

How do Arab Women in Israel Evaluate the Impact of Art Therapy on Their Coping with Daily Life Stress

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Abstract

The present study investigates how Arab women in Israel interpret the potential effectiveness of art therapy for managing day-to-day stress, both of which are complicated issues culturally, socially, and psychologically. This study takes a close look at the sources of daily stress for Arab women living in Israel and their effects, assesses coping mechanisms, and analyses the perceived therapeutic benefit of art-based therapy interventions. In a qualitative study, the study gained perspective from 40 Arab women who experienced art therapy in workshops and from 10 professional art therapists. The study identified the various sources of stress experienced by Arab women as stemming from socio-economic pressure, family and extended family obligations, and traditional gender roles, and how the art therapy workshops provided a culturally appropriate, non-verbal space for emotional healing and resilience. In conclusion, to be practically impactful, our examination suggests that art therapy as a practice is a meaningful and empowers a person to put themselves first and could promote overall mental wellbeing if the approach is culturally relevant to the person. In light of this research, further culturally relevant art therapy programs are recommended to be designed and implemented in Arab communities and training professionals working with Arab women, with social and practical implications for mental health policy and service-delivery implementation in multicultural societies.

Keywords: Art therapy, Arab women, daily life stress, coping strategies, mental health, cultural sensitivity, emotional resilience, Israel, minority women, community-based interventions.

1. INTRODUCTION

This study explores how Arab women in Israel assess the impact of art therapy as an option for managing life stress. The research questions guiding my study were: How do Arab women in Israel assess the value of art therapy in managing their daily stress? The study further explored the sources of stress for Arab women, the psychological and relational consequences of living with that stress, and the therapeutic gains participants reported using art therapy. Using a qualitative design, the research involved 50 participants (40 Arab women who attended an art therapy workshop, and 10 professionally trained art therapists), which supported both a personal and a professional viewpoint in the research. Findings indicate that Arab women in Israel experience compounded stress related to social demands, social expectations, and socio-economic stressors but found art therapy as acceptable way to feel emotionally liberated a means of non-verbalizing their emotional journey a means of healing. This study is an important contribution to the many conversations about minority mental health interventions and clearly highlights community and culturally adapted interventions.

The participants in this study are Arab women in Israel. The Arab women in Israel have unique cultural, social, and political experiences (Haj-Yahia, 2019; Ghanem & Khatib, 2019). The study examined daily life stress that is defined as the emotional and mental burden of every day responsibilities such as child caring, managing finances, duties/obligations to family and friends, etc. (Ramadhani & Elfina, 2019). Coping defined by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) is the process for dealing with a stressful situation (Berdini, 2023; Bondarchuk et al., 2024) and was explored in unison with the "art therapy definition of an intervention that enable(s) a client to create something for the purpose of enhancing their mental health and well-being"(Hu et al., 2021). It is well-known in Arab society, which can be characterized as collectivist with patriarchy still strong (Manor, 2020), when Arab women have little or no access or ability to express their emotional states, so they use ability to have interventions, like art therapy, that are alternative and helpful for their mental well-being. The qualitative method of semi-structured interviews and focus group process was intended to allow the participants to have rich contextualized experiences, and to appraise and reconstruct the cultural-sensitive aspects of their emotional resilience (Oranga & Matere, 2023).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Woman Daily Stress:

Stress is a common and impactful part of life. It happens when people face situations they see as harmful or threatening, leading to feelings of being out of control or hopeless. Stress is often linked to depression, anxiety, physical dangers like accidents, and lifestyle issues such as drug use or impulsive behavior. Understanding what causes stress and how to reduce it is a key focus of research on mental and physical health (Bai et al., 2021).

Stress depends on how people evaluate a situation. If they see it as too demanding or beyond their resources—whether social, financial, or mental—it can lead to stress. This understanding has inspired research into how practices like mindfulness, changing thought patterns, exercise, and better sleep can help lower stress. Positive emotions like gratitude, laughter, and love have also been shown to reduce stress by changing how people view themselves and their environment (Armenta et al., 2017).

According to Ramadhani and Elfina (2019) Daily Life Stress refers to the emotional and mental pressure mothers feel from their everyday tasks, like taking care of their children, managing the home, and dealing with family relationships. This stress can come from family problems, disagreements, or having too much to do. It can affect the mother's feelings and how the family works together, as well as the behavior and emotions of her children. Moreover, they claim that a mother's daily stress can have a big impact on her, her family, and her children. For the mother, stress can lead to emotional exhaustion, frustration, and difficulty managing her responsibilities.

Stress is often linked to physical and mental health problems. It can cause a range of issues, such as sleep problems, depression, and other mental health challenges.

According to the halodoc.com website, stress in women can also disrupt their menstrual cycles. This highlights the importance of managing stress to protect both physical and mental health (Dahroni, et al, 2019).

2.2 Coping with Stress

Lazarus and Folkman describe coping as a personal process where individuals try to handle the gap between demands, whether these demands come from themselves or their environment, and the resources they rely on to deal with stress. In simpler terms, coping with stress is the process individuals go through to manage and resolve stressful situations that pose physical or psychological threats (Ayu, 2021). Coping with stress is not always effective, as it depends on the intensity of stress an individual experiences. For this reason, external support, such as coaching and counseling, is often necessary (Misriah, 2013; Sulastiana et al., 2017). Paramita and Fahmie (in Ayu, 2021) highlight that goal-setting counseling can enhance employees' quality of work life and help them better manage stress, leading to improved performance. Since having strong coping skills is essential for protecting both physical and mental health, creative art can be a valuable technique. It combines cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects to support individuals in managing stress (Ayu, 2019).

2.3 Art Therapy and Coping with Stress

Art therapy is a method that combines verbal and non-verbal forms of expression, encouraging sensitivity and self-awareness by engaging individuals in artistic activities designed to support their abilities and personal growth in an enjoyable way (Hu et al., 2021). Art therapy can help heal trauma in adults and can also be applied in schools. It enhances teachers' class management skills and boosts students' self-confidence. Additionally, counseling that incorporates art therapy models can improve individuals' work-life quality and their ability to cope with challenges. Art therapy has also been shown to reduce anxiety symptoms and promote better mental health (Shukla et al., 2022).

According to Ayu, (2021), art therapy is an effective way to cope with stress by helping people express and manage their emotions through creative activities like painting, drawing, and sculpture. It found that engaging in art therapy can transform negative emotions into positive experiences, improve relationships, and boost self-confidence. Art therapy is particularly helpful for children, teenagers, and adults facing difficult situations, such as trauma, family problems, or disabilities. The study confirms that art therapy not only reduces stress but also enhances emotional well-being, social skills, and resilience, making it a powerful tool for overcoming stress in both personal and group settings.

2.4 The Arab Sector in Israel

The Arabs in Israel constitute an ethnic minority group with unique social and cultural characteristics (Ghanem & Khatib, 2019). Today, there are approximately 1.6 million Arab citizens living in Israel, making up approximately 21% of the population of the State of Israel (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2021). The Arab sector in Israel is diverse in terms of its religious groups (Muslims, Christians, and Druze) and residential patterns (cities, towns, villages, and desert communities) (Diab et al., 2021).

The collective identity of Arab citizens in Israel is made up of three main parts:

(1) Palestinian – they are an integral part of the Palestinian people; (2) Arab – they share language, history, and culture with the wider Arab world; and (3) Israeli – due to their Israeli citizenship and passports (Miari & Natur, 2019).

Although modernization has brought changes, professional studies describe the Arab society in Israel, like other Arab societies, as authoritarian and patriarchal and strongly collectivist (Haj-Yahia, 2019). In Arab culture, the needs of the group are considered more important than individual desires, with a strong emphasis on family bonds and group-oriented behaviors over personal goals. Maintaining family connections and collective actions is preferred over prioritizing individualistic behaviors (Manor, 2020). Group unity remains strong and is marked by involvement, emotional closeness, respect, conformity, teamwork, and caring for others' needs. Arab culture is shaped by values that guide behavior, such as mutual dependence, maintaining harmony, respecting hierarchy, loyalty, protecting one's reputation, and prioritizing family and collective needs over individual desires (Nijam-Achtilat et al., 2018). Social hierarchy is based on age and gender, with men holding authority over women and adults over younger individuals. Parents aim to teach their children the value of family closeness through their own behavior and active encouragement (Nijam-Achtilat et al., 2018; Haj-Yahia, 2019).

2.5 The Arab Family in Israel

Over the past decade, Palestinian society in Israel has experienced changes in economic, social, political, and educational aspects, along with the effects of globalization. Despite these changes, the family continues to be the main source of protection and support for its members, as formal and informal services have not fully taken over this role. The extended family remains the core support system, including parents, unmarried and married children, their spouses, and children (Haj-Yahia, 2019).

The extended family serves vital social and economic purposes for the nuclear family. Strong emotional connections, shared values, and family loyalty preserve its importance. Because of the collective nature of Arab families, individuals often adjust their personal needs and ambitions to benefit the well-being of their family members. They believe that their survival, growth, success, and quality of life are deeply connected to those of their family (Dwairy, 2006).

The Arab family is traditionally structured as patriarchal, with roles and authority organized in a hierarchy based on age, gender, generation, and birth order. In this family system, respected and influential individuals in the community, whether formally or informally recognized, are allowed to get involved in family matters (Haj-Yahia & Lavee, 2017). Despite the influence of globalization, the close connection between the nuclear family and the extended family remains intact. This connection is seen in economic help, childcare, fulfilling needs, and mutual support. Additionally, the traditional Arab family values the role of extended family members, such as grandparents and uncles, in raising children, addressing their needs, and guiding their development, especially when the father is not present at home (Al Gharaibeh & Islam, 2024).

2.6 The Arab Woman in Israel

The improvement in women's status in Israel has also influenced Arab women. Over the years, Arab women have gained more access to education. For instance, in 2000, Arab women made up 10% of all undergraduate students, but by 2016/2017, this number had risen to 19%. Similarly, the percentage of Arab women among graduate students grew from 2% in 2000 to 15% in 2016/2017 (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2018). The participation of Arab women in the workforce is also growing. For example, in 2015, 31.5% of working-age Arab women were employed outside the home. However, it is important to note that 35.2% of these women were working part-time due to circumstances beyond their control (Mizrahi Simon, 2016).

Another area where change is happening slowly is the age at which women get married. A study focusing on Israeli-Palestinian women found a connection between getting married at an older age and spending more years in education. The researchers suggested that women who marry later might face the risk of

not marrying at all, which motivates them to pursue education and work towards financial independence (Sabbah- Karkaby & Stier, 2017).

The status of Arab women in Israel is not equal to that of men. The education and values they receive at home are heavily influenced by religious and traditional beliefs, leading them to view themselves primarily through their roles within the family, such as being a wife or a mother (Kark et al., 2009).

Consequently, according to Gabaren (2020), Despite ongoing changes, the status of Arab women in Israel remains low, marked by vulnerability to violence, lack of independence, and rigid role definitions. This article explores the status of Arab women in Israeli society by reviewing existing research on the topic. While there have been improvements in areas such as education and employment, these advancements do not necessarily ensure equality for Arab women. This is largely due to the continued influence of traditional and patriarchal values in Arab society, which often define women as having a submissive and secondary role compared to men.

3. MATERIAL AND METHODS

Qualitative research design was used in this study for its ability to engage with the subjective and cultural contexts of Arab women in Israel in relation to art therapy as a strategy for coping with daily stress. Qualitative research is particularly appropriate when researchers aim to examine emotional, psychological, and relational aspects of human experience that are subjective and complex (Oranga & Matere, 2023). This method captures the participants' voice, experience, emotions, and interpretations, and supports the study's exploration of the ways stress mediates their mental health, family relationships, and overall health and wellness. It also encompasses the study's purposes of identifying best practices for art therapy interventions in culture-specific practice. Due to the cultural sensitivities of the topic and the need for rich and descriptive context, qualitative research design was the best option for this study.

The data collection method for this study was comprised of the semi-structured interview. This method supports consistency across the interviews while allowing the participant latitude to express themselves freely and in-depth. The semi-structured interview sought to explore the participants' experiences of stress, their stress sources and effects, and their perspective on the role of art therapy (if any) in their coping. The semi-structured interview was quite effective in revealing the subtle nuances regarding how art therapy can promote emotional resilience, emotional stress management, and family dynamics. Focus group discussions were also used along with individual interviews to stimulate discussion, share reflections, and provide more diverse data. The semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions permitted an expansive approach to exploring the phenomenon while allowing me the flexibility to follow-up on themes during the interviews.

The research sample included a total of 50 participants: 40 Arab women in Israel who previously participated in art therapy workshops, and 10 professional art therapists who conducted those workshops. Both great and professional input were included to provide a comprehensive examination on the perceived process and effectiveness of art therapy. Participants were purposively selected from an identified pool of women who participated in art therapy and who expressed a willingness to share personal experiences. Art therapists were included in the study to provide the artistic professional'perspective', including various therapeutic goals, implementation stages, and observed outcomes in facilitating art therapy in their respective cultural context. Contrasting both voices thinned the analysis by providing both a subjective and professional perspective, and this ultimately helped to increase the analysis depth, validity, and real-world application.

4. RESULTS

The findings of the study are organized into four main themes that emerged from the voices of the Arab women in Israel and the professional art therapists, which provide an in-depth understanding of how stress is experienced, and the perceived value of using art therapy as a means to cope with stress. Each of the themes developed from the qualitative data collected via semi-structured interviews and focus group conversations. The themes were developed in consideration of the narratives from the participants about the challenges that they were faced with on a daily basis, the impacts of chronic stress on the emotional and relational level, and how art therapy supported emotional expression, healing and empowerment. Each theme reflects a distinct part of the experience of the participants, embracing both the burden of stress and the possibility of transformation through culturally appropriate therapy.

Theme 1: Sources and Contributing Factors of Daily Stress Among Arab

This theme emerged strongly from the interviews in this study which revealed that the day-to-day tasks of Arab women in Israel faced daily stressors related to a combination of economic strain, social expectations, and family responsibilities. Nearly all participants lamented the emotional toil associated with handling traditional gender roles with the demands of modern life. One woman stated, "I cannot be more than less than, I am to carry the home on my shoulders and make sure to smile while never complain", another said, "People think we are strong because we don't speak, but we are dying inside, from the financial and emotional strain"; and a third woman said, "There is no help-not the husband, not the family, not the community, not the government". All these statements indicate the combined influences of the sources of strain contribute to an ongoing emotional and mental burden. Consistent with previous research, notably Arab women experience a unique mix between socio-economic and cultural focal points when dealing with multiple stressors leading to emotional burnout (Ali-Saleh et al., 2025; Haj-Yahia et al., 2019).

Theme 2: Psychological, Emotional, Physical, and Relational Effects of Stress

A major theme that was discussed in the interviews was the overwhelming nature of stress affecting women on physical, emotional, and relationship levels. Symptoms such as loss of sleep, exhaustion, emotional outbursts, and marital issues were given as possible examples of their expression of stress. Participants expressed, "...I feel like when I'm stressed, my body is carrying 100 kilos." Another individual stated, "... my children say I am always angry, but no one gets that I am just overwhelmed." Another participant said "... my husband thinks I am cold or distant, but truly I have no energy to return a conversation or explain." These voices resonate that stress is systemic; those roles – mothers and wives – were influenced when stress overtook their dynamic. Additional research indicates that chronic stress in women drains their health and wellbeing and stress can impact family dynamics (Shukla et al., 2022; Bai et al., 2021), along with the stories the women share of culturally derived silence about mental health declines further emotional expression.

Theme 3: The Function and Perceived Effectiveness of Art Therapy as a Coping Strategy

During the interviews, the women participating in this research reported that art therapy offered a useful emotional release and mechanism for coping. The women described the act of creating as liberating, calming, and empowering. One participant described her experience by stating, "When I'm painting, I'm not being judged. I just feel like me." Another participant described her experience by stating, "Using colors and shapes, I'm telling my story and not afraid"; while one other said: "Art made me cry for the first time in years - and it felt like healing." These quotes show how art therapy provided the participants with the opportunity to express their emotions that were previously being restrained by culture. Research from contemporary studies support the notion that art therapy can improve mental health, assist with emotional regulation, and reduce stress through non-verbal self-expression (Haryati et al., 2025; Hu et al., 2021).

Theme 4: Effective Practices and Culturally Sensitive Uses of Art Therapy

Participants expressed a strong preference for art therapy in culturally respectful group-based settings where mutual experiences cultivate trust and create empowerment. This theme emerged prominently in the comments such as, "it felt easier to talk when other women also drew their pain," "the therapist understood our traditions; she didn't expect us to change who we are," and "I would like this kind of therapy available in each community destitute center." These comments support the understanding that culturally aware facilitation, community-based settings, and group support play a vital role in enhancing the delivery of art therapy. Research suggest that culturally modified therapeutic interventions promote participation and improve outcomes in minority populations (Bautista-Gomez et al., 2024; Li et al., 2023). Providing new experiences such as art therapy in settings that have a level of preceding familiarity and trust can lead to increased access and sustain all forms of art therapy for Arab women to promote development and healing in exposure to chronic stress.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrated the multiple stressors that Arab women in Israel are subjected to and find supporting evidence for the culturally sensitive use of art therapy as a form of therapy. From

the interviews four themes were identified which brought to light considerations on the Arab woman's experience of stress, and the potential therapeutic benefits of art interventions .

The first theme suggests that Arab women in Israel experience excessive daily stress due to financial factors, social expectations/norms, and family obligations. The participants expressed feeling emotionally drained from managing their financial situations, expectations of keeping within gendered role models, and having to balance everything. The narrative resonates with the findings of Ali-Saleh and others (2025) who reported that Arab women in Israel are significantly experiencing higher levels of anxiety and depression than similar demographics due to specific stressors associated with their socio-economic disposition and cultural background. Duby and others (2025) found that systemic and internalized stressors experienced by marginalized women, leaves pressures to engage in emotion suppression and provides them little to no access to supports .

The second theme discussed the effects stress has on women's physical well- being and emotional self-regulation capacities, as well as their family relationships. The women reported sleep disturbances, irritability, and social detachment. The reports related somewhat to Shukla and others (2022) who suggested health outcomes declined (a systematic decline) across relationships among women with chronic stress. The narratives from the participants are supported by Bai and others (2021) who commented that while women's stress is silenced at the cultural level, it undermines both individual health and family cohesion. Thus, this expands the previous argument that it is imperative interventions attend to stress holistically—considering emotional, somatic, and relational aspects altogether.

The third theme suggested that art therapy provided a distinct means to release and regain health and power. Participants noted that through their creativity they were able to articulate unexpressed emotions, explore healing, and experience self-affirmation. This is consistent with Hu and others (2021) and Haryati and others (2025) findings that art therapy allows for emotional regulation and improves mental health through pathways of self-expression that are not verbal. Additionally, the intimate recounting by participants supports the suggestions by Li and others (2023) that culturally responsive mental health interventions including arts-based therapies were effective with ethnic minorities who report stigma about emotional disclosure.

Finally, the fourth theme recognized the importance of art therapy that was culturally responsive and community focused. Women reported feeling safer and more empowered when the therapeutic environment honored their cultural values, and contained others with similar experience. This was consistent with findings by Bautista- Gomez and others (2024), who concluded that culturally meaningful interventions made in vulnerable communities with participants reduce drop out and improve outcomes. Collectivist cultures, like those that predominate in Arab families, respond better to interventions based on group support, relational safety and community involvement.

This study supports the emergent literature encouraging a culturally responsive approach to mental health that takes into consideration the social, political and gendered realities of minority women's lives (Huey et al., 2023; Willis et al., 2022). While conventional mental health services continue to fail to consider or respond to the particularities of Arab women's lives, art-based therapy can provide an inclusive, expressive and respectful space for healing; allowing women the power to articulate health reclaiming their power without having to abandon or compromise their cultural identity, while accounting for the relational nature of Arab society and therefore mechanizing themselves into its institution making it accessible and culturally receptive for mental health consideration.

Collectively, the findings of this study demonstrate that art therapy is a promising intervention for Arab women in Israel managing chronic daily stress. At the same time, the results also acknowledged the need to facilitate systemic change to ensure that these interventions become a part of public health center services as well as training culturally competent therapists to provide them and facilitate and support increased access to unreserved Arab communities.

6. CONCLUSION

This study examined how Arab women in Israel encounter stress in everyday life, and the efficacy of art therapy as a coping mechanism. The qualitative findings found complexity in the layers of stress these women encounter from economic stressors, traditional gender norms, and no social or institutional support. The study confirmed the impact of stress on physical, emotional, and relational health, which affected the family dynamic and individual mental health. Specifically, the women in the study described art therapy as an effective and empowering way to express emotions and relieve stress, particularly when art therapy was delivered as a community-based fashion and a culturally appropriate

manner.

The study adds to the literature base by showing how culturally relevant art therapy interventions can respond to the emotional needs through the prescribed normative expectations. The women reported that engaging in creative practices such as painting and drawing offered a range of positive experiences, including emotional validation, self-awareness, and healing as it was likely their first time. Additionally, when group delivery was culturally aware, the women expressed feeling more trusting to participate in the art therapy. These findings are consistent with previous research that emphasize how culturally competent approaches to care can be beneficial for participants especially in communities where help-seeking behaviors may be limited due to stigma (Li et al., 2023; Bautista-Gomez et al., 2024).

The study also raises important considerations for future studies. While study findings demonstrated the positive aspects of art therapy, future studies would benefit from determining the long-term impact and applicability of art therapy as an approach across varying Arab communities. Moreover, if art therapy services cannot be implemented in a structured way due to art therapy programs not being part of public mental health systems, then vulnerable populations cannot access art therapy. Future studies could, for example, develop longitude studies to measure sustainable impacts across diverse settings, and explore how to implement art therapy within established healthcare systems in Israel. Finally, the study suggests that there is a need to implement more culturally informed and inclusive mental health solutions and emphasizes the need for solutions respecting culture. When we engage in therapy with respect for culture and compassionate creativity, change is possible for the individual and the community.

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