



## Focusing with images

Stephanie Aspin & Judy Moore

To cite this article: Stephanie Aspin & Judy Moore (2022): Focusing with images, Person-Centered & Experiential Psychotherapies, DOI: [10.1080/14779757.2022.2110147](https://doi.org/10.1080/14779757.2022.2110147)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14779757.2022.2110147>



© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 24 Aug 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 78



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## Focusing with images

Stephanie Aspin and Judy Moore 

School of Education and Lifelong Learning, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK

### ABSTRACT

The practise of Focusing with images was the key element of six workshops held for postgraduate research students at the University of East Anglia, UK. Participants were invited both to respond to extant images (including those from the university's art galleries) as well as to create their own images through working with paint and other art materials. Changes in this highly anxious group's ability to access and manage inner experiencing as a result of their participation in these workshops was recorded and assessed both qualitatively and quantitatively. Participants completed the Focusing Manner Scale (FMS) at the beginning and at the end of their participation in the workshops and improvement ( $p = 0.063$ ) was seen in 6 out of 7 participants, indicating a shift in their ability to find ways of processing difficult experiencing. The FMS findings are supplemented by reconstructions of Focusing sessions based on field notes taken during the workshops. Images not only offer external representations of inner experiencing but also provide material for experience to be carried forward.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 5 January 2022  
Accepted 2 August 2022

### KEYWORDS

Focusing; Focusing Manner Scale (FMS); visual imagery; doctoral research students; anxiety

**'All sorts of things in this world behave like mirrors'. (Jacques Lacan)**

## Introduction

In the Spring of 2019 both authors (trained Person-Centered counselors as well as experienced researchers) were involved in running a series of therapeutic workshops for current doctoral research students at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK. The workshops were based on Focusing with visual imagery, with participants being offered the opportunity both to create images using art materials and to respond to extant images, including those on display in the galleries of the University's Sainsbury Center for Visual Arts. Client process was captured through observation notes and quantitatively measured using the Focusing Manner Scale (FMS) (Fukumori & Morikawa, 2003). The workshop was advertised to the university's doctoral research students as a research project that would involve the teaching of Focusing as a self-help practise. However, a common thread that emerged for all participants was anxiety about their work and the content of the workshops evolved in response to this.

**CONTACT** Stephanie Aspin  [s.aspin@uea.ac.uk](mailto:s.aspin@uea.ac.uk)  School of Education and Lifelong Learning, University of East Anglia, 5 Winter Road, Norwich NR2 3RR, UK

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.  
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

The idea for the workshops derived from an earlier one-day workshop that we had been involved in on the *Inner Critic* (Gendlin, 1978, pp. 98–99). This workshop culminated in a ritual banishing of the critic voice at the end of the day. Our aim in that workshop had been to see whether the effects of the negative inner narrative represented by the inner critic could be mitigated through engaging in a series of arts-based exercises linked to a guided Focusing process.

As the *Inner Critic* workshop progressed we noticed that one participant was struggling to visualize her critic and this stopped her from working with it in any meaningful way. Over the lunch break the group were asked to visit the Sainsbury Center art gallery to see if they could find any images there which might be useful in making the ritual, which was the central task for the afternoon. When we reconvened for the afternoon session the struggling participant was very animated and said excitedly, 'I've seen her, I've seen my critic!' This turned out to be a Lucien Freud painting of a stern-looking woman which, for her, was the perfect embodiment of the kinds of critical feelings she was aware of but could not articulate: it was as if the figure in the painting provided a *vessel* which allowed her felt sense of the critic to manifest. Following this, there was a profound shift in her level of engagement and ability to work with the critic and it seemed to us that something deeply therapeutic had taken place. What the encounter with the painting had provided this participant with was a *shift*- in which a set of inchoate feelings were made tangible and therefore became available to be worked with.

### Focusing and visual imagery

There is much about the Focusing process which points to it being, for many, a type of *visual* practise, which is predicated on having a capacity to work with images; for example, the third movement of Focusing, *finding a handle*, requires the focuser to locate an image to stand for the felt sense before the process of *resonating*- the more dynamic phase leading to a *shift*- can begin. If a handle cannot be found then all that follows is stalled; tracing the inner sense as it develops from this point of contact is impossible if what is encountered inside eludes description. So, the problem for the focuser becomes two-fold: the initial inner experience both remains unclear and is subsequently not available to *change*.

As novice focusers frequently struggle to achieve a depth of engagement with the inner experience, we decided to run a series of six workshops to teach Focusing in the context of making and engaging with art. We were aware of precedents for working with Focusing and art and how 'Focusing enables clients to access imagery that arises from the felt sense and the art process gives it visible form' (Rappaport, 2009, p. 127). However, having been inspired by what we had seen happen with our struggling participant in the inner critic workshop, we decided to introduce an explicit element of *offering* extant images (e.g. postcards, encouraging visits to Sainsbury Center exhibitions) when teaching Focusing as well as encouraging the creative expression of images that arise spontaneously from participants' inner experiencing.

In the passage below Purton (2002) touches on the visual quality of Focusing practise and makes the point that a specific image must be available to the focuser, both at the *start* of the process and throughout. The challenge for the focuser is two-fold: finding an

image is both a starting point and a vehicle for change in Focusing, thus finding the right image is key:

As I understand it, what is central to the theory of focusing is the relation between experiencing and symbolic forms, such as words, images and gestures. Our experiencing is rich and intricate beyond anything that our symbols can render, but it is also very specific, in the sense that only certain specific symbolic formations will render it. I will use the word 'render' here to convey the central relationship or process with which focusing works. This word- like all words- has itself a richness and intricacy of the sort which interests us. The word 'render' has uses which include causing to become as when something renders us helpless. Then there is the sense of translation (rendering something into English). There is the sense of performing a version of a play, or a piece of music. And, seemingly very different, there is the rendering of a wall with a coat of plaster.

The use of the word 'render' is itself an example of what Gendlin calls the intricacy of our language and of our experiencing. The different uses of the word 'render' pull out different aspects of the relationship between experiencing and its symbolization. Thus our symbols can be seen as rendering our experience first in the sense that they cause our experience to become more explicit, more focused, and more communicable. Then there is a sense in which they translate our private experiencing into a public language. (2002, p. 89)

What Purton hints at is the *protean* nature of images (words): that is, that language itself is not fixed nor static- but rather unfolds itself in a process which runs parallel to the Focusing process. The implication is that language itself has a *being-ness* made of meaning-connections: as we follow how images connect and make new connections such linguistic- or semiotic- shifts provide a framework or spine for movements in our own organismic experiencing. Further, he indicates that this parallel unfolding might contribute to the unfolding process of the felt sense. What is perhaps most interesting about Purton's analysis here- and most salient to our project- is that it not only highlights the critical role of imagery in the Focusing process, but also opens a discussion regarding the role of language and the intricacies of language-meanings in Focusing. These meanings are open to shifting and making connections in dynamic ways alongside the movement of the organismic experiencing itself. This process involves a tacit acknowledgment that our experiencing is more complex than our symbols can render: a realization that it is in symbols- and only in symbols- that our experiencing might be seen. So, we may then have found a way in to understanding why our workshop participant found discovering the extant image of the woman in the painting so facilitative: the painting provided not only an *articulation* of a felt sense but also a space or framework within which that still-developing sense might be explored. The dual significance of working with imagery- that images can both capture an existing feeling *and* provide a structure within which that feeling might shift and develop- was perhaps the most significant finding to come out of the original project.

Underpinning the workshops was our understanding of how images work to signify meaning. Images both stand for object and ideas *and* offer a space or structure in which meanings can evolve and extend. Essentially this is the poststructuralist position that language is a fabric made up of chains of meaning/s- what the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan calls *the chain of signification* (Lacan, 1995a)- with which our psyche interacts to, in effect, not only represent our inner world but also to construct it; that is, thought takes form in relation to these chains of meaning which reside in culture. While

it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss Lacanian ideas in detail, his theory is helpful in understanding why focusing with images might have been helpful or significant to our participants. Lacan puts forward the idea that the connections between words (images) is more significant than their connections with objects-in-the-world; that is, when we encounter a single image, say- to take an example from Lacan- *the phallus* (Lacan, 1995b): if we are to understand what this image connotes we might (in the Freudian manner) make a connection to male power. However, in Lacan this referent is not fixed to a single object; rather, it is more strongly connected to all of the other potential referents (meanings) which surround the idea of *phallus* in language- for example, *father* or *government* or *America*. This is what Lacan calls *the fabric of signification*: it is the connections between words (images) that matters more, and that this is a fabric where meanings are always in a state of play. In terms of our project, this offers opportunities for individuals to engage in an exploration of meaning. A further point to establish here, in order to make it clear why this idea is especially relevant to a discussion of Focusing practice and to Gendlin's work, is that when an individual engages with the fabric of signification, what they engage in is a dialectical process where experiential or sense perceptions are felt-through using language as a space or fabric to facilitate this. We believe this is what we observed in our participants' use of images in their Focusing practice. This is essentially a phenomenological process (Kemp, 2006). Whilst Lacanian thought places greater emphasis on the fabric of meaning itself (that is, on language), the place and operation of the self and the *a priori* experiencing of the organism is not excluded by Lacan. Rather, he argues, once we learn (or enter) language such *a priori* experiencing is problematized- we become wedded to meaning (to language) as a mediating force in understanding and representing our experience of the world internally: 'Lacan builds his theories around a developmental sequence which is close to Freud, but which is innovatively informed by linguistics, structural anthropology and Hegelian philosophy' (Kemp, 2006, p. 2). There is a clear connection between the ideas of Lacan and the phenomenological approach which underpins Gendlin's development of Focusing. Lacan and Merleau-Ponty were friends until the latter's early death, and there is evidence of a cross-fertilization of their ideas (Fink, 1995). It is significant that in his obituary essay written on the death of Merleau-Ponty (Lacan, 1961) Lacan is explicit about how Merleau-Ponty's consideration of the place of the *subject* with regard to experience (phenomena) both establishes and pushes forwards his theory of the process of signification (it is also interesting to note that in the same piece Lacan emphasizes the connection with the arts in this process). Merleau-Ponty was also a significant influence on Gendlin (see e.g. Moore, 2021). In an essay on Merleau-Ponty, Gendlin focuses on the importance of the embodied experience, but the function of the interaction with language is nevertheless considered and to some extent pursued (Gendlin, 1992). Considering Lacan's work in the context of Merleau-Ponty's (and Gendlin's) contribution to the field of phenomenology, we can see how it is possible to draw a clear line of connection between what, at first glance, seem to be approaches which pull in different directions.

A second idea underpinning the workshops derives from *ontopoetics*. Ontopoetics holds that the world is psycho-active and responsive to our individual imaginations, not in a pantheistic *magical way*, but rather that the forms and images we encounter in the world offer imaginative opportunities for us to tell new narratives about ourselves and

experience the world in novel and more positive ways, ‘not that we will come to inhabit a world of fantasy but that through imagination we will create narrative contexts for our lives’ (Matthews, 2009, p. 4). What links these two ideas is the understanding that our experiencing is a result of us entering into a dialogue with that which is external to us and that such a dialogue is centered and grounded in an imaginative encounter with images.

For all of the reasons above, we decided that introducing an encounter with images into the Focusing process in an explicit way was likely to have positive effects on our participants’ experience of Focusing practise.

We decided on field notes rather than recording sessions to preserve the feeling that the group was a safe therapeutic space in which participants felt free to share their authentic experiences. Participants also agreed that their artwork might be photographed but held the right to withdraw this permission at any stage. We also wanted to include a less subjective measure to complement our written and photographic memoranda. For this we used the Focusing Manner Scale (FMS) to introduce a quantitative measure of any improvements in the project participants’ facility to focus.

### Using the Focusing Manner Scale (FMS)

The FMS is an instrument developed in Japan by Fukumori and Morikawa (2003). Its purpose is to attempt to identify and quantify to what degree an individual has a *Focusing attitude*- that is, has a way of accessing inner experiences which correlates with a successful experience of Focusing. The FMS consist of 25 items (statements (S); see

**Table 1.** Focusing Manner Scale.

READ EACH STATEMENT AND CIRCLE THE NUMBER THAT INDICATES YOUR LEVEL OF Never (1) Seldom (2) Sometimes (3) Often (4)	
1.	I can sense a variety of rich feelings in my body.
2.	I find time in daily life to get a bodily sense of just how I am.
3.	It is better to hold back and get some distance from things that concern me.
4.	*I criticize myself.
5.	I try to match the words I say to how I feel inside.
6.	When I have problems I try not to let them get to me.
7.	What I do comes from what I feel
8.	I know I have unclear feelings in my life.
9.	*I force myself and make myself think in the way that I should.
10.	When choosing what to do on a day off, I trust my own feel of which options are best.
11.	When I face a difficulty, I know that if I take time and listen inwardly, I will get a sense of what to do or what needs to happen.
12.	In everyday life I turn to my feelings more than I consult my thoughts.
13.	If I have issues to face in life, I like to keep them at a distance.
14.	I retain a sense of how things are for me, even when I am with others.
15.	I know I can trust what I sense inside.
16.	I value my own unclear personal sense of things.
17.	When choosing what to eat, I like to sense what is right for me at that time.
18.	When I speak, I am confident that what I say comes from my feelings.
19.	*It’s hard to have a sense of myself and what I feel.
20.	Whatever my feelings, I tend to accept them as a reflection of how I am at a particular time.
21.	When worrying about things, I pause and step back.
22.	I like to give myself the space to check out “just how am I right now?”
23.	When talking to someone I check with my inner sense to know the right things to say.
24.	*When I have feelings such as anger or sadness, I can’t stand them.
25.	*I only accept having good feelings like happiness and fun.

\*reverse items.

Table 1) which probe such things as how connected an individual feels to their inner experiencing (e.g. [S1] *I can sense a rich variety of feelings in my body*, [S5] *I try to match the words I say to how I feel inside*, [S7] *what I do comes from what I feel*) and generates a quantitative measure of to what extent an individual has a mind-set facilitative of Focusing.

Subsequent to the original paper by Fukumori and Morikawa, the FMS has been utilized in a number of studies which set out to investigate, in a variety of ways, whether or not there are identifiable criteria which predispose an individual toward Focusing. These studies look for correlations and causal links with overall psychological well-being (e.g. Aoki & Ikemi, 2014; Zwiercan & Joseph, 2018). Such studies suggest the FMS to have a good deal of reliability as a predictor of the ability to focus successfully- in particular, '[comparisons] of focusing professionals and people who have had no focusing experience showed that focusing professionals showed significantly higher scores on all sub-scales of the FMS' (Aoki & Ikemi, 2014:). We wanted to see whether the capacity of our novice Focusing participants to become attuned to their experiential organismic sensing might be enhanced or improved through working with images. The FMS offered an ideal opportunity to measure whether any improvements in the capacity to focus might be captured in a structured and quantitative way which would supplement our findings from the qualitative data (field notes and photographs). Although our study is very small in terms of numbers of participants- which makes us wary of drawing too many conclusions about the significance of the project- we *did* observe participants undergoing marked and very interesting shifts in the way in which they were able to be aware of their organismic experiencing. This was captured both in our observations of the six-week series of workshops we ran and in the results of the FMS which we used to establish a baseline in session one and in session six to give a measure of *distance traveled*.

The fundamental research question we set out to answer was: would encouraging novice focusers to use extant images in their Focusing practise- at least in the initial stages of learning Focusing- render an inchoate inner experience more accessible through making the representation of inner experiences more tangible? And there was also an important sub-question: might an approach to teaching Focusing which consciously introduced the use of images into the Focusing process be helpful for other people experiencing 'stuckness' in accessing the inner felt sense?

The findings are discussed below.

## The group

We recruited for a therapeutic group amongst the population of doctoral research students at the University of East Anglia. We deliberately kept the criteria loose with the aim of attracting as diverse a cohort as possible. We simply advertised for students interested in learning Focusing and taking part in an arts-based self-development research project. A final group of 12 students, from a variety of disciplines, included 10 women and 2 men and 7 of these attended all sessions. Participants were from the UK, mainland Europe, South America, East Asia and the Middle East and ranged in age from mid-20s to 40+. Although we specified no criteria for joining the group, other than that participants be doctoral research students interested in learning Focusing, in practise we found that in all cases except one (who attended only the first session) participants joined

the group because they were experiencing moderate to strong anxiety related to their academic work. The group formed a peer bond for the duration of the project around shared concerns, and these concerns (and specifically our awareness of the high levels of anxiety among participants) determined the way we approached facilitating the sessions. In keeping with our Ethics submission (approved by the Ethics committee of UEA's School of Education and Lifelong Learning, March 2019) our primary clinical objective was to provide a safe space in which participants' concerns could be explored.

The group met for six consecutive weeks in the School of Education's Art room. Each session lasted for two hours with both researchers facilitating. The exercises participants engaged in varied from week-to-week, but each session broadly conformed to the same structure:

- Focusing and grounding exercise with the whole group
- Arts-based exercise developing the sense of an image
- Individual Focusing exercise working with an image
- Whole group plenary discussion and round-robin check-out

All participants completed the FMS prior to joining the group and once again after the final group meeting. As not all participants attended the group consistently- only seven attended all sessions and completed both FMS returns- the sample we had to work with was small. We took it in turns to lead activities and to observe and take notes. We find it is always best practise to have at least two therapists present when conducting this kind of group work as someone is always available to support participants as required.

## The exercises

### *The weather inside*

This exercise (Tsuchie, 2005) was introduced at the beginning of the first group session and intended to offer a way in to Focusing practise, which would facilitate participants' ability to capture the felt sense of their experiencing in an image or images. After a short period of guided practise the instruction was given to participants to explore what the 'weather inside' their bodies was like right now; they were then ask to draw a representation of what was found on a simple outline (see [Figure 1](#)).

Although one participant struggled with this exercise (*I can't see anything inside me*) the majority responded well. For one participant the exercise provided a vocabulary which allowed her to talk about her depression: *My good days are pink and yellow- I see my bad days as gray and brown*. This statement was explored further in the group discussion which followed, and this participant reported in a later session that the effect of Focusing in this way had been profound because it allowed her to *be with* her feelings without being overwhelmed by them; representing her depression in images had provided her with some *space* in a psychological sense. Subsequently this participant indicated that Focusing with images had an overall positive effect on her emotional life, particularly in her experience of parenting.



**Figure 1.** Participant response to the weather inside exercise (image of clouds on body outline, coloured pencil on card).

### **One-to-one guided focusing**

In a number of sessions participants were invited to focus in partnership with one of the researchers. Sometimes this was done in front of the whole group as a way of modeling the practise, and on occasion this happened away from the main group. The Focusing sessions presented below are reconstructions from field notes taken at the time. Again, what we tried to foreground in the Focusing process was encouraging participants to represent their inner experiencing with an image or series of images. This was done by asking questions such as *what picture (if any) is in your mind?* and probing for detail. A key observation which was characteristic of almost all these one-to-one guided sessions was that once an image had been identified it was then seen to change in helpful ways, that is, the longer a participant *stayed with* an image the richer and more rewarding the experience of Focusing became. This phenomenon is discussed at greater length below.

The most striking example was a participant who was struggling with habitual feelings of *tightness* in the throat and upper chest, which she called her *anxiety*; as part of the Focusing process the participant was invited to stay with the feeling of tightness and to

find specific words to convey that feeling. Below is an extract from a session in which we observe the starting image begin to change:

P [Participant]: I've got a tightness in my throat, it is all around my throat, it feels like panic ...

L[Listener]: Can you tell me what you see in your mind's eye? What is it like?

P: It is like a thick black vine ... it is wrapped around my throat but its roots are in my chest ... it is trying to choke me

At this point the listener [L] asked the participant [P] to *breathe around* the feeling to see if the tightness might be lessened or loosened. Subsequently we see the image beginning to transform:

P: This energy is strong, but I am starting to feel it can be worked with ... I think I can be with it, or do something with it. When I look at it now I see it as a green plant which is strong but not bad. I can be with it although it is strong.

A similar process was observed with a participant trying to process feelings of anger and grief after finding out her fiancé (back in her home country) had been unfaithful.

L: What do you sense in your body as this issue comes to mind?

P: There is a tightness in my chest. It feels tight. I don't like that feeling.

L: Can we make a bit of space around it, can we make that tightness feel a bit better? I want you to imagine breathing around that tightness. As you breathe, try and relax and let a bit of space open up. Does that feel better?

P: Yes. It is just there now. I don't like it but it does not feel so tight.

L: Now you have a bit of space around the tightness, can you look at it without going into it. Can you say any more about what it is like. Does it have a color? Do you notice it being warm or cold ...

P: It is HOT – it is burning hot!

L: Is it hot like the sun, or hot like a fire ... ?

P: Like fire. Can I tell you what the thing is?

L: Yes.

P: I found out my boyfriend of 5 years cheated on me. I feel this burning thing inside me. [begins to cry]

*L: You have this horrible burning feeling in your chest when you think about it.*

P: It is there all the time, I think about it all the time.

L: OK. Let's see if we can make this more comfortable. It sounds as if this feels very uncomfortable. Can we use this Focusing practise to try and help this feeling to be less uncomfortable? I want you to be in the space around the burning and see if you can ask it

if there is anything it needs to feel better. We are not going to make it go away. I want you to ask it what it needs for you to feel easier.

P: It needs cold, cold water.

L: How cold? Where does the water need to be?

P: It needs icy water poured on it, icy water all around it

L If we surround it with ice by visualizing it might that be what it needs?[silent focusing for about 1 minute]

P: It's better. It's there in my throat now. It's moving up – I think it might be trying to get out.

L: If it got out, if you let it out, where would it be then?

P: I don't know ... maybe the ceiling, we could let it out of the window.

L: Are there any safe things you could do with your body to let that fiery feeling out?

P: I go to the gym and run ...

L: If you went to the gym and did some exercise that feeling might come out?

P: Yes.

In both examples the listener guided the participant to pay attention to the image representing the felt sense: the participant was encouraged to render the felt sense as an image and to work with it in that form. As the image is worked with we observe a change: in the first example the image becomes something different, something *positive*; in the second example we see the 'fire' *move out* of the body. After the Focusing, the participant in the second example reported the intense feeling of anger inside was lessened.

In another guided session a participant represented her feeling relationship to her thesis with the image of herself in a tiny boat adrift in a huge sea:

L: What does being in the boat feel like?

P: I feel scared. I don't know where I am going. I feel anxious here [indicates abdomen]

L: Can you breathe around that feeling and see if you can make some space?

...

P: Maybe it could be a happy boat just bobbing along on the sea.

L: So, can we welcome that image of you in the boat?

P: Yes. Now I see it as the image of a journey. I am in a little boat on an ocean and there is a star. It looks like the boat has a direction, even though it doesn't know where it is going.

Once again, as the listener encourages the participant to stay with the image, we see a shift and observe the image change in positive ways.

### **Focusing with archetypes**

For this exercise, participants were presented with a set of cards depicting Jungian archetypes (Myss, 2003). We laid the cards on a table and asked participants to let their eyes roam over them and to pick the card they were most drawn to; participants were then asked to focus on their chosen card: the instruction given was to look at the card, tuning into the felt sense of it- to engage in a process of *noticing* what their inner experience was as they looked at the card, talking through their responses with a Focusing partner. In the extract below the participant has drawn *The Hermit* card:

P: I don't know why I picked this card now. This gives me a claustrophobic feeling- a tightness in my chest. It's kind of scary because he's all hunched over and in a cave and everything . . . but as I look at it now I can feel I kind of like the way he is hunched over. There's like a 'heat' in the middle- so he's shut in, but everything is also shut out. It makes me apprehensive but also curious: a little feeling of excitement is in there.

L: Can you explore that feeling of excitement a little more, can you stay with it?

P: Yes. It makes me think that doing a PhD feels scary and gives me that tight feeling but also it is exciting- there's another part of me that really likes being in here.

Here we see an extant image being used as an *arena* for a shift in the felt sense to be played out.

### **Exploring the gallery**

For this exercise, participants were sent to explore the Sainsbury Center galleries to find an image that resonates with their feelings in some way. The Art room was set out with big paper and poster paints in a way that was reminiscent of a primary school classroom, which we hoped would facilitate a feeling of creative freedom. When participants returned to the room we asked them to make a painting of their individual images.

What was striking was that many of the participants chose images which had a resonance of *safety* despite having reported experiencing feelings of anxiety at the beginning of the session before being sent off to the gallery; further, many of the participants saw safety being represented by a *house*.

One participant painted a house she saw in a picture (Figure 2) which evoked a feeling that she would be *safe* from the criticism of others which provoked her anxiety: we see a house set apart and flanked with tall trees. Another participant represents a house- her family home- perched at the top of multiple flights of stairs (Figure 3), which she said represented the work she had to complete on her thesis before she could return home. The response to this exercise turned out not to represent the feelings of anxiety all participants reported in other sessions, but rather to work toward an answer to the question: *What does that anxiety need to feel better?*



**Figure 2.** Participant response to gallery visit (safety image of house flanked by trees, poster paint on paper).

### ***Making a talisman***

Participants were given an assortment of craft materials- colored clay, beads, metal charms with a variety of images- and instructed to pay attention to their felt sense as they constructed a *talisman* which would capture a feeling of *safety*. This exercise was designed in response to participants having gravitated toward images which reduced their anxiety in the gallery session the previous week. Our aim was for the creation of a talisman to have therapeutic benefit, something to be worn or placed in the workspace to embody positive feelings.

Participants used color, texture and figuration in making their talismans. [Figure 4](#) includes textured wooden beads to represent nature, the colors blue and yellow for *water* and *sun* plus metal charms of a running horse and a seahorse, associated by its creator with a feeling of being free.

A number of our participants were also involved in the university well-being initiative *PhD Gardeners*, which involved growing fruit and vegetables on an allotment on campus. They included images of the natural world in their talismans, because they said that being out on the allotment lessened the feelings of anxiety they had around the thesis.



**Figure 3.** Participant response to gallery visit (safety image of house at the top of tall stairway, poster paint on paper).

One participant's mother is represented in clay (Figure 5): this participant said they wanted something to remind them of their mother while they wrote at their desk because *she has a way of calming me down, like everything will be OK*. This participant also made a bracelet which includes a charm of a crescent moon with a star (Figure 6), to represent *the PhD dream*, and a clay representation of a mountain associated with the participant's home country also with the *achievement (climbing to the top)* of the PhD.

A key element of this exercise is that participants were encouraged to connect with the felt sense as they made their talismans and to talk in groups about their feelings during the process of making.

The participants reported that this was the most enjoyable of the exercises the group engaged in and it reinforced the sense of group bonding that we observed.

### The FMS results

All participants were asked to complete the FMS (see Table 1) in the first and last sessions they attended. Our aim was to measure if participants' facility to focus was enhanced by taking part in the group. As noted above, the sample size was small with only seven



**Figure 4.** Participant response to talisman exercise (plain wood bead bracelet with metal charms).



**Figure 5.** Participant response to talisman exercise (female figure in coloured clay).



**Figure 6.** Participant response to talisman exercise (two islands in coloured clay, string of coloured wood beads with metal charms).

participants completing both iterations of the FMS; nevertheless our analysis shows that all seven *did* show improvement.

We used a Wilcoxon signed rank test to look for significant differences between period one and two.

Despite the small sample ( $N = 7$ ), we found improvements, at the 90% and 95% confidence level on many items which resulted in a positive outcome overall. Taking the sum of individual scores on the 25 items, we found the difference between period one (individuals completing the FMS at the outset) and period two (completing the FMS at the conclusion of the group sessions) showed an improvement in *Focusing attitude* ( $p = 0.063$ ). Further, as only one of the seven individuals did not experience an improvement overall, excluding this outlier results in an increase in significance for the change in the overall scores to the 95% level ( $p = 0.027$ ).

In terms of individual items on the FMS, the following stood out as being of particular interest: S2 -  $p = 0.084$ ; S6 -  $p = 0.096$ ; S13 -  $p = 0.058$ ; and S22  $p = 0.046$ .

*S2 I find time in daily life to get a sense of exactly how I am:* The improvement seen in the score for this item seemed important to us. What this result indicates is that the practise of tuning into bodily experiences, through engaging in Focusing exercises in the group, gets translated into a habit or way-of-being outside of the group in daily life; that is, as a result

of participating in a Focusing practise group members achieved a greater general level of attunement to their internal experiencing.

*S6 When I have problems I try not to let them get to me:* a strong result for this item indicates that engaging in the group exercises has provided participants with a strategy to enhance their sense of well-being; once again, the implication is that the practise of Focusing with images has influenced behaviors *outside* of the group- that a particular way-of-being with one's experiences has carried over into daily living, and that this has been found to be beneficial.

*S13 If I have issues to face in life I like to keep them at a distance:* Given the strength of this result, again participating in the group seems to have facilitated individuals in being more cognizant of their internal experiencings without becoming overwhelmed by them- which is another indicator of developing better *Focusing attitudes*. However, the wording of this question is such that individual responses are potentially ambiguous: being at a distance could be interpreted as an increase in the repression of experience rather than healthy management. Any continuation of this work would need to address this ambiguity.

*S22 I like to give myself the space to check out 'just how am I right now':* the improvement in score showed another strong result for this item, which again speaks to participants experiencing a positive shift in the degree to which they are attending to their inner experiencing after taking part in the workshops.

Taken together, the improvement in scores on these four items seems to tell a story in which participants become: more attentive to their inner experiencing, less likely to be avoidant of negative emotions, and- perhaps most significantly- have developed skills allowing them to process difficult experiencing. Overall, what we see is both a positive shift in the *Focusing attitude* the FMS is designed to measure *and* a reflection of better Focusing skills- that is, the ability to identify, to attend to and to *process* experiencing.

All significant changes represent improvements in *Focusing attitudes* apart from S7 ( $p = 0.046$ ) *what I do comes from what I feel*, which was the only one which indicates a decline in score between the first FMS and the second: this result seems to run counter to the general trend that the group experienced significant development. One possible explanation of this could be that individuals have become more aware of the gap between *what they feel* and *what they do*; we could speculate that this might be regarded as generally enhanced awareness or the ability to simply observe inner experiencing, and therefore in step with what is a generally positive trend. However, we would need a much larger sample to say anything more.

Clearly, the size of the sample and the potential for self-selection bias in the way the data collection was managed- as stated earlier, five people chose to leave without filling out the FMS for a second time- means that these results provide only tentative support for the idea that introducing working with images into the Focusing process improves the ability attain a *Focusing attitude* overall. Participation in the gardening project may also have been a factor in changes observed and registered on the FMS scale. Any further study should also include feedback (in their own words) from participants on their experience of the group as a whole. However, the findings are encouraging and provide an interesting corollary to the qualitative data gathered from the groups.

## Discussion

The qualitative data collected suggest that introducing exercises into the Focusing process, which invite participants to work with imagery in deliberate and explicit ways produces three distinct categories of response which we have called *manifesting*, *anchoring* and *transforming*.

### Manifesting

Here we see a cluster of responses to Focusing with images in which an image is used to *capture* or *clarify* a feeling which is on the edge of a participant's conscious awareness; this type of response was most present when participants were asked to focus with the archetype cards: as they explored the images- in terms of what was attractive or repellent in the image and what had prompted them to choose a particular card- then they were able to go deeper in terms of being aware of their felt sense. Having an extant image also provided material for feelings which were only half-sensed and unclear to be made *manifest* and thus become available for further exploration. The example given above, where a participant focuses with *The Hermit* archetype card, is a good illustration of a *manifesting* response.

### Anchoring

In this category, we see images being used to *tie down* or *contain* certain elements of the felt sense: in the main such images are used to 'fix' positive sensations: images of safety, security or inspiration in ways in which they remain available to the participant's awareness or are *amplified*. The mother-figure seen in [Figure 5](#) is a good example of this type of image use, as the figure both contains and amplifies the feelings of support and well-being this participant associates with the mother and, through this representation, such feelings maintain *presence*.

### Transforming

It is in this third category of image-work that we encounter the most striking examples of how introducing images can enhance the Focusing process. In *Transforming* the image not only *manifests* and/or is used to *contain* what is sensed at an experiential level: there is a third movement in which the image then provides a space or material within which organismic change can take place. The most powerful example we saw of a *transforming* response was the participant with the *dark tendrils* wrapped around her throat which: through the process of focusing with the image in mind, she experienced the image transforming itself into a green and living plant, at which point the participant underwent a shift at a feeling level. Similarly, we observed another participant represent their depression as a *wet rag* located at the back of their head; through focusing with this image in mind we saw it change into a piece of velvet becoming *somewhere soft I can rest myself until I feel better*. In all cases of *transforming* the change seen in the image was positive and therapeutic. An interesting outlier which also belongs in this category is a participant who worked imagistically in a physical and tactile way: this participant had

a felt sense of *churning anxiety* which seemed to need *neatness* to feel better; as they focused they chose make an orderly arrangement of beads by sticking them in clay so that they formed a matrix- and reported that this activity caused also the anxiety to shift and release.

We found that across all three categories of response- *manifesting*, *anchoring* and *transforming*- working with images made a positive contribution to the Focusing process: through imagery, participants found new ways of exploring, articulating and changing their experiential states as a part of the Focusing methodology.

As an interesting additional outcome to the main findings of the project, we also saw what might be described as the way in which working in an arts-based environment facilitates *play* and, whilst this is somewhat beyond the scope of the discussion of what we set out to do, we believe this to be something worthy of note: as they interacted with the various arts activities and materials presented to them, we found participants were able to relax and open up with regard to accessing and speaking about their feelings. Much work has been conducted on the benefits of play and this is a broad field of academic study, so we do not want to say much about it here- other than to note that introducing a *playful* element into the group experience did seem to have beneficial effects: participants reported feeling more relaxed, of finding enjoyment in the exercises and were generally observed to be sociable with each other as they completed the practical tasks. In the words of David Ward-Wimmer, 'Play is a natural and enduring behavior in adults [that] has healing powers for the mind and spirit that we are only beginning to appreciate and learn to use' (Ward-Wimmer, 2002).

## Conclusion

What we encountered through our work on this project points to a process occurring within the psyche when an individual focuses with images- a process in which images provide the psyche with something to make experiencing tangible, and a space for that experiencing to *unfold*. Nevertheless, this study offers only a snapshot: this is a small study and thus any conclusions we draw must necessarily be modest. However, what we found *does* encourage us to think that working with images and engaging in arts-based activities is helpful in developing an individual's Focusing practise out of *stuckness* and into a deeper level of engagement with inner experiencing- as well as facilitating the articulation of feelings which have previously been out-of-reach. Our analysis of the FMS returns provides a strong indication that this group did find that working with Focusing using images enhanced or improved their ability to *tune in* to a sense of a personal inner experience. In this sense, our hypothesis that introducing an element of working with images into the Focusing process would have a positive effect on developing the *Focusing Attitude* of our participants was confirmed: we observed shifts- supported by the FMS results- which cause us to be optimistic about the effect of introducing arts-based exercises. Given these results, we suspect that a larger sample would produce greater differences and that something *meaningful* is being picked up in the data. This is something we are hopeful of seeing in future iterations of this project.

At this point, we can say that Focusing with images seems to be helpful in the following ways: images can help us to *capture* and *clarify* feelings; they can *anchor* us to a sense of safety or peace; most strikingly, images provide a 'space' in which our feelings

can be *changed*- and they allow us to observe that change. We may go further to say that introducing images into Focusing practise might be seen as initiating a process of *apperception*- transforming the inchoate inner image to something with a form that can be viewed from *outside*.

What also came out of this project was a sense that working with images was psychologically facilitative for our participants because images/signs/symbols/language lead individuals into an arena- a way of working with experience- with an *atavistic* resonance. In other words, using images in this way, as both a catalyst and a material which enters into a dialectical relationship with *thought*, drawing on the imaginative force that has always imbued humans processing the most profound types of experiencing. We believe this to be a way of working which is endemic to the human experience which tells us something important about Focusing and, more broadly, about the way in which the psyche interacts with the experienced world. Returning to Purton's point, made above, what images offer us as Focusers is a way of 'rendering' the insubstantial flow of experiencing; images give a substance to thought which renders the inner world into a form where it might be worked with, becoming both visible and *plastic*. As we saw in our experience with the participants in our workshops, images not only crystallize and stand as external representations of inner experiencing- they simultaneously provide the material for experience to be *worked with* and to change.

In conclusion, this project provides an insight into a way of working with images in Focusing practise which is redolent with promise. For us as researchers, this is not the *conclusion* of an experiment, but rather the beginning of an exploration of a new way of working with Focusing which extends the practise and draws on the fabric of language itself, making it more than a vehicle for the *expression* of our experiencing, and instead framing it as a catalyst and material for making what is *felt* manifest.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributors

**Stephanie Aspin** is an MA course director in the *School of Education and Lifelong Learning* at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK, and an integrative therapist in private practice specialising in working with autistic clients and clients with associated neurodivergencies. She holds dual doctorates, in poetics and counselling studies, and her research interests are situated at the intersection of psychotherapy and literary theory. Stephanie's most recent research focusses on *the imposter phenomenon* in academia and the construction and internalisation of an academic *imago*. This work also engages with issues of structural exclusion and marginalisation, particularly with images and narratives connected to the representation of social class and the experience of the working-class academic. Stephanie frequently uses creative methodologies in both her research and clinical practice, and she is currently pursuing further training in Person-Centred art therapy.

**Judy Moore** is former Director of Counselling and Director of the Centre for Counselling Studies of the University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK. She was originally trained in the Person-Centred Approach and taught on the postgraduate Diploma in Person-Centred Counselling at UEA for several years before becoming involved in the development of Focusing training at UEA in the early 2000s. She is a Certifying Coordinator of the International Focusing Institute. She is co-editor

(with Nikolaos Kypriotakis) of the two volume publication, *Senses of Focusing* (Eurasia publications, Athens, 2021). She is currently following up ideas generated by that work, including investigation of the deeper origins of Client-Centred Therapy and the Person-Centred Approach.

## ORCID

Judy Moore  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8165-8044>

## References

- Aoki, T., & Ikemi, A. (2014). The focusing manner scale: Its validity, research background and its potential as a measure of embodied experiencing. *Person-Centered & Experiential Psychotherapies*, 13(1), 31–46. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14779757.2013.870925>
- Fink, B. (1995). *The Lacanian subject: Between language and jouissance*. Princeton University Press.
- Fukumori, H., & Morikawa, Y. (2003). Relationship between Focusing and mental health in adolescents. *Journal of Japanese Clinical Psychology*, 20(6), 580–587. (in Japanese).
- Gendlin, E. (1978). *Focusing*. Bantam Books.
- Gendlin, E. T. (1992). The primacy of the body, not the primacy of perception. *Man and World*, 25(3–4), 341–353. Retrieved March 27, 2022, from <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01252424>
- Kemp, R. (2006). Notes toward a phenomenological reading of Lacan. *The Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, 6 (1), 1–9. Retrieved March 27, 2022, from [https://www.academia.edu/2429578/Notes\\_towards\\_a\\_phenomenological\\_reading\\_of\\_Lacan](https://www.academia.edu/2429578/Notes_towards_a_phenomenological_reading_of_Lacan)
- Lacan, J. (1961). Merleau-Ponty: In Memoriam (Jacques-Alain Miller, Trans.). *Les Temps Modernes*. 185–86, 245–254. Retrieved March 27, 2022 from <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5d52d51fc078720001362276/t/5ff5c05d92a257639ed3e4c1/1609941086739/19610101+Merleau+P+Lacan.PDF>
- Lacan, J. (1995a). The agency of the letter in the unconscious or reason since Freud (Alan Sheridan, Trans.). In *Ecrits: A selection* (pp. 146–178). Routledge.
- Lacan, J. (1995b). The signification of the Phallus (Alan Sheridan, Trans.). In *Ecrits: A selection* (pp. 281–291). Routledge.
- Matthews, F. (2009). Invitation to onto-poetics. *PAN Philosophy Activism Nature*, 6(1), 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.4225/03/58587d89bd427>
- Moore, J. (2021). Introduction to vol. I. In N. Kypriotakis & J. Moore (Eds.), *Senses of Focusing (two vols)* (pp. 49–71). Eurasia Publications.
- Myss, C. (2003). *Archetype Cards*. Hay House.
- Purton, C. (2002). Focusing on focusing: The practice and the philosophy. In J. C. Watson, R. N. Goldman & M. S. Warner (Eds.), *Client-centered and experiential psychotherapy in the 21st century: Advances in theory, research and practice* (pp. 89–98). PCCS Books.
- Rappaport, L. (2009). *Focusing-Oriented art therapy: Accessing the body's wisdom and creative intelligence*. Jessica Kingsley.
- Tsuchie, S. (2005). Internal weather. In T. Chikada & M. Hikasa (Eds.), *Focusing workbook* (pp. 46–48). Kaneko Shobo (in Japanese).
- Ward-Wimmer, D. (2002). *The healing potential of adults at play*. Retrieved April 2, 2021, from <http://www.psychceu.com/Schaefer/intro.pdf>
- Zwiercan, A., & Joseph, S. (2018). Focusing manner and post-traumatic growth. *Person-Centered & Experiential Psychotherapies*, 17 (3), 191–200. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14779757.2018.1517659>