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Understanding Participation in a Community-Based Art Program

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Introduction

- **Doctoral capstone project** in collaboration with a community-based art program in Philadelphia
- The existing community-based programs seeks to provide opportunities for **self expression**, rebuilding of **self-esteem**, and fostering **dignity**
- Research on similar art-related programs has shown benefits of engaging with art for people living with dementia and their caregivers on **social engagement, feelings of inclusion, and communication** (Camic & Chatterjee, 2013). Similar program conducted at the Museum of Modern Art (NYC) **reported increase in happiness** after attending the program (Rosenberg, 2009).
- Nilsson and colleagues (2007) found that for people ages 85 years and older, participation in **leisure occupations** had more of an overall impact on **life satisfaction** than activities of daily living alone.

Objectives

- 1) To understand the **perceived benefits of occupational engagement** with art for people with dementia and their informal caregivers
- 2) To understand the art program's **influence on interpersonal relationships**.

Methods

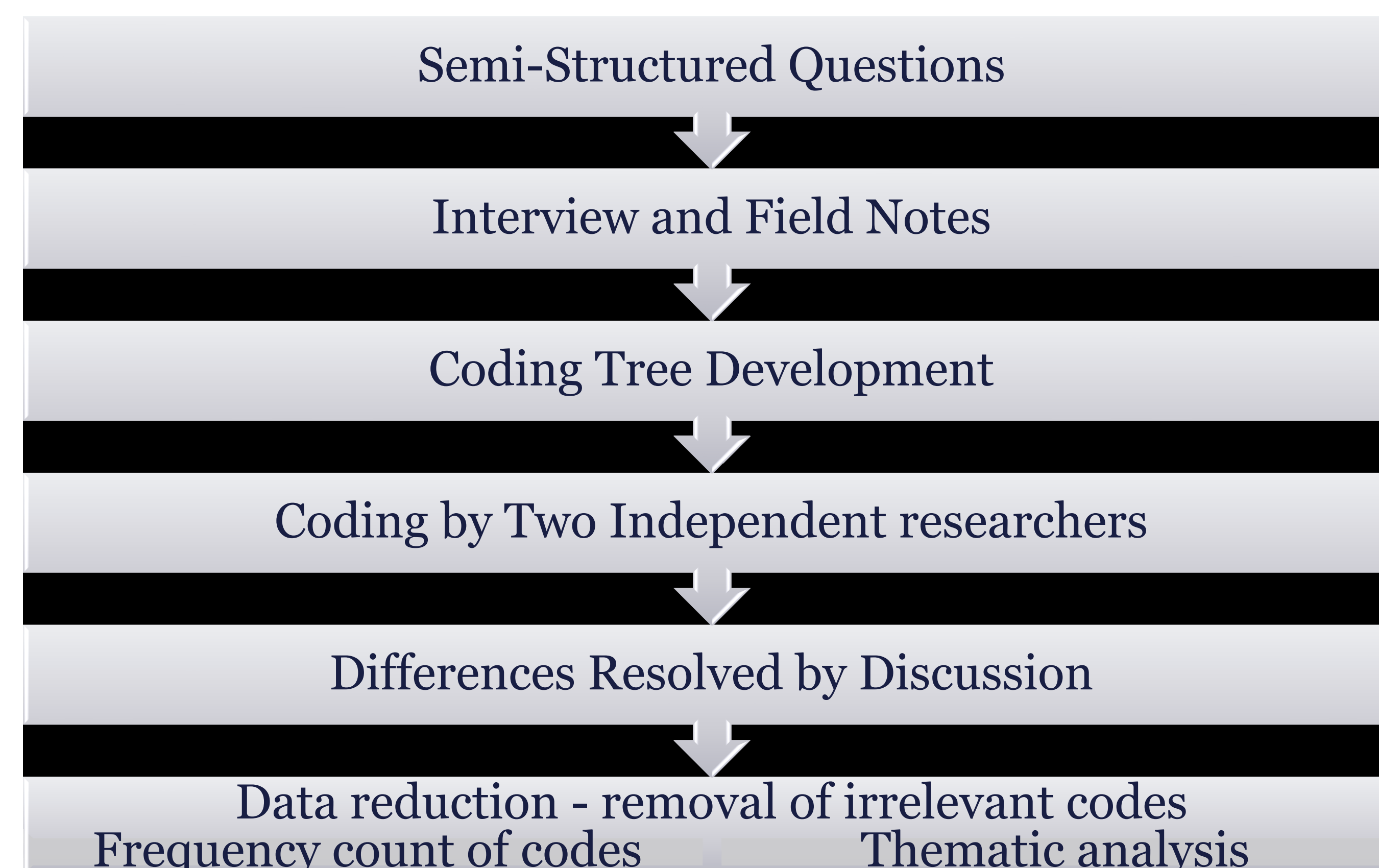


FIGURE 1. QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY USING PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

Table 1. DEMOGRAPHICS

	Caregivers	Persons with Dementia
Number of participants	8 (5 male, 3 female)	4 (2 male, 2 female)
Average age (years)	70.25	71.25
DSRS scores	N/A	2 mild, 1 moderate, 1 severe
All participants had a college or technical degree, were married or widowed, no comorbid health conditions. DSRS=Dementia Severity Rating Scale		

Results - Themes from Qualitative Analysis

Study was approved by Thomas Jefferson Institutional Review Board and all participants consented or assented to participate in the study.

1. **Art positively influenced social engagement:** Participants valued social engagement and built connections. Being with the art provided an opportunity to bond over the visual artwork with others and created a **common denominator**. Some participants highlighted enjoying learning and listening to other participants' perspectives about the artwork. Caregiver-5 reported **"we just don't have much in common anymore, we can look at the paintings... 'hey what do you think'... we can talk about that... I'm almost ready to say [art's] our only activity we can do [together]"**.
2. **Art experiences encouraged occupational engagement:** Viewing and discussing art was a valued occupation in which persons with dementia and caregivers could **engage in together**, especially for those with **limited verbal communication**. Participants reported a **desire to engage in their own leisure occupations with art**. Caregiver-2 took ideas from the program to **provide care** to his loved one at home.

"Her husband [caregiver] makes a comment about the art, and she kind of listens. Because she's here... and she's proud of him and then she will even tell you that she loves him...so if they didn't have [this program], what would they have?" (Caregiver-2)

3. **Participants' emotional and mental well-being:** Overwhelmingly positive feelings of enjoyment, enrichment, and sense of calmness when viewing, discussing, and being with the art were reported. These feelings provided an opportunity for social and occupational engagement, which was said to be better than any other occupations they have done or treatments they have received. Caregiver-9 reported **"it was better than any anti-hypertensive medication I could take. This just brings you right down to a really good feeling"**.
4. **Presence in a purposeful social environment:** Participants valued the **non-threatening, safe environment** of the museums, where they didn't need to speak about the disease. The art program discussions had no rules or limitations, and enabled **connecting without judgment**. Participants looked forward to **meeting new people and building relationships**. Some participants compared the program to a **support group**, whereas others felt it was an opportunity to socialize due to limited social networks. For many, the programs provided a variation in routine, although some participants did report **challenges** related to **transitions and attendance**.

"I feel joy. I feel my imagination to carry me in all kind of weird places [laughs]" curiosity. I feel... intellect... I love exploring the thoughts that may be in there..." (Person with dementia-10)

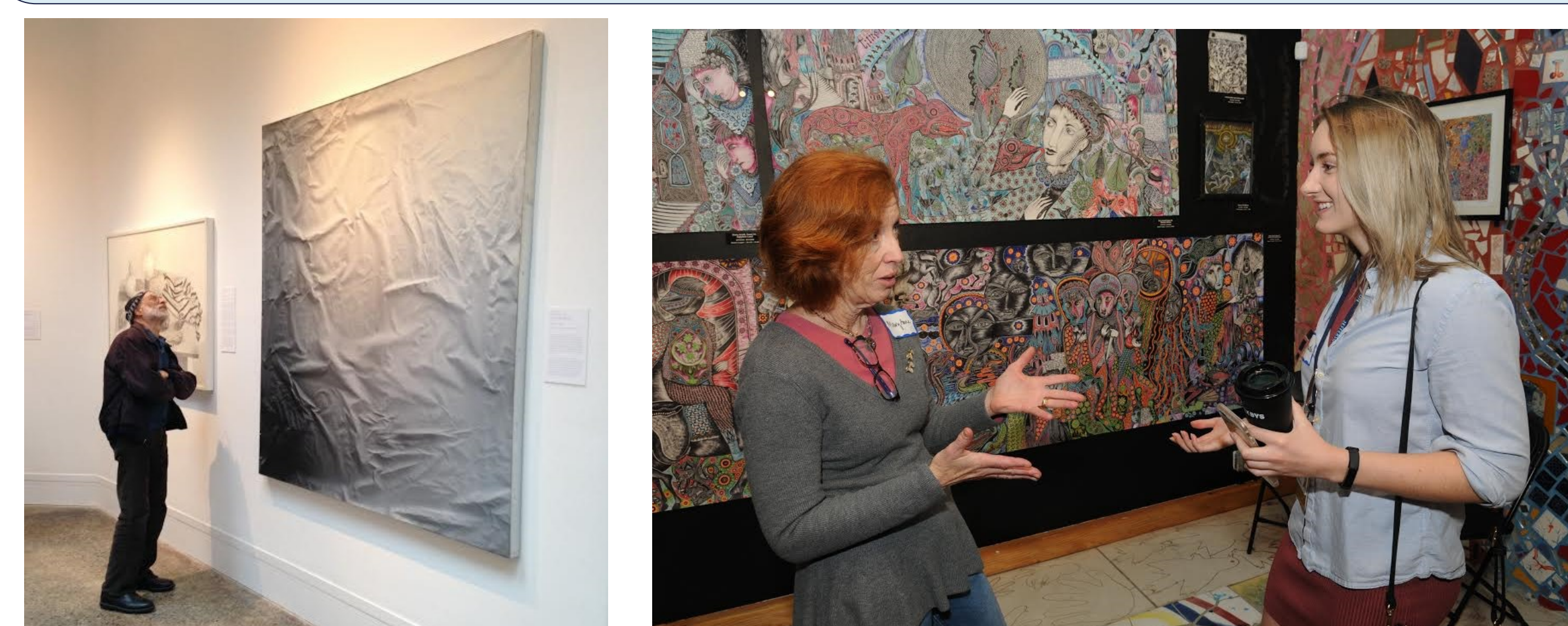


FIGURE 2. INDIVIDUALS AT THE MUSEUM DISCUSSING AND VIEWING ART

Results [Continued]

5. **Learning from different perspectives:** Participants enjoyed learning about all different things, not just dementia and caregiving. They also reported learning about themselves in both the program and the reflective interview process of this study. In the end, participants reported feeling **hopeful that people in later stages of dementia will be active in the community and gain helpful resources** like community-based art programs.

Discussion and Implications

- **Discussion:** The results indicate the unique and significant influence that discussing and viewing visual art can have on occupational engagement for both caregivers and people with dementia. The findings match prior studies to indicate that art can be an integrative and a meaningful occupation to engage both populations, and informs how influential art programs can be for the growing population of caregivers and people with dementia who would benefit from accessible, non-pharmacological services (Camic & Chatterjee, 2013).
- **Implication:** Occupational therapists can use this information to understand the value of community based programs for clients with dementia and their caregivers. With shifting roles, it is invaluable for loved ones to engage in occupations together to connect. Partnerships between healthcare and community-based organizations can promote inclusion and occupational justice for populations who may feel socially isolated.
- **Limitations** include risk of personal bias inherent to qualitative research and the limited sample size.

Conclusion and Future Research

- **Conclusion:** The findings contribute to an increased understanding of the impact of community-based arts programs for both populations. The museum environment and using art as a medium for engagement was meaningful for caregivers and people with dementia. The social environment enhanced interpersonal relationships and provided new ones that offer learning and role validation.
- **Future Research:** The findings can inform future studies that can include quantitative data and program development. We encourage future research to aim for a larger and more culturally diverse sample to increase generalizability of findings to a greater population.
- As a **capstone project**, this research provided the opportunity to understand and perform the research process in its entirety, and to discover the engagement and relationship between people with dementia and their caregivers in a community-based art setting.

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