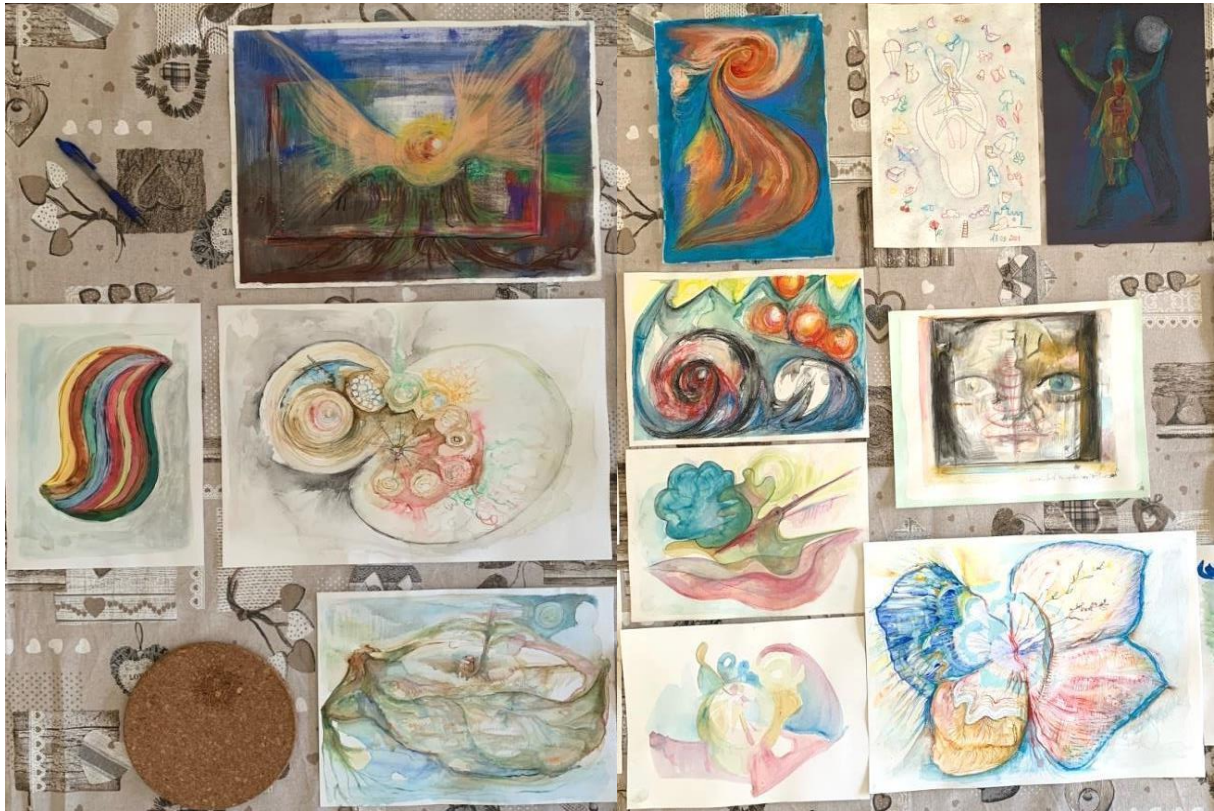


Fig.11 Overview of artworks 2D during Initial engagement –a

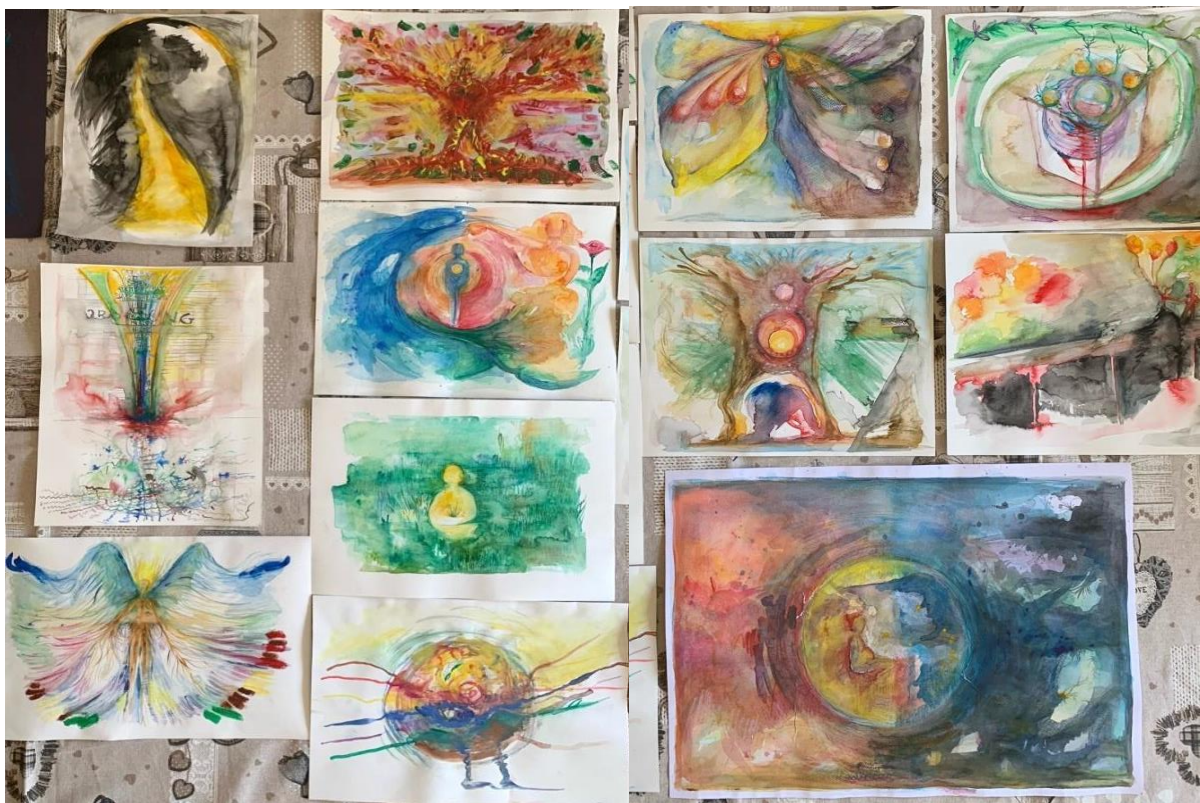


Fig.12. Overview of artworks 2D during Initial engagement –b

Subsequent to the artmaking, each artwork was followed by the written part and at the end of this heuristic phase, the writing and artworks were coded (see fig. 13).

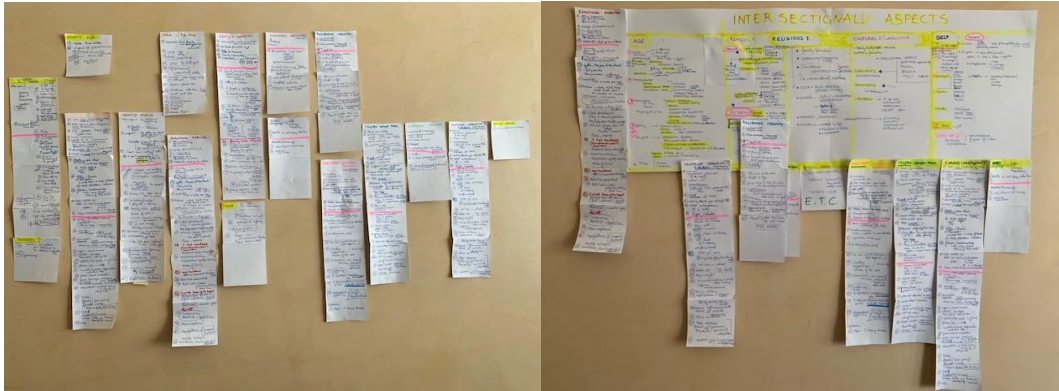


Fig.13 Analysis codes memo-drawings of Initial Engagement

The most frequently elements that have emerged as *visual codes* in this *Initial engagement* phase are represented in the following table

**Table 4.** Visual codes of Initial engagement phase

<b>ARTISTIC MATERIAL</b>	Watercolors, Soft/dry pastel, Charcoal
<b>COLORS / MEANINGS</b>	Blue: <i>spiritual, river-water, interiority</i> Red: <i>trauma, deepness, symbol of rose</i> Yellow: <i>energy, gold, sun, transformation</i> Black: <i>divide, define - underline, close</i>
<b>SHAPE</b>	Circle, Sphere, Wave
<b>CONTRAST - OPPOSITE</b>	Light-darkness, Life-death, Heat-cold
<b>MOVEMENT -DYNAMICS</b>	Action, Comparison, Repetition, Exploration
<b>SYMBOLS - METAPHORS</b>	Heart, Sun, Eye, Flowers, Wings, Wave
<b>EMOTIONS - FEELINGS</b>	Negative: <i>sadness, pain, fear, loneliness</i> Positive: <i>curiosity, joy, hopefulness, sense of save</i>



After having perceived that this first heuristic phase has been exhausted by coding, the following **intersectional aspects** are identified through the analysis and codification of all the artworks:

**Age**, most of the data refers to the period of childhood and youth, using the symbols of wings, flowers and trees to which the emotions of suffering and loneliness are also associated.

**Family identity**, first of all that linked to the family of origin, underlining the role of mother and father and of both together in the concept of parents. The symbols relating to the identity of the family are the tree, the roots, the flowers, the mountains. Furthermore, the author-participant emerges with the identity role of daughter and sister projected within the original family, then emerges with the role of mother, with the presence of her children through the symbol of balloons and flowers.

**Religious identity** emerges as an identity linked to family education and later as a personal discovery. It is expressed with yellow and blue colors, with the transparency of the material and with the symbol of the sun and light, accentuating the sense of contrast as light or dark, or the opposition between horizontal and vertical.

**Cultural identity** is identified more by the presence of cross-cultural aspects, including the sense of social identity, where variety and diversity are perceived with a positive sense of expansion, curiosity, openness.

Another emerging aspect that must be considered important inherent in Identity development is the concept of **Self**, which is represented in this *Initial engagement* phase through the various identity's states, such as the *crisis* with the symbol of face-mask and existential questions; the *confusion* with the symbol of water, of the vortex, of an undefined position; the *diffusion-moratorium* identity status with the role of sister and the shape of sphere; the *foreclosure* status with the symbol of flower, the attribute of wings, and at the end the *achievement* status with affirmative symbols as sun, horse and flower.

## 4.2. Immersion

### 4.2.1. Pre- immersion

After defining the conclusion of the *Initial engagement*, in which the artworks were analyzed, I took a break due to my physical movement to another country, Croatia. I therefore decided to create transitional artworks to reconnect with the theme, and take vision and awareness of change and refocus myself.

There are four artworks created to express this passage, which I called *pre-immersion*.



Fig.14 Transaction

Fig.16 Before and after

Fig.15 Between water and air

Fig.17 Warming

Immediately a change with respect to the works of the *initial engagement* emerges in the insertion of different materials (collage, tissue paper, threads, characteristic and use of the canvas as a support) which in some way testifies to a passage in the research. In the artwork

*Transaction* (see fig.14) is clear the passage from the pointed, geometric to the curvilinear natural shapes.

From the fragmentation due to the surface of the canvas of the work *Between water and air* (see fig.15), the use of water allows to organize the image, to unite the parts of what is being created. A creature emerges that can live both in the fluid environment of water and breathe air, developing the ability to adapt, showing the integration of differences.

In the work *Before and after* (see fig. 16), a fluidity of approach allows you to create a story starting from simple fragments of tissue paper, which with a circular, almost skeletal shape, multiply and create a shape full of color, energy and symbolic meaning.

The visual code *opposition-contrast*, which emerged in the analysis of the artworks of the previous heuristic phase, finds a sort of integration and a new awareness. It appears in several images as a duality: "*two faces seem to coexist*", two worlds (water and air) they are consequent, past and future are linked in the narration and two cultures overlap.

*Each color has its own space, each space is stretched out, vibrates, overlaps, relates, and creates shapes that communicate with each other.*

The “landscape“ of the fourth image *Warming* (fig. 17) summarize this transitional moment: the movement following direction from left to right, with curvilinear lines and creating symbols of the natural world: tree, bird, river, sun, flower, spiral, feature, butterfly.

These four artworks witness the introduction, therefore an evolution through awareness of a sweet gaze, an all-female gaze that accompanies me as an author-participant.

Each reflection is entirely feminine, and it is also perceived in the written part.

*Thoughts intersect, like lines.*

*They create pungent shapes.*

*They seek new directions but always touch the same points.*

*They remember the pain.*

*Remember to continue.*

*Remember to go further.*

*I raised the anchor.*

*I want to leave again.*

*Come back to continue.*

*Come back to get my life back.*

*The memory softens, approaches, becomes real.*

*Memory takes on the present.*

*A sweet look accompanies me, a feminine look.*

*Taking care of oneself, of one's own feminine interiority,*

*fragile, varied, attentive, curious, delicious, so essential.*

The intersectional aspects also confirmed in the writings are **family identity** as heritage and bonds, **religious identity**, **cultural-social identity** and finally **gender**. They are a reference for the intersectional exploration in the subsequent phase of *Immersion*.

#### 4.2.2. Immersion: eight artworks – eight phases of life

In the *Immersion* phase, following the sequence of the identified periods of my life (see table 2), I continued to explore the intersectional aspects of identity, taking into account my being female. The *Initial engagement* offered both visual codes and intersectional aspects that helped me to face the *Immersion* in its entirety. Each phase of my life of the eight identified has its own particular story, and in this *Immersion* phase I recalled them with two-dimensional works of art, of the same basic dimensions.



Fig.18 Background

Fig.19 Limbo

Fig.20 Crack

In the first artworks, *Background* (fig.18), concerning the years of childhood, is evident a narrative necessity to begin the family story using my photos inspiration to draw figures. The background of the family is characterized on the left side by mountains, houses, stones, leaves. I am represented as a drawn figure in two different ages: the first one at nine years old is in the center: I am the protagonist of a religious celebration and I walk among my parents. The second one represents me as a child of four or five years old in the lower part of the sheet, and I hold a helium balloon that flies upwards, higher than the parents themselves but

always inside the house, below the roof, near. In the center, just under the roof, there is the curious presence of a mini church, given the openings and the cross. Small, but visually present. Several plots of paper collage, on the right side of the house, represent the numerous members of my family, ten. They have their own identity and head outwards.

In the second artwork, entitled *Limbo* (fig. 19), I am shown as a pre-adolescent girl, sleeping at the base of a flower, a sort of dreamlike, intimate space, made of soft and feminine colors. I look crouched on the curved base as if I were a dreamer who lets her be cradled among rose petals. The floral image seems to want to announce a flowering, an opening of its petals, perhaps premonitory an awakening. Some areas of the petals are made with a mimetic hatching, as occurs in the "pictorial restorations" on damaged parts. The thin relief of a cotton thread appears to define the contours of the petals, a minimal, almost invisible presence. Two squares of corrugated cardboard, yellow and red, are applied to the petals. They are presented twice, and they seem unrelated to the image made up of smooth lines. As warning signs, of something not disclosed. The flower is suspended in the air. On the opposite sides of the sheet, external to the space of the flower, there are two angels; they seem to wait, dream and observe.

The third artwork, entitled *Crack* (fig. 20), represents my adolescent age, from 15 to 25 years. The entire surface of the sheet is dominated by an orthogonal grid of geometric shapes: it can read the textures of the stone and marble that accentuate its rigidity. The composition is so fragmented and heavy at the same time. A circular shape, formed by a sequence of white, red and black elements, resembles a kind of roulette, or a clock that beats time. It is located in the center of the image, where a small naked figure is collapsed on itself, expressing a dramatic and solitary situation. The presence of a few words on the right side, which looks like an impassable wall, characterizes a mental and physical rigidity: the expression of an existential crisis. I have written:

*I was in an "autistic" and vicious situation towards the world: I couldn't express myself (...). There was too much pain behind those images, I had to reduce them to simple squares, pieces of a mosaic.*

Two drawn arrows indicate an exit: a small window from which it can see the sky and a tiny seagull flying high. My adolescence crisis continues with events that allow a progressive improvement.



Fig.21 Renovation

Fig.22 Rebirth

Fig.23 Travel

In the next artwork, *Renovation* (see fig. 21) at the age of 25, there was a significant change in the experience of conversion within the Catholic faith. This exceptional experience of spiritual renewal has given me for the years to follow the energy to experience new life opportunities (independence from family, multicultural experiences in France, Germany, Austria), both physical and spiritual. The heart becomes the symbol of these two dimensions. The heaviness of the stone seen in the image above gives way to a light grid, which supports the growth of plants and flowers. On the left side, however, there are short texts from the Bible. Words are renewed and now offer support to the heart. The cognitive meaning of the words now becomes symbolic: biblical words are the "new" stone on which to build my new identity.

The image offers visual paths for the eye: a spiral movement in the center of the heart invites the eye to follow its lines by going to the right. A green thread continues the spiral shape and rises upwards, accompanying the birth of leaves and then of flowers and through the wings of a bird it enters the yellow heat of the sun and then descends back into the heart. Soft lines, which move creating spiral and concentric shapes, the primary colors interact with each other: a visual narrative path between the symbols of the heart, water, leaves, flowers, the sun, the bird with spread wings, a dynamic that speaks of personal regeneration and transformation.

It is no coincidence that the title of the next work is *Rebirth* (see fig. 22). It concerns the years of my missionary experience in Brazil and Rome. The image is extremely symbolic: it features warm colors, curvilinear and concentric shapes that seem to lead the gaze towards the center, where a clearly female figure holds and welcomes a heart. Many meanings overlap: and certainly my approach took place at various levels of expression. On a perceptive, almost naturalistic level, I proposed green and blue natural elements (plants and water), yellow and orange, recalling the ripening fruits, therefore on a symbolic level representing the essentiality of a mother, through a stylized figure. If in the previous work the narration followed a linear

movement of sequences, here the narration takes place starting from the entire surface of the image, from the outside inwards, up to the heart. A concentric movement that alludes to a path in depth, towards a very intimate and emotional experience of the person himself. In this work there is the intimate essence of my feminine person.

The following artwork is called *Travel* (see fig. 23). It concerns the period in which I got married, formed my family and settled in Croatia, my husband's land. The image presents mostly circular geometric shapes that overlap: each in its own individuality and color is part of the surface of the other. The circular, closed shape recalls the concept of identity, both of the person and of the family. My family therefore occupies the left side of the image, it takes on the appearance of an oval shape. I have to care them but also to approach the new society where I live, presented on the right side: plant motifs reminiscent of corn, typical of the Croatian region, are drawn in black and white, with small red spots to recall the war past. Family and society are contained in a semicircular shape that appears to float on the blue surface. A roof defined by two brown lines (similar to the roof of the *Background* artwork) dominates the center of the sheet, and seems to want to protect both the family nucleus and the environment outside it. The blue base recalls that of *Limbo*, but it appears more stable, thick and supportive of the new reality.



Fig.24 Achievement

Fig.25 Resonance

The following period of my life gives its name to the following artwork: *Achievement* (see fig. 24). I am forty-four years old. I have my family, my job, my home. I became a mother for the third time. The geometric shapes begin to be enriched with decorative elements of natural inspiration: flowers and leaves, especially in the external part of the large circle-spiral, which dominates the surface of the sheet. The colors are more delicate and nuanced than the previous work. An animal figure, a sort of swan, with a pointed beak turns towards the spiral

that is at the origin of the circle-sphere. The composition, despite having a geometric structure, seems to allude to a more natural world. The individual parts seem to have found their position, creating a more peaceful rotary movement. A sort of integration seems to have taken place between the form and the function attributed. Basically I feel fulfilled in my world, despite external challenges continue to sting me.

The last artwork of the *Immersion* phase concerns the experience of a year, a relatively short time compared to the life experience of the other images. I moved with my family to Italy, and within a few days it turned out to be the epicenter of the Covid pandemic phenomenon. An experience that broke all security, both personal and social: a sort of "big bang". A background created of various colors that seem to have shattered on the surface. They have no definite forms. A dark spot occupies a central area, but stylized leaves and flowers in white acrylic are created on it. The lines are very thick; it seems they want to reaffirm their presence. On them there are small circles and a heart of red thread; it too is of considerable depth and seems to allude to a "starting over and mending". The red heart and the red circle, however small, are the significant forms of this work entitled *Resonance* (see fig. 25).

#### 4.2.3. Analysis of Immersion phase

The *visual codes* emerged during the *Initial engagement* (see table 4) are maintained and play a more active and somewhat conscious role in the *Immersion* phase (see table 5).

**Table 5.** Visual codes of Immersion phase

<b>ARTISTIC MATERIAL</b>	Watercolor is predominant technique Collage with tissue paper collages, newspapers (figurative elements and words), thread of various colors and acrylic
<b>COLORS – MEANINGS</b>	Blue, Red, Yellow Addition of Green Brown Black (less used) Various colors (new code)
<b>SHAPE</b>	Circle, Sphere, Spiral, HEART
<b>DUALITY (NEW)</b>	Inside-outside, mountain-sky, father-mother, house-church, past-present
<b>SYMBOLS - METAPHORS</b>	Heart, House, Flowers (rose), Leaves
<b>EMOTIONS - FEELINGS</b>	Negative: <i>sufferance, grief, loss, fear, confusion</i> Positive: <i>protected, proud, joy, inner warming, thankful</i>



Although *watercolor* is the predominant technique, the artistic material has become richer combining different material; the colors overlap each other but do not mix, keeping a clearer meaning. A novelty undoubtedly lies in the transformation of the concept of *contrast-opposite* into *duality*. *Emotions* are certainly more balanced between positive and negative ones. The *sphere* and the *spiral* become the forms that represent the *Self*.

After having exhausted the codification of the artworks relating to the eight periods of my life, I was able to identify the following intersectional aspects of identity, confirming their presence as well as their importance.

**Age** is congruent with the phase of life represented in the image; the aspects that individualize it are *shape, size* and *color*. It is therefore an intersectional aspect that has been defined by the methodology itself.

**Family identity** is the intersectional aspect that returns more often, from the earliest stages with the link of the concept of *family* of origin, therefore with a broader concept of family, including the bond of a *spiritual family* and reaching the realization of one's own family.

The intersectional aspect of *family identity* emerges through different symbols: the *house*, the *mountains*, the *tree* and the *branches* and the *brown* color for the family of origin, with the *heart*, the *sun*, the *light* to give expression to the concept of *spiritual family* to which are also added the *emotions* of *fullness, curiosity, love, joy* and *universality*.

The current family is represented with *circles*, with the color *yellow, green* and *red*, with the feelings of *protection, welcome, love* and *understanding*.

**Religious identity** is linked to the concept of institutional *church* as a construction and structure in the symbol of the *house-church* or rather of *house* in the *house*, welcoming the concept of religious education and formation within the family. My conversion, which took place at the age of 25, identifies the religious aspects in a more intense and personal spiritual dimension, and is represented by the *symbols* of the *sun, light, opening*; it is expressed in the sense of *universality, welcome, and acceptance* with feelings of *joy, fullness, openness*, with the colors of *yellow* and *blue*. Within the *religious identity* the concept of *family identity* also evolves, experiencing the sense of *belonging* to the spiritual family of the Church. This

experience transforms the register of my *emotions*, becoming more positive and balancing the negative *emotions*.

**Cultural identity** concerns that aspect of identity that traces my cultural environment of origin, the first experiences of social relations outside the family, and the cross-cultural experience in various European and extra-European countries, with the meeting and the knowledge of different social models, languages, habits and traditions. Visual elements that characterize it are lines of *various colors* and tones, the inclusion of *different materials*. Moreover, feelings of *curiosity* and the desire to explore are the dynamics that have moved me towards new energies and motivations.

**Gender**, a characterization of the *female* gender is present at every stage of the *Immersion*, from the definition of a *little girl* in the written texts, to the *delicate colors* of floral shapes, to the *sinuous shapes* with feminine indications; all refined details that try to express *female* identification with precision and accuracy..

**Self**, the identity roles and various identity's states are distributed over time. Each identity state is undoubtedly committed to the intersectional aspect of the genre, confronting itself with the family cultural environment (*Background*), the pre-adolescent interiority in the symbol of a flower in the process of blossoming (*Limbo*), with the rigidity of an identity crisis to be dissected and rejected (*Crack*), with the presence of strong guiding spiritual symbols (*Renovation*), with the centrality and amplification of a discovered femininity (*Rebirth*), with the organization of family space (*Travel*) with coexistence of the Croatian society world (*Achievement*) and with moments of difficulty and confusion in the pandemic time (*Resonance*).

### 4.3. Incubation

Every time I made an artwork, I looked at it in successive and distinct moments. This modality allowed me to see it both in its experiential presence as participant and as an objectified image in the researcher role.

*After making all the works, I hung them all on the wall, and for the first time I looked at them all together. I took a deep, open breath. Despite the density of my thoughts during*

*this immersion experience, looking at these drawings reassured me. There are eight of them, yet I have arranged three rows there, as if to underline that the path is not over anyway. I let this gaze still live almost empathetic with the works.*

For the *Incubation* phase, after the *immersion*, I spent two weeks without thinking or writing about it. I experienced the works only as a visual presence on the wall:

*Watching them gave me an even stronger feeling that those works were part of an almost biological rhythm. This is the reason that brings me even closer to the heuristic method.*

#### **4.4. Illumination**

The heuristic phase of *Illumination* is certainly the most unpredictable. It occurred spontaneously when I intuited the meaning of some formal and/or thematic aspects. It manifested itself at different times, sometimes in an explicit form, also during artmaking, sometimes following paths of intuition, thought, reflections of internal dialogues that lead to the understanding.



Fig.26 Symbiosis

For example, an important example of illumination took place during the time of *Initial engagement*, when I understood the family dynamics that involved me in childhood, which I defined as symbiotic with the artwork *Symbiosis* (see above, fig. 26).

The image in its dynamics expresses the experience within the family organization; various colors and movement visualize a shape, where one color can't move differently than others. The shape is close to the gray surface. No external contact.

I have written:

*Being a large family, and being the last of eight, I struggled to identify with the psychosocial process of individuation: the ideal of the whole, superimposed on the family theme, is certainly an aspect that subsequently influenced the evolution of my person. Interpreting the world around me according to parameters that I was looking for in the family of origin (eg. match the working context to the family context, or look for a supportive relationship, equal collaboration where the hierarchical one predominates) generated frustration, dissatisfaction, sense of non-belonging, isolation.*

When I felt I had discovered the meaning, I continued to verify its authenticity by reliving it in the different phases and situations of my life.

It was an illumination's point because I began to correlate my primary need to belong to various other situations, having a new understanding of them. Starting from this point, many other aspects have found a "light" that I will better present in the discussion.

#### **4.5. Explication**

After the *immersion*, coding the results of the images and writings (see subparagraph 4.2.3.), and *incubation* phases, letting my intuitions emerge, I dedicated a long time to observing what happened, understanding each image for itself and the whole.

The visual and intersectional aspects that emerged during the *initial engagement* were confirmed in the *immersion's* analysis, however, they also defined themselves and acquired depth and stability in their message and their symbolic meaning.

I therefore tried to deepen some themes considered primary, both for the content and for the formal aspect, themes that carry multilevel meanings. For example the *mountain*, which

recalls the origins of my parents, expresses the characteristics of a nature capable of resisting, with the presence of wood, trees and rock. Its dimensions cannot help but look up to the sky, immediately creating a relationship of esteem and admiration. This is followed by the visual element of the *house*, which passes from a concept of physical space to the symbolic meaning of a place where the family gathers, where they receive protection, care, where they grow up. Another recurring visual element is in the *flowers*, used as decorative elements associated with the concept of beauty, delicacy and even femininity. In my work the flower often becomes the *rose*, carrying with it the *symbol* of love, of the gift and not surprisingly it is the personal name of my mother, so it acquires a further value as well as meaning. Alongside the flowers and the rose, in more artworks are the *leaves*, a vegetal motif that recalls the natural cycle of life that grows. Other important themes, which in the exploration path of this research have acquired multiple levels of meaning, are *heart*, which symbolizes the place of the intimate and profound experience of feelings, and *light*, in its symbolic and spiritual meaning of giving life. The *Light* and the *Heart, life and love*, become an important dichotomy in the profound dialogue with oneself.

This further process of rationalization has also strengthened the meaning of the shapes of the *circle*, of the *spiral* and therefore of the *sphere*, as if they were part of an evolutionary process of the same meaning: from the static shape of the circle to the dynamism of the spiral to reach the three-dimensional shape of the sphere; a change of growth and strengthening. These *insights* have broadened the expressive range of those identity aspects that I recognized earlier. They are not static, defined and concluded, but continue to vary precisely in relating to each other. For this reason also the *verbal terms* used both to describe the artworks, which present in the written parts, become significant: they describe actions such as *overlapping, layering, intertwining, stratifying, relating*. It is therefore precisely in the *action* of these verbs that one can grasp what happens between the different intersectional and identity aspects of the Self: they relate and create a dynamic coexistence contributing to the construction of the Self.

#### **4.6. Creative synthesis**

The whole artmaking process during the phase of *Creative synthesis* was a search for the materials that corresponded to sensations I wanted to convey, to the shape I wanted to give, to the meaning I wanted to attribute. It was a process of continuous and progressive "choices"

that have strengthened my bond with artwork, transferring the aspects highlighted during the *Immersion* phase and the subsequent *Illumination* and *Explication* phases to it.

With plaster and plaster bandages, aided by the volume of a balloon, I created the base of the final artwork *Inner Globe*. In placing the plaster and the bandages I went from the sensory-kinesthetic level with the plaster and its modeling, to the affective level, reliving emotion and pain. By giving form and function to matter (perceptual and cognitive level) I assigned to matter a new meaning (symbolic level) to that suffering that had accompanied me since childhood. I have assigned a consolidation role from which to start again to build the Self. In that material the sense of physical trauma was condensed.

It was a creative process that allowed me to pass through different levels of ETC (Hinz, 2020). The result is a sense of stability and solidity.



Fig 27 Process of the artwork *Inner globe*

In this final artwork **visual themes** (shape, colors, emotion, duality, symbols) and **intersectional aspects** (age, gender, family identity, religious and socio-cultural identity, Self), intertwine.

In table 6. I visualized the intersection between visual themes and intersectional aspects present in the last artwork of *Creative synthesis*. It is visible how the same theme corresponds for different intersectional aspects, having reached their synthesis of meaning in this stratification process.

**Table 6.** Creative synthesis: intersection between themes and intersectional aspects

INTERSECTIONAL ASPECTS THEME	AGE	GENDER Female	FAMILY IDENTITY	RELIGIOUS/ SPIRITUAL IDENTITY	CULTURAL SOCIAL aspects	SELF- Identity state:
EMOTION FEELING	Hope Responsibility Potentiality stability	Love welcome Fullness Richness	Hospitality Love Stability	Love Acceptance Energy joy Feel carried Universality	Curiosity Richness Compassion Emotive integration	Achievement protective  <i>I have my place</i> Affirmative state
COLOR  SHAPE FORM  MATERIAL	Semi-sphere Circle  Plaster as incorporated memory	Red  Semi-sphere Transparence Openness	Red, Brown  Circle Heart  branches, roots	Blue (air) Yellow-white sphere  Candle	Various colors  Little leaves Layers Intertwining	Various colors Transparences   Thread- rope Natural material
DUALITY	Sensory-cognitive	Hard-soft Thin-flexible Flexible-solid	Vertical- horizontal Hard-soft Branches-leaves	Yellow-red Inside-outside Light- Life Sensory-spiritual	Italy-Croatia	Coexistence two culture Inside-outside Synthesis-complexity Acceptance-diversity
SYMBOL	Semi-sphere Layering words plaster-memory	Semi-sphere Heart	Nest Heart Balloon (memory)	Sphere- sun Heart Light	Various colors Openness	Semi-sphere Circle-Spiral Heart

Some colors become material, so the *brown*, referring to the family and the cultural heritage of the family during the *Immersion* phase, is presented as a thin, flexible but not breakable branch. The spiritual color *blue* became airier, integrated into the air of the spherical volume; the vivacity of the colors and the intensity of *yellow* that prevails in the inner-inner part is influenced by the Brazilian experience of *light* and *heat*; *yellow* is flanked by *red* to represent that *energy* and *vitality* are flanked by the feelings of *love* and also of *suffering*. Together they define the *heart* which is positioned in the center of the interior of the hemisphere. Respecting my dual nationality as a family, I also put Italian and Croatian bows near the *heart* (see fig. 28 a,b) because they both belong to me and I belong to them.

On the outside of the volume many small elements of tissue paper are visible, as if they were small *leaves* or flags. The *variety of colors* represents the variety of the *different cultures* that I met, and from which I let myself be touched, becoming a part of me.

The shape of the sphere or of a hemisphere in 2D visible during the phases of *Initial engagement* and *Immersion* becomes a volume in three dimensions, capable of welcoming. The shape was consolidated thanks to the successive and continuous *layers* of semi-transparent, white and colored paper. In this *layering* process I also added some of my

biographical writings, which were not as transparent as the previous ones. In this way, 'shadow' areas of contrast were created when the light coming from the window crossed the walls of the hemisphere, it seemed to create fabulous landscapes, depending on the rotation of the sphere (see fig. 28 c, d), which I they suggested the existence of an externally visible inner world depending on the light. *Inner Globe* was therefore the title entrusted to this final work.



Fig. 28 (a. b, c, d) Inner globe – different perspective-point of views

In this regard, as a poetic expression, I have written:

*There is me,  
only me.  
Look me in the eye, even without a mirror.*



*that balloon in the photo is now the space of my shape,  
grown and consolidated;  
left its mark on the volume of myself.  
After all, he filled my fantasies with the air  
he has kept within him for all these years.  
Gradually, colored paper veils overlapped, fixing moments lived together with them.  
They gradually replaced each other,  
confident that the memories were not erased,  
but transformed into thoughts, words, emotions.  
Emotions that take you away, over time.  
The trust remains,  
the presence of a sign remains,  
the Light. The Love.*

## 5. DISCUSSION

This chapter first presents the contribution of the methodological choices for this research, then describes the findings from the arts-based methods, and finally answers questions to the initial exploratory process that contributed to the answers to the research questions, which are: IQ1: How do arts-based methods help the exploration of intersectional aspects of the Self through various life stages?

IQ 2: How do arts-based methods help the exploration of the female role through various moments of life through different contexts?

### 5.1. Heuristic and Arts-based approaches

The heuristic phases, from the *Initial engagement* to the realization of the last phase of the *Creative synthesis*, marked the rhythm of the artistic exploration of the intersectional aspects of the person in the course of life. The development of the phases is naturally akin to the phases of development of the identity (*confusion-crisis*, *moratorium* and *achievement-synthesis*), in the search for clarification, expression and therefore synthesis. It is a fact that the first heuristic phase is certainly more impregnated with emotions, which need to be expressed in their intensity when emerged. In the *Immersion* phase, the experience was more measured, aimed at exploring with more awareness the topic and purpose of the use of the tools available (artistic materials, poetic expressions, memorial notes). In the final heuristic phase, the emotional, sensory, cognitive and symbolic aspects of artistic process were all available to work together for the *synthesis*, how happens in the mature and adult person, who knows how to look, read and work with the reality of his own life.

The coincidence of the role of participant-researcher made it possible to explore very personal spaces (through *Self-dialogue*, *Tacit knowledge*) with total involvement (Sultan, 2019): the heuristic design encouraged me to go deeper, in constant confrontation with myself, believing that the "data is within me" (Moustakas, 1990, p.13), and that from them I can understand the nature of the different aspects within me. Thus, for example, the fact that during the initial involvement about half of some works spontaneously referred to the period of childhood, underlining the role of daughter, sister and younger sister (therefore the relationship with the family unit and with the parents, mother and siblings) manifests the predominance of the intersectional aspect of family identity. Many reflections have been brought into a visual language for a better understanding, so if in the heuristic phase of the *Illumination* I had

grasped the concept of a symbiotic relationship, it is through the artwork *Symbiosis* (fig.26) that a closed and wavy form composed of different juxtaposed colors was the my deeper response to the theme of the family, explaining its dynamics. Art-making has finally allowed me to intuit and understand it and personal memories have come to confirm situations.

The heuristic search has allowed an internalization of the exploratory path. The immersion in the theme using all the senses, perception, intuition, creates a strong connection between the participant-researcher and the theme itself. In my case, the intersectional perspective has also accompanied me in my daily life, refining the ability to recognize its nuances, even in the artistic process. By enhancing the researcher's capacity for reception and perception, when a certain 'performance' anxiety blocked me, I was able to create an alternative space with the "here and now" method, suggested by Sultan (2019). This gave me confidence and reassured me to proceed towards "unknown spaces" (Moustakas, 1990). In synergistic form to heuristic method, the arts-based approach has been the basis of all exploratory process, precisely because of the interest it can bring to the therapeutic paths of art therapy (McNiff, 1998) and to the knowledge of the Self (Allen, 1995). Artworks, as well as free poetic expression, accompanied me in every heuristic phase.

## **5.2. Artmaking and the exploration of the Self**

From the very beginning within the exploratory process, the artistic process took place in the free choice of materials and formats, allowing me to express myself as I thought best to explore the intersectional aspects of the Self. Within this approach the artistic material has become the metaphor of my *Internal frame of reference*, as catalyst (Sultan, 2019): by choosing it I express my affinities to with; by using it I recreate the *living experience* (Sultan, 2019) and letting myself be involved with all of myself, I become more attentive to every passage that resonates in me.

In the beginning of the *Initial engagement*, writing my reflections in the sequence *Centering* (fig.9) about the heuristic process, I wrote: "*Pastel has aroused a basic curiosity, being an unusual material for me.*" Curiosity has stimulated a greater energy of exploration, and I have always lived it positively in my life. Just as the pastel needs a surface that welcomes it, which corresponds to what it is made for, the Self also needs the context, be it family, social, religious or other. About the same material I added: "*the pastel has broken; something unexpected has happened that must be solved*".

The broken pastel represented its fragility. Life can unexpectedly present events that change its direction (such as traumatic events, family events, etc.). To continue the image it is necessary that the artist continues to consider its use, ready to remedy it, or ready to intervene to replace it. The artist is like the individual in the face of difficulties, must grow in awareness and ability to carry on his path.

This means that artistic materials are important research tools as they are bearers of metaphors in an exploratory path about the Self and therefore on its intersectional aspects.

During the *Initial engagement* I used pastels, tempera, watercolors and sheets of different formats; the technique and the artistic material itself have given me the opportunity to understand several important passages, at first to respond to personal emotional needs.

About the choice of artistic material I wrote:

*The intuitive choice of watercolors lent itself very well when the emotion was strong: the addition of water, the physical dilution, the repeated brushstroke, created a process of internalization, awareness and materialization. The emotion lived inside has found its image outside, and with this distance it has calmed down.*

The choice of watercolor has become for me the preferred artistic technique during the *immersion* phase. Water, as medium within the artistic process, becomes an effective metaphor for me to reflect on certain attitudes: water offers the possibility of diluting the color, the intensity; it allows lengthening the execution times; the importance of letting it dry to continue adding glazes, stratifying thoughts. Similar to the watercolor technique, even the intersectional aspects gradually *stratify* forming the person, *intertwine*, *overlap*, *change* in intensity according to the situations. Above all they settle slowly, they need time to define themselves.

Starting from this conscious choice of watercolor, each variation of technical experimentation, however minimal, opened up different opportunities for expression and for understanding. Therefore, it is interesting that the final work of the *Creative synthesis* becomes a multi-material work (combination technique), in which the expressive power of the artistic materials is reworked with real materials.



Fig.29 Dialogue on the wall



Fig.30 In situ

This evolution also in the material aspect means that the sense of Self, my *Internal frame of reference*, has developed into an awareness of its potential, passing from a two-dimensional image to a solid form (see fig. 29 and fig 30). Thanks to the creative process, all the intersectional aspects that have been identified (see the following paragraphs) during the heuristic journey, have been maintained and integrated with each other in a synthesis. In itself, the material evolution shows a maturation of the sense of Self, giving it solidity and stability.

#### 5.2.1. Recall memory as emotional memory, art-making and intersectional perspective

Throughout the whole process of inquiry, memory has played an important role activating themes and self-referential work, discovering new details and helping with their interpretations with artworks and memos. During the *Initial engagement* more images with a strong emotional impact emerged. At first, *Identifying with the Focus of Inquiry* I kept remembering traumatic events and reminiscent of childhood not understanding how they could be connected with the research topic. The qualitative research I was undertaking was an “immersion” “swimming in unknown currents” (Moustakas, 1990, p.13) and I had to trust. It was difficult to separate the personal concepts that would be best suited in a therapy session from my research inquiry.

I let the memory guide me through art-making and I gave space to the *Tacit knowledge* of the artwork. The next text shows how the artwork supports this important process. It was taken in an excerpt from my memos as I explored the childhood phase of my life, during *Initial engagement*:

*Even when I didn't have good things to say, even when the fear had deepened, or the pain was alive again creating artwork was supportive for me because it listened to me as an interlocutor. In some way I was aware about this risk because I have a life full of suffering and traumatic events, so, sometimes I have processed the different heuristic phases in an intuitive way, immersing myself in the problem, taking time, looking for answers, giving explanations and starting over with new awareness. The artwork was my witness and traveling companion, allowing me to create an interlocutor capable of withstanding the sentiment expressed until it settles.*

By becoming a witness of this emotional memory and *living experience* (Sultan, 2019) the artwork lets emerge the intersectional aspects of the Self. The artwork below *Absence* (fig.31) presents the sufferance of existential crisis state during my adolescent stage: the coexistence of the two different eyes gave visibility to the strong inner contradictions between two options: life and death. These two feelings alternated in a spiraling movement in the central figure.



Fig.31 *Absence*

In my memos about this artwork I wrote:

*They have been very difficult years; it seemed to me that I was preparing for war, the most important one you can face, the one for your life. I wanted to be a hero, but courage belongs to those who remain. And this I knew inside of me. I couldn't bear to be given a pitiful look. The courage belongs to those who remain, until the end, to make sense of every minute of breath.*

*I still see that courage in my mother today. She was not a thread, she was a rope. She has always had within herself this sense of life, a sense of survival, sacrifice but for life, without heroism. Live every minute, even without my father, giving glory to God for what she has always known how to face.*

This artwork allows reliving a personal critical experience through memory, in which the reference to the figure of the mother emerges behind the image; family identity and the female

role are intrinsic part to this image at an adolescent age in which individuation is a fundamental step. The words above all evoke the metaphor of a material, the *thread*, the *rope* (a stronger and thicker thread), which will be physically presented in the next heuristic phase, in the artworks of the *Immersion* and *Creative synthesis* phase. This means that the artwork is continuously connected to the Self, respecting the *Internal frame of reference*, and through its expression gives it continuity.

Another example of emotional urgency and an intersectional aspect of Self, during the *Initial engagement*, is the artwork *Abyss* (fig. 32): recalling a traumatic event in adulthood, the pain and suffering are still present. However, the presence of my husband on the other side of the bridge, who holds out his hand to me, was revealing.



Fig.32 *Abyss*

In the memo about this experience I wrote the following text:

*That visual detail comforted me. It emerged in its meaning, while I was gripped by my pain. It emphasizes the meaning and need in family relationships to be supportive in the difficult moment.*

These details emerged in an unconscious form during the memory of the event and became fixed in the artistic work. In this way they become meaningful to understand part of the family identity.



Giving continuity to autobiographical memory and making art offered me the possibility of recognizing that some emotional aspects that were dominant in *Initial Engagement*, had to be entrusted to a path other than the path of exploration. The space of the work of art turned out to be a safe space to entrust them to, and at the same time, the expression of emotional situations, has allowed identifying some intersectional aspects of my identity and the importance they held with respect to my life, ex. family identity as well as religious identity in the infantile-pre-adolescent period. The underlying artwork *Looking forward* (fig. 33), done after the previous artworks *Absence* and *Abyss*, gave voice to the different emotional aspects linked to the childhood trauma present in the memory as “a wound, red color that spreads”.



Fig. 33 Looking forward

My right wing corresponds to the underlying form (the family of origin), it leans on it, but with the left wing, perhaps also due to the central wound, the form takes another direction. A blue cloud (symbol of the spirituality) seems to lift it, overlap and emerge with another shape, greeting the sun, takes another direction. Somehow suffering is positioned at the center, almost taking on a broader meaning of "pain" and an active role among the identity aspects of my person linked to family and religion. The image presents a smooth integration of the different parts.

In fact, in the memos about *Looking forward* I wrote:

*Being able to have a controlled image, with the desire for a balance of the parts was for me very comforting, an inner sense that somehow becomes a therapeutic response to the previous overabundant emotions.*

This process indicated an arts-based therapeutic path and a process of integrating the identity of the Self. The autobiographical memory, in fact, has allowed to give continuity to the sense of self (McLean & Pasupathi, 2012), making art has allowed a deepening and enrichment of the sense of Self. An exploration according to an intersectional perspective has allowed a greater awareness of the most urgent intersectional aspects, which support the Self and which need to be understood, therefore integrated, to reach the state of achievement or synthesis (Erikson 1959, 1968). The artworks have made it possible to identify these intersectional aspects even if in the course of life they have assumed different values while continuing to coexist; this assumption is what I will present in the following paragraph, in response to the main research questions.

### **5.3. How arts-based methods help the exploration of intersectional aspects of the Self through various life stages**

The first main inquiry question was highlighted as the heuristic experience of intersectional aspects involves the ability to listen and welcome aspects that *overlap, intersect* and then find their own space through art-making. The artistic process mediated and enhanced the exploratory potential of the identity, allowing following the intersectional aspects and then synthesizing them in the final work.

The artwork is able to support both the uniqueness of an intersectional aspect and the coexistence of different intersectional aspects by assigning them a relational value visible in the artistic work itself. The artistic materials support the intersectional aspects in their coexistence in the various stages of life, through the following aspects: *various colors, overlapping of different shapes, overlapping transparencies*. In the written explanation, verbs emerged such as: *stratify, intertwine, layering, superimpose, relate*. This illuminated the correspondence between the artistic work (intrinsic to *tacit knowing*) and the awareness that emerges from its verbalization. In the written explanation, verbs emerged such as: *stratify, intertwine, superimpose, relate*. This correspondence allows me at this point to answer the first specific research question by presenting the individual intersectional aspects that emerged in the artworks during my research path, in the following paragraphs.

## Family identity

Family identity was a recurring intersectional aspect in the different phases of my life. Family identity emerged from the beginning throughout several artworks and writings during the study. The recurrent themes about family identity are *symbols, shape, and colors*.

For instance: *house* and *home* were symbols identified with family identity. Also the *color brown* has a symbolic meaning associated with my family of origin. It is linked to my true mountain origins associating the idea of earth, wood, trees. It is interesting to note that during the heuristic process a value of heaviness was attributed to them, linked first to the tiring life of the mountains, then to the rigorous teaching of my parents on the value of life. So an emotional closure has also gradually emerged with respect to my growth. The symbol of the *little house in the house*, present in the work *Background*, offers this sense of closure, one container within another. And I wrote also “*Mountains can also be walls*”, showing a double meaning for the symbol.

Continuing within the immersion phases, *family identity* emerged when I created my own family with my husband and my children. It was recognizable by the *circular shape* and that *spiral* in the artwork *Travel* artwork (see fig. 23). There are no walls, but only a protective roof, which involves the left side of my family and the right side of the environment where we live. Similarly, in the last image of the *immersion*, called *Resonance* (fig.25) corresponding to the dramatic period of the pandemic and my family's return to Italy, sees the *family identity* of origins and that of my current family overlap. Again, I wrote in my notes:

*What amazed me is to feel the presence of brown in its link with my origins, and to feel it often with a certain heaviness. (...) A sort of limiting construction, from the stone houses of the first image to the grid of the artworks “Crack”, as well as brown in the last one, “Resonance”, where the experience of the pandemic allowed me to think about the different conflicts interior, to the rigidity of spaces and where I left that brown deep behind me.*

In *Resonance* the identity aspect of the *family* of origin becomes a stain of a *brown* color, but its presence, however, recedes, because in the unfolding of my life its value and its influence diminish in favor of redemptive symbols, the *red circle* and the *red heart*. From *brown* to *red*, it's showed a change of values in the concept of family. The identity value that remained in the adolescent past is renewed by the identity value of the current family. The *circle* means

my real family, the *heart* is related to my spiritual family. *Circle* and *heart* are created with thick cotton *thread*, sources of energy. This material connects to the evocative qualities of my mother in the work *Absence* (fig. 31) and therefore to the maternal role. The *role of mother* is connected to the *family identity* aspect and in a broader sense also to the *religious* one.

In the final work *Inner Globe*, (see fig.28) of the *Creative synthesis*, the bond of the family of origin is identified with the insertion of natural material: small dry but still flexible twigs are inserted into the structure of what resembles the *nest* (a *house* with an evocation more naturalistic and intimate). Somehow the *family identity* of the past is incorporated into the form of the present, and still contributes to the function of Self for a new family.

This final artwork is an emphasis on the quality of *family identity* linked to *hospitality*, *welcome*, which involves *religious identity* and *femininity* at the same time. The Art-based approach allowed me to follow the intersectional aspect of family identity: it identified family identity within two aspects, one linked to the family of origin and the other to my family; discovered their relationship in the course of my life; welcomed their coexistence, giving them a function in the final work. These steps become very important for a therapeutic path, to favor integration and balancing in favor of the integrity of the person.

## **Religious identity**

Throughout the exploratory journey, *religious identity* emerged in several artworks and writings, becoming one of the emerging intersectional aspects. The religious aspects changed during the different stages of life, and their understanding also during the various heuristic phases.

During *Initial engagement*, the theme of *opposites* visible in the artistic works as light and darkness, day and night, hot and cold, life and death certainly brings back to a religious vision present since childhood characterized by the *opposition* between good and bad. *Opposites* provide the coordinates in which to move, it was a part of religious education. This *contrast* corresponds to the aspects of a religiosity that has been handed down, but not yet "embodied". In this heuristic phase, in an unconscious form, many traumatic events needed to be visualized and I asked myself why do I always need to go through this suffering? At some point it was the *illumination* inside of the *religious identity*, because I understood that I have implemented the strategies that my parents have handed down with their example in a religious attitude: going through suffering as a form of learning. The "cross" is an obligatory passage, for my

experiences the sufferance becomes a cathartic path and becomes important understand its demagogic value.

The artwork *Renovation* (fig. 21) made during the *immersion* phase is the artwork that more expresses the strong spiritual experience lived in my mature age. In this image the "cross", made up of two lines, one horizontal and one vertical, is a source of *light* and it is a source of life. The elements present in the image seem to underline the horizontality in the horizontal movement of the green lattice, where thorns are still present as metaphor of the human experience and sufferance; and the verticality in the ascension of the grid and flowering plants. Horizontal and vertical are also the coordinates identified by Erikson in his theory on spirituality (Carol, 2009). They are part of the spiritual dynamism of life.

Proceeding into the phase of *Immersion*, the *opposition-contrast* characteristic in *Initial engagement*, changed in the theme of *duality*. *Duality* allows for coexistence. *Duality* requires greater maturity to accept the different possibilities of the reality, also within the religious identity; *duality* is open to diversity, presenting an attitude of choice and not of exclusion. *Blue* and *yellow* are the duality of colors associated to the *religious identity*.

In the artwork *Inner Globe* of the *Creative synthesis* phase, the *color blue* with the values of spirituality and depth attributed to it during *Initial engagement* and during the *Immersion*' phases, becomes *air*. For me, *religious identity* is like *air*, to be breathed in order to live. Furthermore, dominating the internal part, there is *yellow* associated with energy, light, sun, warm, life, the divine; *yellow* expands and strengthens. The *air* fills, the *yellow* completes, giving *religious identity* an important role in my person.

In my experience, *religious identity* is intertwined with *the family* one. In the first artwork of *Immersion* phase (see figure 18, *Background*), religious identity is enhanced in the memory of the religious celebration, in which I was placed in the foreground between my father and my mother. Again, the church is the little building into the house drawn in the upper part of the work. This give a second meaning of the symbol *house in the house*; the church is also a kind of house, for believer, and it is a structure already present in my house. In the artwork *Renovation* precisely (see fig.21), the *heart* becomes the symbol-place where I met my spiritual identity in the religious Christian community-family. The sense of the family extends to the Church, and the sense of belonging is matched by spiritual bond of brotherhood. The *heart* is also the place where sacrifice and sufferance acquires meaning in *love*, in the gift of oneself. A sort of circularity visible in the artwork *Renovation* (fig. 21), and concentricity in *Rebirth* (fig.22), *sinuous shapes within others*, create a more accommodating warmer space.

The symbol of the *heart* welcomes all these meanings: *the family, religious and feminine identity* are enclosed in the symbol of the *heart* presented in the final work.

In some notes written during the *immersion*, I highlighted this awareness:

*Despite having committed years of my life to a mission based on catholic faith, I did not realize how much this continued to motivate and impregnate my attitude and my life.*

The arts-based methods allowed me to identify the *religious identity* progressively, first through the symbol of the *house in the house*, with the duality of horizontal and vertical (the symbol of the cross), with the values of the color *blue* and *yellow*, and then in the *heart* symbol. The *family* and *religious identity* superimpose their coexistence in the symbol of the *heart*, with the value of the high sentiment of *love* that distinguishes them.

### **Social-cultural identity**

Social-cultural identity is important intersectional aspect that accompanies me in my growth, relating to the context in which I lived. A first characteristic that the arts-based method has brought out since the initial engagement is the *feeling of curiosity*. *Curiosity* is what allows me to reflect and accompanies me precisely to understand myself in relating to the external environment.



Fig.34 New begin

During the *Initial engagement*, wanting to explore the meaning of this aspect, the first image that emerged is the artwork *New Begin* (see above, fig.34), where I express the experience of living in Germany. The artwork features *different colors*, which unfold as if they were two moving *wings*. The encounter with many young people and many cultures, which I have known over the course of a year, have enriched what was my starting figure in a sort of winged being. The dry, wooden silhouette (expression of identity's crisis, in a familiar context), in the middle, seems to take flight and rediscover vital energy, expressing a change in life within the *socio-cultural identity*.

In the set of artworks, the socio-cultural context finds visual reference in the *various colors*, arousing positive emotions linked to *curiosity*, to *discovery*. The *color* itself seems to be the main visual and symbolic aspect to convey the characteristics linked to *socio-cultural identity*. The *color* is visible thanks to the light. Its intensity, variety and chromatic scale depend on the context. For instance, looking at the fifth immersion artwork called *Rebirth* (fig. 22), with the experience in Brazil; the *colors green* and *yellow* are absolutely explicit in the reference to the flag, capturing the meaning in the green of nature and in the sunlight.

In the artwork *Travel* (fig. 23), the post-war context of Croatia is represented by gray tones linked to the aridity of the earth burned by bombs. In a sort of empathic relationship with the context, I express the *socio-cultural* aspect by defining my relationship with the context itself. Transferring these aspects into artistic works allowed me to recognize the different experiences made in countries other than my own, Italy; recognize my attitude towards them and above all welcome them as part of me. The *multicultural aspect* expressed with *various colors* is now part of me.

In the final work, the theme of the *various colors*, which have become small *colored leaves*, positioned both outside and inside, means that the *diversity* of the multicultural contexts encountered continues to contribute to my growth. Specifically, precise references to Croatia and Italy are represented by two bows with the *colors* of their respective flags. Clearly these two identities are underlined as the most important for their contribution to my personal and family life. Croatia involves me in the *socio-cultural* aspects, but it has become part of my *family reality*. The hemisphere visible in the artwork *Travel* (fig. 23) solidifies in the artwork *Inner Globe* (see fig. 29, *Dialogue on the wall*), and welcomes the “oscillations” of the family and its environment, integrating them within itself.

Thanks to the expression through artistic doing, within the code *various colors* I was able to identify in my *curiosity* the personal attitude towards the external context. The *socio-cultural*

aspects of identity were intrinsically connected with my *family identity*, and their relationship is a work in progress that accompanies me and my family.

## Gender

The concept of the *female* aspect of identity during all stages of my life is expressed in various artworks and written texts, both during the initial stages of *engagement* and *Immersion*, allowing me to perceive their transformation and awareness. The colors *pink*, *red* and *some transparencies* were the formal elements that alluded to a feminine state, perhaps also accepting a certain stereotyped meaning. The feminine pink, the *delicacy* and perhaps *fragility* in *transparency*. The *flowers*, the *rose* as the flower par excellence (with a symbolic reference to my mother, who is called Rosa) and the individual parts such as the petals, represent the *delicacy* and accuracy recognized in the feminine.

Continuing with the exploration through the arts-based method and the heuristic phases, the sense of the feminine is internalized, also welcoming other formal expressions such as the presence of a material: this is the passage from the *cotton thread* that accompanies the shape of the petals in the artwork *Limbo* (fig. 19) to the *heart* and *circle* of the artwork *Resonance* (fig. 25), ending with the thick, soft thread placed in the *red heart* open, in the center of the hemisphere of the *Inner globe* (fig. 28).

The aspect of femininity from the *color*, the *material*, the *shape* arrive to the *symbol*; it seems constant throughout the course, and its qualities become more precise, depth, enriching the experiences that the author has lived. The *circular shape*, therefore the *spiral* that seems to persist in representing my Self during the *Immersion* phase, becomes the volume of a hemisphere in the *Creative Synthesis* capable of welcoming. This evolution of the form corresponds to an evolution of the symbolism of the Self.

Within femininity there is further meaning: *motherhood*. The *symbol in the symbol* becomes an expansion of this aspect. If it is initially expressed by the symbol of *house within the house* in the artwork *Background* (fig 18), in the artwork *Rebirth* (fig.22) it is enriched by the *concentricity* of anthropomorphic forms: a female figure who takes care of a *heart*. This welcoming dimension becomes physical and real in the final work where the *heart* is welcomed *within the hemisphere*.

This artistic expression underlines the female potential to *welcome* by offering softness and warmth, to support, to accept, to protect and finally to internalize. The process of artistic creation, during all the heuristic phases, was a process of consolidation of the sense of Self,



leading me towards a *symbolic meaning* that could correspond to the different intersectional aspects: *family identity, religious identity, socio-cultural identity* and finally *female identity*. The last artwork of the *Creative Synthesis* (see fig. 28), which concludes my journey along the path of my life, summarizes all them in the true sense of the word through *shape, color, material, symbol and meaning-emotions*.

#### **5.4. How arts-based methods help explore the role of female in different moments of life through different contexts**

The exploration of the different roles related to *gender / female* identity during different phases of life can certainly offer many elements for reflection about sense of continuity, integration and functionality.

Already during the *initial engagement*, the role of *daughter* and *little sister* emerged several times indicating the need to investigate them within my family reality. In fact, the point of view of the subject influences the perception of his own family context, and can influence his attitude towards the external environment (Erikson, 1959).

Often in the written notes it emerged that the role of *daughter* and *younger sister* is maintained when I relate to my *family of origin*, despite my adulthood. This manifests an inner condition that seems to persist, linked to the past, and attributes a *limiting value* to me in regard to the family of origin. During the artistic process, the *balloon* theme emerges three times, in three different heuristic phases acquiring a particular meaning. At first during *Initial engagement*: the three balloons that I hold in the artwork *Abyss* (fig.32) during a traumatic event to symbolize my three children; they are a sort of projection of me as *little girl*. I don't want to be left, even in the presence of danger or drama.

The second time, during *Immersion* phase, the balloon appears in the artwork *Background* (fig.18) linked to my childhood: I'm a five-year-old, I hold an air *-balloon*. With other children we are in the backyard to celebrate a religious event that brings the whole family together. I'm the only one with the balloon, it's mine alone. It represents me, it rises towards the other but reaches the sky, it remains inside the roof of the house.

Finally, the *balloon* takes on a very important meaning in the *Creative Synthesis* phase. The final work, in fact, starts from an inflated *balloon*, which layer by layer consolidates into a *hemispherical volume*. The *balloon* is then pierced and physically removed from the solid form, which remains a witness to its presence.

The *balloon* that initially appeared as a shape related to childhood, now literally becomes a physical and solid shape. The *circular shape* present in various images of the *Immersion* is amplified in the choice of the three-dimensional volume in the final work *Inner Globe* (fig. 28). The *balloon*, like the *circular shape*, is a visual element linked to the concept of Self. The Self is the result of what, although no longer present has become consolidated in the memory, in the emotions and in the overlap of the different aspects in the course of life.

Precisely in this passage, thanks to the artistic process, I became aware of the continuity of my *female* path: from daughter, sister, to woman, to wife and therefore to the role of mother. The transformation of the *balloon* from a figurative subject to an object of construction symbolically expresses the meaning of this change: the role of the feminine includes acceptance and welcoming.

That femininity and that sense of motherhood were symbolically expressed in the artwork *Rebirth* (see fig. 22), recalling when I was in Brazil. In that country I had learned to accept myself, and I expressed it through the roundness of the forms, in the concentric curvilinear forms, capable of welcoming. It was a “rebirth” in *female identity* and her spiritual fruitfulness. The children arrived later in my life, but I was ready then.

The full recognition of myself required a cultural context different from the European one. I never believed it was a coincidence, I felt that *diversity* had offered me the opportunity to open up to what I did not know before. The expression of my *feminine being* could be complete only by allowing the different aspects of Self to *intertwine*. Likewise, in this heuristic arts-based study, I was able to perceive myself only by allowing all the artworks created during the *immersion* to speak to me, and at the same time to dialogue with each other. Then I allowed a dialogue between the *Immersion*'s artworks and the *final artwork* (fig 29, fig. 30), creating cohesion of the whole path of my life and integrating those experiences that seemed to me to remain fragmented.

Along this path, *shapes*, *symbols* or *materials* are the spokespersons of important themes, but it was essential to give myself time to listen, letting this relationship become knowledge and therefore awareness.

*These images continued to live with me, as a whole.*

*They were still hanging on the wall when I could speak about them more time to other people: this was really new for me. I was not ashamed of them, I was not ashamed of myself. It was as if everything was finding its place and its dimension. I can move my eye from one to the other and continue to perceive myself, even in overcoming*

*difficulties. Rather, as if those difficulties have taken on another value: they are no longer a priority, they are there, but they don't oppress me.*

Artmaking has the power to relate different parts and roles of the Self; following the various heuristic phases and creating fluidity between the different levels of the creative process (Lusebrink, 1990; Hinz, 2020) it can have an added restorative effect.

### **5.5. Limitations and strengths**

One of the most important aspects of this specific study is that the author, as a researcher-author, is the only researcher-participant. The results and discussion thus offer reflective material from a single source, bringing with it the characteristics of subjectivity and personal interpretation. In this sense, however, being within a qualitative research and methodology, the narrative and personal perspective can become its strong point.

Many other strengths emerged from this exploratory experience:: first of all, the **deepening of the relationship** are the themes that helped me to express also what profound and sometimes inaccessible I had inside me and in my story.

A further benefit is given by the **sense of continuity** and integration between the different parts of the Self, which arises precisely from "reading" one's life through the artworks, especially during the *immersion* sequence, step by step and then as a whole, through various levels of the creative process (Lusebrink, 1990). Art-making allowed me to detect discrepancies in the evolutionary process (crisis, confusion, achievement as identity's states) and it supported the strengths of my identity and accompanied me towards a **greater self-awareness**.

Another benefit was the increase in **self-esteem** and **sense of Self**, thanks to the recognition of the visual and narrative path of one's life. Improving *intuition* and *tacit knowledge* as tools of exploration increased the confidence in the participant-researcher 's personal capacity for reflection and understanding in the process of artistic creation, allowing to strengthen the link between life experience and artworks. a greater knowledge of oneself and of its complexity in the various intersectional aspects of identity becomes synonymous with wealth and "potential in the making" from which to draw and continue to learn for the Life. The final work itself, in its being a synthesis of identity aspects, has become for me a sort of "anchor" of reference every time, for other reasons, I have felt a bit lost, reminding me of that acquired inner sense from which to start again. Furthermore, this experience contributed to a **process of**

**maturation**, both of inner growth and of reflective capacity. In fact, as Sela-Smith (2002) puts it, “self-transformation is an expected outcome of this method” (p.70). Precisely because the heuristic process has evolved over time, with ups and downs, it has become a metaphor for life itself.

In the end, the attitude of honesty and authenticity that heuristic research requires is rewarded by the **sense of sincerity towards oneself**. Even the single experience, made in an authentic and sincere way, is no longer individualistic, but can resonate with aspects that involve others and resonate with universality (Moustakas, 1990; Sultan, 2019). At the end of this study, I felt a kind of understanding of human nature that makes me feel closer to being human, very important for my future professional life.

In this research I found several **difficulties**, and the first was maintaining clear the role of participant and the role of researcher during the explorative process, but also in the subsequent phases of elaboration data. The heuristic and artistic processes require that these two roles overlap, but it was also important to be able to listen and recognize the reflections of the first and the re-elaborations of the second.

A second difficulty was to stick to the research field when the memories had a very strong emotional involvement and brought more personal aspects to explore. The image of the inverted perspective (fig. 3) offered me a key to answer in adequate way in fact, while maintaining the point of view in the participant-researcher, the image continues to follow the rules of perspective, distancing and circumscribing a space. In the same way I have tried to circumscribe the space of the research questions and the *living experience* related to them.

Another difficulty is given by the fact that heuristic art-based research was a tiring journey, which required a lot of energy because it involved me in my totality. During the process I lived the experience of *stagnation* (Sultan, 2019), I felt like I lost my bearings. An incubation period, dealing with something other than research, has allowed for a restoration of management. Again, I made experience of *saturation*: I was so involved in my own reflections that I could not get out of it, experiencing a sort of *circularity* and *heaviness*. I was ready to give up. Once again *a time* of rest, of distraction was not only restorative, but also enlightening to continue.

The last difficulty, but external to the research itself, stemmed from the fact that the pandemic phenomenon added a sense of helplessness, insecurity and general confusion which was reflected in the organizational difficulty of daily activities, including the time and

concentration to devote to this research. Creating a personal, defined and safe space for this investigation was also the way to carry out this research.

## **5.6. Implications for practice**

This research aimed to explore intersectional aspects of the Self-identity during life span. Precisely on the basis of the choice and intentions of this study, the content and methodology can inspire various proposals for therapeutic application, as a paradigm for specific populations.

A therapeutic path based on art, capable of making the intersectional aspects of identity visible, allows growth in self-awareness welcoming its complexity. So it can be applied to people who are in a state of confusion, moratorium or crisis, who are in a conflictual relationship with external world, or in their Self, reinforcing the function of Self and directive. Furthermore, by giving a formal, material, emotional and symbolic value to the intersectional aspects of identity, an arts-based therapeutic process can help to express those contents unconsciously related to socio-cultural, religious or gender identity, creating a space for integration and reconciliation of the parties. This mechanism can help adolescents experiencing moment of identity crisis, which is necessary for a process of individuation and growth, achieving *Creative synthesis* encourages the symbolization of the Self, attributing power and meaning. Furthermore, it can be effective for those young people or adults who experience socio-cultural changes and have difficulty to adapting to diversity, linked to geographical displacement for reasons of work or study or other. The exploratory process can strengthen and reassure one's own identity and at the same time it can create an expressive space for emerging emotions. Furthermore, artmaking encourages artistic expression at all levels of the creative process (Lusebrink, 1990). By becoming aware of it, it becomes a further aspect that can take on a therapeutic function, especially for those who have developed post-traumatic symptoms.

An application of particular interest can take place for adults who are going through a crisis with respect to their own identity role. By focusing on the intersectional aspect of gender over the course of life, arts-based exploration can offer new insights for the attribution of value, increasing the sense of Self. In all these examples of applications based on art, the heuristic design with its phases offers a valid path in itself for a therapeutic path. In fact, it enhances both the artwork and the written notes, giving space to *intuitions*, to the times of *incubation* and explication, allowing the participant / client to harmonize with himself and his needs.

## 5.5. Implications for research

Based on my experience, I would recommend a few things for future researchers who want to engage in heuristic investigation and arts-based method about identity.

First of all to remember that the exploratory path of research is not a therapeutic path, therefore the researcher and possible participants should try to clearly define the research topic. In my case, at my first experience of this research, the *Initial Engagement* phase it was an essential moment to clarify the domains of research. Identity is a topic that is often explored in a therapeutic setting, and so specific individuals with particular diagnoses may have difficulty knowing when the personal content needs to be done in in art therapy session versus art-making used for the purpose of self-reflection independently. All these points are important for the researchers-participants to successfully complete the research.

Research types similar to this, focused on intersectionality and based on heuristic and art-based methodologies, can benefit the research field of art therapy by focusing for example the exploration of single themes: exploring how art expresses a single intersectional aspect during the person's evolutionary path or emotional path. Furthermore, a similar methodological approach can contribute to a greater understanding of those aspects conditioned by belonging to ethnic or religious minorities, touching the concepts of diversity and multiculturalism, but can also remain in the specificities of psychosocial development, exploring a specific phase of life (childhood, or adolescence or old age).

It could be significant to explore how artistic expression helps the expression of identity roles, particularly in some social or family relational dynamics. It can certainly offer many insights also for other areas (pedagogical, sociological, cultural).

The variations that can be made to the research theme are many and each can become a stimulus for a greater knowledge and awareness in art therapy field, both for the client and for the therapist.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

A great interest in the exploration of identity was at the basis of the choice of heuristic, art-based methods. They have proved to be excellent accomplices in addressing the issue of the intersectional aspects of the person, in the course of life. As the participating researcher delves deeper and deeper into his own subjective experience, he comes to a more complete understanding of the inquiry question, which has transformative powers over the Self and universal values (Moustakas, 1990; Sultan, 2019).

Sela-Smith (2002) states that the *Tacit dimension*, corresponding to the artwork, is multilayered and that it is “a constantly growing form of knowledge which is under construction every time a new experience is introduced” (p. 70). The path was continuous but also progressive, in which the discovery of the individual intersectional aspects and their reciprocity in the *living experience* contributed to the construction of the meaning of the Self, in its complexity.

The last work *Inner Globe* (fig. 28) is undoubtedly the formal and significant synthesis of this process in my journey.

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