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Harmonic Chaos: The autoethnography of a creative, process-oriented, and multimodal qualitative inquiry project

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In this article, we present a creative, process-oriented, and multimodal qualitative inquiry project conducted by five undergraduate psychology students and their instructor. The project started as a course assignment on creative research methods aiming to explore the theme of inspiration. However, the project's initial theme soon proved to be a device that catalysed the unfolding of the process rather than being an end in itself. Using photovoice, drawing, and collage-making, we engaged in a layered collaborative process of reflection, emotional sharing, and meaning-making. The writing of this article itself became an extension of the method, weaving our voices together into a shared narrative. Through this collaborative autoethnography, we engaged with a set of generative questions: How can creative methods help us explore psychological and social experience? In what ways might collaborative and multimodal inquiry catalyse emotional openness, reflexivity, and the co- creation of meaning? And how might such creative practices extend psychological research towards more relational and embodied understandings? We called our project *Harmonic Chaos* to reflect the balance that we experienced between chaos and self-organisation during the process.

Keywords: creative methods, psychology, collaborative autoethnography, reflective group, qualitative research

Introduction

This article is an autoethnographic account of a creative, process-oriented, and multimodal qualitative inquiry project that we named *Harmonic Chaos*, which was conducted by five undergraduate psychology students and their instructor. Initially developed for a course assignment on creative research methods, the project involved using a combination of creative techniques, including photography walks, drawing, and collage-making, to explore the theme of *inspiration*. While the initial theme provided a point of departure, the project soon evolved into a case study demonstrating how creative methods can serve not only as tools for exploring a topic but also as a means for personal and collective transformation.

In this article, we attempt to make several key contributions to existing literature on qualitative inquiry and collaborative research. First, we affirm that research can be a relational, embodied, and transformative practice, challenging traditional views of research as a mere act of 'objective' representation. This article thus contributes to the growing body of scholarship on creative research methods by showcasing how visual and participatory techniques can help unearth emotions and experiences that would be difficult to express otherwise. The article also aligns with the concept of *slow scholarship*, emphasising the value of collective action and mutual care as forms of resistance to academic pressure for rapid productivity. Additionally, we illustrate how collaborative autoethnography functions as a relational praxis that bridges individual experience with collective meaning-making. A central insight is the role of the research theme as a device that catalyses the unfolding of a meaningful participatory research process, thereby allowing for the deeper engagement of participants, rather than being an end in itself.

More specifically, our inquiry is driven by the following questions: How can collaborative autoethnography and process-oriented creative methods support the exploration of psychological and social experience? In what ways can such approaches facilitate emotional openness, group cohesion, and the co-creation of meaning within a research context? What are the implications for psychology when research is realised not as data extraction, but as a transformative, relational practice? By engaging with these questions, we demonstrate how the process of qualitative inquiry can be as valuable as the final product and that genuine knowledge emerges from shared vulnerability and the embodied experience of collaboration.

Throughout this article, which is a collective patchwork, a bricolage, various voices are emphasised to show how our shared journey created 'harmonic chaos', a performative balance between structure and flow. We, either deliberately or inevitably, alternate between the collective 'we' voice (as expressed when one of us speaks on behalf of the group), the individual voices of each participant, and a third, more academic voice that usually conveys insights and understandings more 'objectively' – or, at times, simply emerges when we are uncertain about which voice to use.

Literature review: creative research methodologies and collaborative inquiry

A growing body of scholarship is emphasising that research is not merely an act of representation but rather a relational, embodied, and transformative practice (Norris et al, 2016; Kara, 2020; Camargo-Borges and McNamee, 2022). The following literature review

draws together several intersecting strands of scholarship that inform our approach, helping us realise why techniques such as photovoice, drawing, and collage-making are not only methodological tools but also relational and process-oriented practices that invite personal and collective transformation.

Creative methods help to bring out more subtle, or not yet conscious, voices and experiences among participants that are often missed with more traditional forms of research (Leavy, 2015). Participatory audio-visual research, for example, positions participants not as passive subjects of study but as active agents of change who co- create knowledge alongside researchers. The making of a film, narrative, or collage then becomes the site of transformation (Marzi, 2023). Knowledge, then, can be realised not as a static product delivered at the end of the research but as a living process that emerges from the relations among participants, researchers, and contexts. This perspective supports broader arguments about creative co-production, which stress the generative value of 'messy' and non-linear practices such as storytelling, drawing, or collage-making. Such activities not only communicate ideas in alternative modalities but also help participants externalise complex emotions and make sense of dynamic social realities (Brailas, 2020). Here, creativity is not simply supplementary; it is intrinsic to how meaning is formed and how lived experience is expressed.

Methodological debates also attend to the temporalities that shape research. Mountz et al (2015) argue that academic work, increasingly constrained by the accelerated rhythms of neoliberal universities, risks losing the reflective qualities that sustain meaningful inquiry. They call for 'slow scholarship', which emphasises collective action, mutual care, and feminist ethics as forms of resistance to productivity pressures. Pottinger (2024) extends this temporal metaphor with the notion of *patchwork ethnography*, where fragments of stories and observations are combined over time. This aligns with the idea that creative methods give people space to find meaning in what they know, feel, and live – an engagement that requires patience, reflection, and openness to the process.

Another significant stream of methodological innovation emphasises the act of walking as both a research practice and a political act. Mason et al (2023) describe how walking methods reveal the entanglements of power, history, and belonging embedded in landscapes, while Warren (2017) emphasises the need to pluralise the walking interview, noting that for some, walking may be constrained by gendered norms, familial obligations, or safety concerns. Alongside these insights, participatory photo-based walking practices, such as 'photo go-alongs', combine movement, conversation, and photography to capture the significance of ordinary environments (Barron, 2021). These methods place value on the process as much as on the product, generating dialogue, memory, and reflection through the act of moving together.

Furthermore, relevant scholarship also stresses the importance of attending to discomfort and silence as meaningful elements of the research process itself. Chadwick (2021) introduces the *politics of discomfort*, arguing that unease signals the presence of unsettled truths and interpretive possibilities. Barron (2023) shows that silence is not an empty pause but a charged interruption, where participants negotiate meaning, identity, and belonging. Together, discomfort and silence remind us that knowledge does not always emerge through clarity or articulation. Often, it resides in hesitations, pauses, and embodied intensities that cannot be easily interpreted.

Hernandez et al (2017) describe collaborative autoethnography as a process of pooling lived

experiences to create a multivocal narrative. The method brings the 'I' into conversation with the 'we', thereby producing insights that are simultaneously personal and collective. Karalis Noel et al (2023) demonstrate how collective autoethnography generates thematic consensus while honouring differences. In this way, autoethnography can become the driver of social change, healing, and transformation (Adams and Herrmann, 2025). These accounts show that collaborative autoethnography is not only a method of generating knowledge but also a transformative relational praxis (Norris et al, 2016). Here, collaborative writing serves as a catalyst for participants to connect with their inner experiences while contributing to collective meaning, bridging the personal with the collective.

Throughout these discussions, the unifying metaphor of research ecology arises, which refers to understanding, realising, and participating in research as a living, interdependent system, where practices, participants, and contexts mutually transform one another within a framework of transactional causality (Von Foerster, 2003). Creative inquiry often involves co-production (Camargo-Borges and McNamee, 2022; Marzi, 2023), temporal re-patterning (Mountz et al, 2015; Pottinger, 2024), embodied and situated methods (Warren, 2017; Barron, 2021; Mason et al, 2023), and attention to affective intensities (Chadwick, 2021; Barron, 2023). It allows for research to become a convivial space, where people discover meaning in what they feel and live, as well as how they relate to each other, making inspiration and transformation possible.

Creative methods such as photovoice walks, drawing, and collage-making offer innovative ways to explore lived experience, which can enrich the qualitative research tradition, but they also present challenges. While photovoice methods allow participants to look at their surroundings from a new perspective, there is the possibility that these new perspectives will be positively biased. Additionally, during interpretation, cultural differences between participants and researchers may cause misunderstandings, making verbal elaboration crucial to the process (Brailas, 2020). Verbal expression is also important since visual methods can trigger past traumatic experiences, something that participants should be aware of and be allowed the space and time to process verbally (Brailas, 2020). Lastly, collage-making and other visual methods are often time-demanding and require participants' commitment and researchers' active involvement. Researchers are also responsible for ensuring that participants do not share too much of their personal experience to prevent them from feeling regret or over-exposure later. A research project is not a psychotherapy session – a distinction that should always be maintained (Brailas, 2020).

All these three mentioned techniques also have limitations. Pickering and Kara (2017) remind us that creative and multimodal methods also raise questions about how and to whom participants are represented. They show how all forms of representation involve compromises in preserving empirical detail, protecting anonymity, and enabling affective engagement among audience members. In this direction, offering and allowing participants methodological choices enhances the quality and authenticity of research outcomes (Brown and Kara, 2025).

Drawing on this initial theoretical framework, we now turn to a detailed description of our project, *Harmonic Chaos*, outlining its design, methodology, and unfolding.

The Harmonic Chaos project

Harmonic Chaos was a collaborative project conducted by the authors of this article, comprising five undergraduate students and their instructor. The project started in the context of an undergraduate psychology course on creative methods at the Department of Psychology, Panteion University, Athens, Greece. For this course, instead of written final exams, students had to complete a group assignment. Each group was asked to design and conduct a research project using creative, participatory, and multimodal methods and techniques. After concluding their projects, students delivered in-class group presentations and submitted individual reflexive reports, which included autoethnographic writing and a drawing of their lived experience. Our group at that time included five undergraduate students: Marylis, Iris, Nikolina, Lamprini, and Moysis. We chose to explore the theme of inspiration. We began by discussing our ideas and designing the research framework together. Once we agreed upon an approach, we chose a location for the project, set a date, and gathered the materials we needed.

We chose the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center (SNFCC) as our research site, a landmark sustainable complex on the Athens coast. The SNFCC is more than a cultural institution housing the National Library of Greece and the Greek National Opera. Its core is the 210,000 m^2 Stavros Niarchos Park, a purpose- built green space that constitutes 85 per cent of the site and was designed to reclaim a degraded area, reconnect the city with the sea, and double the green surface per capita for the local community (Makowska, 2021). This park, with its Great Lawn, endemic Mediterranean gardens, canals, and panoramic views of the Acropolis and the sea, provided the diverse and inspiring environment for our creative exploration. Its combination of accessible indoor and outdoor spaces proved to be the ideal supportive setting for our project (Figure 1, a).

We began with a 30-minute solo walk. Each person used their smartphone to take at least one photograph based on what felt inspiring to them in the moment. We also included elements that we found along the way, such as a box filled with short poems on slips of paper (Figure 1, b), which we added to our materials.

We did not know why the box of poems was there. The SNFCC often organises small interactive activities such as this. For example, on Valentine's Day, there was a board on which visitors could post love messages. This box may have been for World Poetry Day (21 March 2024), which was about a month before our project. Regardless, it became for us an unexpected source of artefacts. The poems influenced our drawing stage and reminded us that inspiration often arises from small, serendipitous encounters: a coffee stain became a colour; a line of poetry became a prompt.

After the walk, we met in a quiet spot to begin drawing. Each person used paper and markers, pens, or pastels to create an image based on their walk and photographs (Figure 1, c). We then shared our drawings, gave them titles, and talked about their meaning. This part of the process involved storytelling, reflection, and group discussion. Our interpretations and understanding started to deepen as we listened to each other and built on what others shared. Our final step was to create a collective collage (Figure 1, d). We combined all the individual drawings into one shared piece. We added sticky notes containing our thoughts and feelings, which allowed us to reflect on the experience as a whole. The collage served as both a visual summary and a symbol of shared meaning, capturing both the theme of inspiration

and how different experiences could come together as one.

A few days later, we worked together online to prepare our classroom presentation. We included our photos, drawings, and reflections. Each member contributed and spoke about what the process meant to them, both personally and as part of the group. This was a process that later we came to understand that is called collaborative autoethnography, where the 'I' engages in a dialogue with the 'we', and both transform. As Blalock and Akehi (2018) note, collective autoethnography can arise from either the need to make sense of a difficult experience or the desire to understand how people find meaning in similar situations. We think our project followed the second trajectory. The steps we followed were shaped by what we had available in our hands and how we related to each other. Working together to assemble and interpret the collage created a strong sense of group identity.

Figure 1. (a) The group worked at the SNFCC, which has many convenient indoor and outdoor spaces. (b) The place offered us unexpected and spontaneous resources, such as a box filled with short poems on slips of paper. (c) Each of us created a drawing based on our photos. (d) Collaborative collage-making.

We encountered many practical challenges during our project. One issue was effective time management. During the walk, we set a 30-minute time limit and agreed on a meeting point. However, during the drawing session, some people finished earlier than others, leading to pauses in the group rhythm. We realised that a flexible but clearer time structure could have

kept the group more balanced while still allowing for creativity to flow. We also came to understand more about the researcher's role. In participatory research like this, participants, also being researchers themselves, co-facilitate and guide the process and help create a space in which everyone feels included. This requires attending to both group dynamics and individual needs, which can be challenging.

The outcome of this project was not just a set of creative works and artefacts. It was a shared experience that had a lasting impact on everyone involved. We all felt more connected to ourselves and one another. We also noticed how creative methods helped us slow down, observe our surroundings more closely, and see things from different perspectives. This was a practice of mindfulness. We also realised how inspiration often comes from small, everyday moments, such as a bit of sunlight, a quiet corner, or a simple exchange of vulnerabilities. What began as a course assignment evolved into a meaningful personal and group experience. We called our project, *Harmonic Chaos*.

The collaborative writing of this article

The project did not end with the creative sessions and the final in-class presentation; it continued in the collective writing of this article. Our group journey progressed as follows: the work began as a course assignment in the spring semester of 2024. It profoundly impacted us, so in October 2024 we contacted the instructor to explore the possibility of sharing our experience in an academic article. The instructor provided an initial framework, guidelines, and a roadmap for writing a collective autoethnography, and us students moved into the writing stage, producing the first draft of this article in May 2025. This draft contained autoethnographic vignettes of our lived experience. After this first draft, the instructor adopted a more active role: he edited the draft, added his own autoethnographic vignette, and coordinated with the rest of us online during June 2025, offering guidance on scholarly publishing.

We acknowledge that the instructor's greater coordinating role, starting in May 2025, introduced a power imbalance in how voices were represented. This was inevitable due to the practicalities of current academic publishing ecologies, although it was not our intention. We thus understood this imbalance as a scaffolded collective zone of proximal development (Engeström, 2008) that supported us students' learning and gradual induction into academic writing. Our aim was to preserve our perspectives while ensuring that the manuscript met disciplinary and genre conventions. The workflow was thus complex and sometimes disorganised, with six people's personal obligations, employment schedules, exam periods, and holidays intersecting. These dynamics were reflected in the text, which moved between individual 'I' voices (in the personal reflections and vignettes) and a collective 'we' voice (the group's shared perspective). At some points, this 'we' also referred to the students' subgroup, while at other times, it referred to the extended group that included the instructor. We regard this constant flow between voices as both inevitable in collaborative autoethnography and desirable: it allowed us to present the richness and productive messiness of the group knowledge-making process in rich detail. The article thus enacts harmonic chaos: a negotiated balance between structure and improvisation that allowed the collaboration to stay far away from an equilibrium without collapsing.

The following section moves to the individual 'I' voices since we present our individual autoethnographic vignettes therein, which collectively formed a shared narrative of our journey.

Personal autoethnographic reflections

We present the following vignettes as individual narratives that, together, form a collective account of our search for 'the pattern that connects' (Bateson, 1979) our lived experiences.

Reflection – Iris

I was initially intimidated by this project. We were free to choose any combination of creative methods that we wanted to use for this qualitative inquiry. This was a new concept for me since all the studies I had been involved in previously had been quantitative, so they followed a strict structure, thus leaving little space for personal expression and creativity. I needed a clear understanding of what we were aiming to achieve through this intervention to envision the benefits it would bring in the end. When I set out to capture inspiration through photography, I was nervous about what my source of inspiration 'should' be. However, as I immersed myself in my surroundings, I began to appreciate things that I had previously overlooked. This process reminded me of mindfulness practices that I have tried, which give me the same sense of calmness and gratitude.

One thing that became clear was that inspiration must be spontaneous and genuine, not something that you can decide on beforehand. For example, a sight that intrigued me when I first saw it had little to no emotional effect on me the second time I saw it. Spontaneity was also essential during the drawing session since I had a completely different vision of what I wanted to draw compared with what I ended up drawing. Describing my photographs and drawings allowed me to connect with my emotions and thoughts, and I started to notice common themes among our creations. These were not only themes that inspired us but also themes that troubled us. While analysing our photos and drawings, we could acknowledge them, accept them, and view them from the other group members' perspectives. It was unexpected how our art pieces facilitated a deeper connection with ourselves and others, bringing about personal growth and a broadened perspective.

As we all agreed on in our group discussion, in the end, we left feeling different. The self-awareness, broadened perspective, sense of belonging, and overall personal growth all felt unexpected at first, but now I understand why it had to happen that way. When people choose to trust one another, share their vulnerabilities, and acknowledge different perspectives, something valuable is bound to arise.

Reflection – Marylis

This project taught me invaluable lessons, not only about others but also about myself. It pushed me out of my comfort zone, making me think and feel differently than I usually do. Thinking about emotions alone is different from sharing them. I usually hide what I feel. When you articulate your thoughts, they change. They become part of a group discussion, open to different views, ideas, or even rejection. At first, I felt unsure of myself. I wondered whether my ideas were good enough, and I was worried that I would not contribute as much as others. I often fear people truly seeing me for who I am. I seek perfection in everything I do, and I always mask my flaws, so I interpret being open or rejected as a failure on my part. However, creative work is not about being perfect; it is about being authentic, which requires honesty, saying what you think and feel. Even though the idea of openness scared me, I wanted to immerse myself in the project completely. As the project

went on, I saw how unique our group was. Each person brought something special to the group. We offered more than just ideas; we shared the deepest parts of ourselves. All of our pieces put together created a collective tapestry of individuality and emotion. Even silence held meaning as part of the process.

At first, I found it difficult to feel inspired or to express my thoughts visually. Over time, I became more comfortable with the process, though. The group's openness and shared commitment made space for trust and connection, and this process was transformative. It taught me to embrace both my vulnerabilities and my strengths, and it allowed me to explore the powerful role that creativity can play in processing emotions. By the end of the project, I felt safe – not only with the group but also within myself. I learned that art can help resolve and release what is going on internally. I also discovered that creativity does not just bring us closer to ourselves – it creates and strengthens our connections with others. Communication and expression, I have come to realise, are forms of art, too, and those who participate in the process become part of the art itself – they are not only the artists that created it.

Reflection – Nikolina

Looking back on this project, I was not the only one who could confidently say it was an important step in my qualitative research journey. This project allowed me to face and overcome some personal challenges. However, what stood out the most to me was the collaborative nature of the project and the uniqueness of each person involved. From the beginning, I noticed that while I had the freedom to choose a location that inspired me, I did not feel the need to explore different options. I had already found a spot, a small river, which somehow felt right for me at that moment. My teammates wanted to explore the space before deciding on a location that inspired them. This was one of the first differences I noticed in how we worked. Each of us had our own way of processing and making choices. Even with these differences, when we shared our photos, ideas, and reflections, we saw clear overlaps in themes and meaning. It was clear that different paths can lead to similar insights. The process offered me an opportunity for more than personal reflection: it showed me how sharing experiences can help others understand their own. I felt nervous about showing my photo and drawing, unsure whether my approach would make sense to the group. One teammate, without knowing about my hesitation, told me that they found my way of expressing my thoughts especially meaningful. That response surprised me and reminded me that being open can lead to connections and new perspectives, even when we least expect them.

Reflection – Moysis

Everything began during my first class session. As we finalised the evaluation criteria for our assignment through a participatory process with our instructor, who fulfilled a facilitating role, I anxiously searched for 'compatible' collaborators. Ultimately, our five-member team for *Harmonic Chaos* was formed, consisting of individuals of different ages, years of study, and backgrounds. Through an open and productive brainstorming session, we co-developed our research theme and arranged to meet at the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center to carry out our plan. During my individual exploration, I initially felt numb because I could not find and capture an inspiring place. Entering the drawing stage, I hesitated, but I eventually stepped outside my comfort zone to draw something. However, the environment quickly became familiar and comfortable. As I immersed myself in the process, I felt my body relax. Everyone engaged

in the activities deeply, kindly exchanging markers, pens, and pastels. My favourite part was sharing perspectives and collaboratively (re) colouring each other's drawings, constructing shared meanings and finding the thread that connected our thoughts and experiences. The conversation flowed naturally, dispelling the initial awkwardness, and the project ended with a multidimensional collective collage. As we were leaving, we gathered our drawings, sticky notes, and poems and placed them in plastic sleeves. I felt like an accordion closing after a concert, embracing the vast range of our experience. Though slightly dizzy from the immersion, I returned home happy after a full afternoon. Our presentation was created with a holistic, collaborative effort to codify and verbalise our reflections, which was an unexpectedly complex process. During the in-class presentation, images and sounds from our experience kept flashing through my mind. Even though we managed to transform our research steps into something meaningful, I had hoped that we could communicate and narrate our embodied lived experience more effectively. Reflecting on this journey, I feel deeply connected to, exposed to, inspired by, and enthusiastic about qualitative methodology, not just as a research tool but also as an intervention with therapeutic value.

Reflection – Lamprini

The most valuable part of this experience was the opportunity to engage in a shared collective process, something that I feel is often missing from the way we typically function. In our project, a team spirit was consistently present, from the joint design of a 'mental puzzle' to the collective meaning-making and final evaluation of our experience. Although we were a heterogeneous group beyond our common field of study, I realised that through collaboration, sharing, and co-creation, we had more in common than I thought, including fears, habits, and expectations. These shared elements became the foundation for our connection and collaborative success.

Through this process, I also rediscovered the act of drawing as an adult. Our initial discomfort in this area reflected, I believe, a disconnect from play, experimentation, and authenticity. The process was made easier by prioritising communication and sincere sharing, which had a therapeutic effect. This approach helped us unblock our emotions and focus more on self-expression than striving for an aesthetically pleasing outcome. Even in our silences, there was a shared sense of connection, purpose, and focus.

I was struck by how quickly I lost track of time during the process. The flow between individual reflection and group sharing was effortless. It reminded me of a dance troupe during rehearsal, experimental, embodied, and coordinated, following a harmonious sequence of movements. This experience led the team to propose the name *Harmonic Chaos* for the project, which aptly captured the balance between structure and improvisation in our process.

I kept wondering how this experience would have unfolded if we had not all been willing to share our perspectives. I realised that the emergence of our 'collective treasures' was only made possible by each participant being open to collaboration. Co-creation does not happen automatically; it requires goodwill and intentionality. The group design process that preceded our collaborative work was essential for our subsequent success. Connection through co-creation became the cohesive force of the process, allowing us to flourish individually before the final composition.

Reflection – Alexios (instructor)

As I reflect on this project, what remains with me most vividly is the quiet transformation that unfolded. This is the story of five students that entered their research adventure, initially tentative and uncertain, without a rigid structure, but with openness and trust in the unfolding of their process, and daring to take the risk, to slowly create their group-as-a-whole existence. When I first imagined this project, I envisioned it not as a traditional assessment, nor as an outcome-driven activity, but as a collaborative inquiry, the co-creation of a space for personal and collective development. What unfolded exceeded my expectations. From the very beginning, I knew this project would not be linear. Each participant offered something else, a different part of a jigsaw puzzle in the becoming: a photo, a poem, their vulnerability, silence. And the group-as-a-whole took these offerings seriously. Members listened to each other, not just with their ears but also with their full presence. It is in this multimodal sharing that the group becomes a mirror. One person speaks, and another unexpectedly recognises themselves in what was said. One person draws, and another sees in the drawing their own emotional truth. These recognitions accumulate and begin to weave a network of meanings that no single person could have constructed alone. In this sense, the group does not simply reflect but it generates. A web of associations, responses, symbols, and shared moments. This web is dynamic and alive. It changes shape depending on who enters, who speaks, who pauses, and who takes the risk of showing their vulnerability.

Witnessing how the group navigated their process, I was struck by how meaning gradually emerged. Ambiguity was not a barrier. Every creative artefact becomes an invitation for exploration. What does this remind you of? How does it make you feel? What is missing? These questions did not seek correctness; they sought resonance, and resonance was what participants found in abundance: in the laughter that followed uncertainty, in the shift of someone's voice as they realised what their drawing actually meant to them, in the collective stillness, a moment of silence where nobody spoke but all eyes lit up simultaneously, where all the mirroring neurons of the participants seemed to be firing together, in total resonance.

The group's meeting at Stavros Niarchos became a miniature ritual: of paying attention, of taking turns, of dialectic encounters, of making and unmaking meaning. The final in-class presentation, as well as this article that followed, while valuable, were not the real gains. The real gain was what each student, me included, carried with them afterwards: a perspective cross-pollinated by others, a new way of seeing, a sense that their voice mattered, a personal transformation. The group-as-a-whole became a new living entity with its own dynamics, its own autopoiesis, not because members were simply enriched by seeing things from others' perspectives but because members were personally transformed through their synergies.

Everything is born from a deviation, *perekklisis* or *clinamen*, wrote Lucretius: The universe, and all within it, arises not from perfectly straight courses but from tiny, unpredictable deviations in the motion of matter (Dolar, 2013; Trépanier, 2023). If each individual particle were to fall through the void in straight, parallel lines, like raindrops falling vertically, then nothing new would ever have come into existence. The world as we know it would never have formed. There would be no complexity, no unpredictability, no life. In this project, meaning was not extracted from our straight, parallel, and independent movements. Our routes collided, and meaning was born in the collective quest, in photographs, in the colours chosen or avoided, in the way

drawings overlapped, in the way a poem suddenly unlocked someone's memory. This shared sense of meaningful collaborative action was not just interpretive: It was affective, embodied.

Discussion

Developed within the framework of a university course on creative research methods as a group assignment, this research project was initially aimed at exploring inspiration as a concept. From the outset, we approached inspiration as something that might be better experienced than defined. As the project unfolded, our reflections revealed that inspiration manifested not as a fixed object of study but as a dynamic, relational process. It appeared in subtle and collective ways: in moments of curiosity during the photovoice walk, in the creative flow of drawing, and in the playfulness and trust that developed through our collaborative collage-making. Several of us wrote about experiencing inspiration most vividly when responding to one another's work or emotions, suggesting that it was not confined to individual insight but generated through mutual resonance. In this sense, inspiration remained a vital affective thread running through the project, shaping how we created, related, and ultimately co-authored our story. Although we later came to understand inspiration as functioning like a MacGuffin, a catalyst rather than a destination, it nevertheless retained this generative quality. A MacGuffin, a concept coined by Alfred Hitchcock, refers to a narrative device that drives action forward while its specific content remains ultimately irrelevant (Digou, 2003). Recent work extends this metaphor to educational and research contexts, showing how prompts or objects can serve primarily as catalysts that enable participants to move, connect, and create rather than as ends in themselves (Brailas et al., 2017). In our project, inspiration played, to some extent, this role: It was the initial theme that brought us together, gave shape to our activities, and offered a point of entry into reflection, yet the real work lay in the processes of collaboration, sharing of vulnerabilities, and collective meaning-making that unfolded around it. This suggests that in creative research, the thematic starting point may sometimes function less as a destination than as a generative device, a portal into shared exploration, making space for relationships, transformations, and insights to emerge (Leavy, 2015; Watson, 2025).

A recurring theme in our reflections was the centrality of the group process. Meaning did not emerge (only) from any one individual artefact but (mainly) from the act of sharing, responding to, and weaving interpretations together. Silences, which often overrode written text, were experienced as moments of resonance and connection, echoing Barron's (2023) argument that silence itself is an active form of meaning-making. In this sense, the group became both the method and the data, embodying the focus of collaborative autoethnography on moving from the 'I' to the 'we' (Norris et al, 2016; Hernandez et al, 2017; Karalis Noel et al, 2023; Adams and Herrmann, 2025).

Central to our experience was the creation of a safe, appreciative, co-regulated environment wherein we could express our vulnerabilities without fear of judgement (Brailas, 2025). As Iris observed, 'When people choose to trust one another, share their vulnerabilities, and acknowledge different perspectives, something valuable is bound to arise.' Other people's emotional experiences can uncover common patterns among others' stories, making it easier to feel connected to them as part of a group (Rimé, 2009).

Our shared photovoice walk through a familiar public cultural space became a mindful,

contemplative act that initiated our collaborative inquiry. Guided by a loosely structured framework, each of us captured photographs of scenes that resonated with us emotionally, beginning a process of externalising internal states. This act of taking photographs as a form of emotional mapping proved to be a powerful way to promote mindfulness, slow perception, and deepen emotional insight (Pyyry, 2016). The photographs became invitations to participate in dialogue, uncovering unspoken experiences and invoking collective processing (Han and Oliffe, 2016). In our project, the diversity of interpretations revealed the constructive influence that differing personal histories, emotional states, and cognitive lenses have on collective meaning-making, while the act of sharing enhanced empathy and belonging within the group. The drawing that followed built on this process. As Hass-Cohen et al (2018) describe, drawing offers a space wherein abstract or unconscious experiences can become visible and available, outside and inside, to the person and to the group. The collaborative collage-making, though not included in our initial plan, organically became the final stage of our project. By assembling individual drawings and other artefacts into a shared visual bricolage, we believe our group enacted the core principle of collaborative autoethnography: shared meaning arises from the dialogic interplay between distinct, personal perspectives (Hernandez et al, 2017). While Raffaelli and Hartzell (2016) note that pre-existing collage elements may limit personal resonance, our process relied effectively on our own artworks, allowing us to maintain authenticity and emotional immediacy.

Members of our group repeatedly described experiences of transformation. For some, this meant confronting personal fears: 'I usually hide what I feel' (Marylis). Moysis captured the embodied nature of this transformation through the metaphor of performance: 'I felt like an accordion closing after a concert, embracing the vast range of our experience.' As Iris noted 'we left feeling different'. Nicolina discovered that sharing her experiences 'can help others understand their own' and Lamprini realised that 'we had more in common … including fears, habits, and expectations'. These reflections underscore that creative methods are not simply expressive but can be profoundly transformational for both individuals and groups.

Playfulness also emerged subtly but decisively during our group process. Several of us reflected on rediscovering a sense of experimentation, lightness, or even humour during the project. As Lamprini said, our 'initial discomfort … reflected a disconnect from play, experimentation, and authenticity'. Similarly, Moysis described how exchanging pastels and '(re)colouring each other's drawings' dispelled awkwardness and fostered a flow of collective creativity. These moments point to the role that play can serve in research: facilitating the creation of convivial spaces (Illich, 1973) wherein the usual seriousness of academic activity is temporarily suspended, allowing trust, risk-taking, and new forms of connection to emerge. Van Vleet and Feeney (2015) argue that adult play is often overlooked precisely because it resists the dominant cultural logic that equates value with productivity; yet, as they note, play is better understood as a quality of interaction, a disposition towards 'in-the-moment' engagement that communicates trust and security. In this sense, the playful elements of *Harmonic Chaos* were not peripheral but central to how we dared to be vulnerable and imaginative with one another. The therapeutic dimensions of this playfulness also align with Berger et al's (2018) insight that the absence of play may itself signal psychological rigidity, while its reintroduction can restore fluidity, creativity, and social connection. For us, the improvisational quality of collage-making and the serendipity of incorporating found materials (such as the box of poems) acted as playful interventions that

helped us reframe our anxieties and rediscover joy in collective meaning-making.

Through our project, we also affirmed the value of co-presence in multimodal interactive spaces. As Archer (2025) notes, multimodal face-to-face interaction enables richer, more inclusive engagement by allowing participants to draw on embodied forms of communication, such as gestures, silence, and laughter, in the shared material space that digital platforms often filter out or flatten. We noticed this in how our group used silence and other non-verbal cues to shape understandings of one another's artefacts. The affordances of the embodied co-presence were an active part of how meaning was made and shared among us.

We observed that our interpersonal relationships within the group deepened as we experienced inclusion, connectedness, and emotional and psychological safety (Henderson et al, 2024). Since the project took place in the SNFCC, an urban green space (Makowska, 2021), we realise that this environment may have helped us feel more connected to ourselves than another space would have, thereby inspiring us to be more open with each other. Being surrounded by natural elements such as trees, gardens, canals, the sun, and open air may have boosted our creativity, emotional awareness, and willingness to share our feelings with one another (Bratman et al, 2019). During this process, our perceptions seemed to have shifted to a more mindful observation of and gratitude for the world around us (Berman et al, 2008).

Presence, sharing, and personal transformation are not accompanied by only positive emotions. Our project also foregrounded the emotional demands and anxieties that accompany creative work. Several of us reflected on the vulnerability of sharing personal expressions, the fear of not being 'good enough', and the paralysis experienced when facing a blank page or canvas. For example, Marylis described that 'I interpret being open or rejected as a failure on my part' and 'I felt nervous about showing my photo and drawing, unsure whether my approach would make sense to the group' (Nikolina). Such reflections align with the findings of recent research on creativity anxiety, which refers to a fear tied specifically to the uncertainty and ambiguity of the creative process, often producing avoidance or mental blocks that hinder divergent thinking (Daker et al, 2020). Our findings suggest that these anxieties are not peripheral but central to the lived experience of creativity and that an appreciative, supportive group can help members navigate them.

At the same time, our project speaks to broader debates about the precariousness and emotional demands of creative labour. Wolgast and Hoff (2024) note that creative workers often face a paradoxical combination of autonomy and pressure, freedom and constraint, that can amplify self-doubt, isolation, and long-term strain. While our setting was educational rather than professional, we similarly grappled with the double bind of wanting authenticity yet fearing judgement. By working collaboratively, however, we were able to transform some of these anxieties into sources of connection and meaning: 'At first, I felt unsure of myself. I wondered whether my ideas were good enough, and I was worried that I would not contribute as much as others … By the end of the project, I felt safe – not only with the group but also within myself' (Marylis). This suggests that collective inquiry and shared vulnerability may serve as protective and generative resources, counterbalancing the individualising pressures often described in the literature (Daker et al, 2020). In this way, *Harmonic Chaos* contributed to our understanding of creativity not only as an expressive act but also as a place where anxiety and transformation are deeply intertwined.

Still, this approach had limitations. Collaborative autoethnographic inquiry is subjective, which,

depending on one's epistemological positioning, could be seen as an advantage or a disadvantage. Group dynamics shape how people share and interpret their experience, and this entails risk-taking; when many people write together, some voices may be lost or simplified to maintain harmony, albeit artificial harmony (Lapadat, 2017). Additionally, when an instructor joins as both a teacher and a participant, it can affect the group's balance and how equal the process feels (Hernandez et al, 2017). Building on Levitt's (2025) framework for investigator reflexivity and epistemic privilege, we further underscore the value of sustained, intentional self-examination within collaborative qualitative inquiry. While we organically engaged in reflexive dialogue throughout our multimodal collaborative process, Levitt's model emphasises how structured reflection, such as the use of reflexivity worksheets, can bring greater awareness to the positionalities, assumptions, and epistemic lenses each researcher brings. Our shared reflections suggested such awareness, but integrating formal reflexivity tools might have made more explicit the power dynamics and knowledge hierarchies present within our group. In line with Levitt's emphasis on epistemic privilege, we recognise that the lived experiences that we each contributed were not equally informed by the same social locations or histories, and yet these differences became resources for co-creating layered, critical interpretations.

Aside from these limitations, our collaborative inquiry helped us focus on *how* we know, not only *what* we know. We used photovoice walks, drawing, collage-making, and reflexive autoethnographic group writing to explore inspiration, not as an idea but as a lived experience. The realisation that inspiration may arise from tension, discomfort, or even silence can enrich our psychological understanding of inspiration as both a cognitive and an affective process. In the end, this project did not lead to a single answer but allowed us to ask real questions about the self and others and to explore the space between. The creative activities helped us slow down, pay attention, and notice things we may have ignored in a more structured setting. As Guillemin (2004) points out, creative methods can help us ask questions, not just provide answers. They can reveal meaning in subtle ways, in a quiet moment, in a drawing, or when someone sees themself in the virtual mirror of another's work. The stories, images, and shared reflections of our project became both our methods and our data. This aligns with the idea that good autoethnography is good storytelling, developing a shared narrative that reveals, questions, and connects (Adams and Herrmann, 2025). The whole project reflects Brinkmann's (2014) idea of doing empirical research without data. In our project, we did not collect empirical data in the traditional way. According to this view, research does not need to rely on usual data or coding. Instead, Brinkmann suggests that researchers can work with moments of confusion or surprise, what he calls *stumble data*. These are moments that disrupt our usual way of thinking and lead us to ask new questions.

Instead, we worked with photos, drawings, and group conversations that emerged through our group inquiry. Some of these moments felt unclear or uncomfortable at first, but they helped us learn more about ourselves and each other. This process followed the form of abductive reasoning Brinkmann calls for, whereby we attempted to understand something new by noticing a challenge and thinking about what might explain it. Our work shows that research can grow from experience and shared meaning, even when it does not follow an established plan. We came to realise that when collaborative research occurs within an appreciative culture, the group itself becomes a place of learning and care. We feel that we co-created a space where it was safe to speak, draw, and imagine, where each person's story mattered, and where we could trust our

process as it unfolded. This proved to be enough.

Concluding thoughts: Implications for psychology and creative research methods

The *Harmonic Chaos* project helped us realise how creative, multimodal, and process- oriented approaches can expand psychological inquiry beyond verbal-only accounts. Through photovoice, drawing, collage-making, and collaborative writing, we explored aspects of our lived experience that were relational, embodied, and often difficult to articulate in words. For us, what mattered most was not the creative artefacts themselves but the shared processes of meaning-making, where silence, play, and vulnerability became central resources.

Several implications for psychology arise from this work. Creative research methods can help researchers and practitioners access dimensions of experience that conventional approaches often miss. In our project, unplanned moments, such as pauses in conversation, playful exchanges, or the quiet resonance through shared images, proved to be as meaningful as deliberate reflection. These experiences suggest that psychological phenomena are not only cognitive but also embodied and relational, and that creative methods can support their exploration in both research and applied contexts. The collaborative design of the project further reframed participants as co- creators of knowledge, resonating with participatory and feminist methodologies that emphasise reciprocity, reflexivity, and social justice (Kara, 2020). It also illustrated the value of embracing what Brinkmann (2014) terms *stumble data*: moments of confusion or surprise that, rather than being treated as errors, can open new lines of understanding. Just as importantly, the project underscored the significance of psychological safety. The environment of trust and care that developed among us was a precondition for the willingness to share personal vulnerabilities. For psychology, this points to the importance of cultivating appreciative spaces where participants feel safe enough to take risks, and, depending on the context, to share enough but no more, since these conditions enable emotional openness, learning, and growth. Our experience also contributes to discussions of creative research methods within psychology. Scaffolding techniques – from photovoice walks, to drawing, to collage- making, and from the individual to the group level – proved to be effective in moving from personal reflection to shared synthesis. The original theme of inspiration operated less as an object of study and more as a starting point that catalysed engagement while leaving space for unanticipated turns. At the same time, the challenges of creative methods should not be overlooked. They require sustained time and commitment, raise ethical questions about the extent of personal disclosure, and can be shaped by cultural differences in interpretation. These considerations underline the need for reflexivity: researchers and practitioners must remain attentive not only to how artefacts are analysed but also to how group dynamics, power relations, and contexts influence the process.

In the end, *Harmonic Chaos* was less a product than a process of shared exploration. It showed us that psychological inquiry can benefit from methods that are embodied, relational, and creative, and that knowledge often emerges in the interplay of trust, vulnerability, and conviviality. For psychology more broadly, this suggests that creative methods should not be seen as peripheral but as integral tools for understanding lived experience, reminding us that research is not only a matter of representation but also of participation in the unfolding of human meaning.

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