



Research Article

# Touching the Loss and Creating a New Sense of Being in Clay Field Therapy: A Longitudinal Phenomenological Research

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## Abstract

Clay Field Therapy is a trauma-informed Sensorimotor Art Therapy rooted in haptic perception. It emphasizes the tactile relationship between the individual's hands and materials, providing a non-verbal avenue for deep therapeutic processing. The combination of three fundamental materials creates Clay Field: a rectangular wooden box filled with smooth clay and warm water. This longitudinal phenomenological study aims to examine the experiences of individuals undergoing Clay Field Therapy to process complex grief. The participant group consists of four women, aged between 30 and 45, who sought Clay Field Therapy due to their unique experiences of loss and grief. Data was collected through participant-led, in-depth, process-oriented, and semi-structured interviews conducted after the first and twelfth Clay Field sessions of each participant. Longitudinal Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was employed to explore in detail how participants attributed meaning to their experiences, changes, and transformations during Clay Field Therapy. Four superordinate themes emerged from the analysis of data: beyond words, from nothingness towards existence, from tangible experiences towards a transformative spiritual experience, and a comprehensive sense of being. Clay Field Therapy facilitates not only the resolution of the grief process but also enables profound existential work and spiritual growth. This process, in which individuals reconstruct the meaning of life through their tactile encounters in the Clay Field, has been conceptualized as "Embodied Reflection."

## Keywords:

Longitudinal interpretative phenomenological analysis • Clay Field Therapy • Complicated grief • Sensorimotor Art Therapy • Expressive Art Therapy • Haptic perception • Embodiment • Embodied reflection.

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## Introduction

Clay Field Therapy was founded by Heinz Deuser fifty years ago and has continued to evolve since then. It encompasses a multidimensional perspective that integrates ancient and traditional resources, phenomenological philosophy, and modern psychology and neuroscience (Başıoğlu Yavuz, 2023; Elbrecht, 2012, 2018). While drawing from a variety of theoretical frameworks, including Gestalt, analytic, object relations theories, and developmental psychology, Clay Field Therapy is not merely a therapeutic technique that combines various theories; rather, it is a unique psychotherapeutic approach centered on touch and haptic perception. Clay Field is a trauma-informed sensorimotor art therapy that has become increasingly widespread in application with both adults and children, particularly in Europe and Australia.

The Clay Field consists of a combination of three materials, which distinguishes it from clay therapy: a rectangular wooden box measuring 36 x 42 x 3 cm, approximately 15 kg of clay that completely fills the wooden box, and warm water in a large oval bowl. While the use of these materials may exhibit variability on a case-by-case basis and across different sessions, these three primary materials are essential components (Başıoğlu Yavuz, 2023; Elbrecht, 2012, 2018; Elbrecht & Antcliff, 2014).

The clay, or earth, serves as an ancient repository of meanings that vary according to culture and beliefs but generally presents a sacred significance. Prior to monotheistic religions, it has been represented as the “mother earth” and a layer housing the afterlife or the demonic within (Jütte, 2008; Van De Castle, 1994). From the Old Testament to the Quran, it holds a creationist role, as humanity was formed from the earth and would return to it. Clay has been employed in a variety of cultures as a medium for spiritual or healing purposes, as well as in certain societies for divination, the creation of charms, and magical practices (Henley, 2002; Hinz, 2009; Sherwood, 2004; Sholt, Gavron, & Israel, 2006; Van De Castle, 1994). Since ancient times, humans have externalized their inner worlds and deities through sculptures, reliefs, and totems, immortalizing their memories and significant figures through monuments (Grant, 2017; Krauss, 2021).

Clay possesses distinct characteristics, including volume, texture, scent, and weight, which can transform when it interacts with elements such as water and air. When individuals engage with clay, it can respond by warming, softening, hardening, taking various forms, being held, squeezed, molded, grasped, embraced, or preserved. Clay is, therefore, regarded as one of the most suitable materials for art therapy, particularly in facilitating inter-relational experiences (Henley, 1991, 2002).

Clay Field Therapy cannot be conducted without the wooden box. The significance attributed to the box is unique to an individual’s tactile relationship. For instance, the box can serve as a place, a ground, inner space, boundaries, the world, and so on.

In Clay Field Therapy, water is considered the opposite of clay and perceived as a balancing material due to water's soft, transparent, calming, sensory-stimulating, fluid, and purifying qualities. Although warm water is primarily preferred in Clay Field Therapy, its temperature can be adjusted according to the individuals' needs (Başoğlu Yavuz, 2023; Elbrecht, 2012, 2018).

Clay Field Therapy is also a form of expressive art therapy approach; however, it differs by focusing on the process of hands and haptic perception. In other words, expressive art therapies are typically characterized by an emphasis on what hands create and the symbolic outcomes of the process. In contrast, the focus of Clay Field Therapy does not center on the creation of a particular object. Instead, it is concerned with how the hands engage with the materials, the process of tactile relationship with the materials, and the sensory-perceptual encounter of the skin (Başoğlu Yavuz, 2023; Elbrecht, 2012, 2018).

### **Spiritual and Psychological Aspects of the Hands and Haptic Perception**

Throughout history, hands have held a prominent place in traditional medicine, art, philosophy, and theology (Ben Ayed, 2014; Fulkerson, 2011; Merleau-Ponty, 1979; Nancy, 2020; Josipovici, 1997; Jütte, 2008; Segal, N. 2009). In ancient Vedic texts, Chinese medicine, and Ayurveda, the skin and hands have been regarded as a map representing other bodily systems, indicators of health or illness, and reflections of one's state of mind, serving as pathways to healing. The earliest systematic use of hand gestures can be traced back to Egyptian hieroglyphs and the Mudras found in Asian paintings and sculptures, as well as the epics of Mahabharata and Bhagavad Gita (Easwaran, 2007; Rajagopalachari, 2018). The word "Mudra" refers to hand gestures that convey various meanings, intentions, and spiritual messages. Derived from Sanskrit, the term Mudra embodies notions of happiness, vitality, joy, and caring (Bhattacharyya, 1958). The specific positioning and contact of the palm and fingers also signify the sensory-perceptual dimension of Mudra. Mudras not only serve as a non-verbal form of communication or self-expression beyond words but also reflect inner contemplations. The iconography of hand gestures, from Ancient Greece to Rome and continuing into today's Christianity and Islam, possesses a universal characteristic that may exhibit similarities or differences depending on geography, history, and culture (Van Straten, 2007).

According to Husserl (2000), the founder of phenomenological philosophy and psychology, the skin provides a distinct phenomenological space through the *double sensation* quality of touch, as touching implies being touched. Merleau-Ponty (1979), one of the most influential existentialists in phenomenological psychology, asserted that the exploration of the invisible and the unveiling of the implicit universe can only be achieved through tactile or haptic experiences, thus "*the skin is Existence*" (p. 182).

In the embryo, the sense of touch begins to develop much earlier than all other senses, starting at approximately the ninth week (Hepper, 2008). The skin is the most sensitive and largest organ that entirely envelops the body from the inside out. It provides a space for other organs and delineates boundaries, engaging in a relationship with the external world. (Andersen & Guerrero, 2008; Anzieu, 2016; Fulkerson, 2011; Hepper, 2008; Hsiao & Yau, 2008). Haptic perception encompasses tactile sensation, kinesthetic sensation, and proprioception (Andersen & Guerrero, 2008; Hepper, 2008; Overliet et al., 2008). In other words, haptic perception involves the skin, the musculoskeletal system, joints, connective tissues, and the vestibular system, contributing to functions related to movement, balance, body awareness, and pain sensation. Haptic perception, therefore, serves as the foundational sensory framework for investigating various facets of human existence, including the experiences of space and time, inter-subjectivity, and one's positioning within the world.

A baby's sense of attachment and trust can primarily be internalized through skin contact and tactile relationships. Psychoanalytic, especially object relations theory, identifies the skin with the preverbal structure and emphasizes the crucial role of touch in the first representations of self and others (Anzieu, 2016; Bion, 2014, 2020; Klein, 1997; Segal, 2009). The experience of love, violence, intimacy, and sexuality is primarily facilitated through touch, not only in the preverbal period but also in subsequent stages of life. The communication of these emotions and desires continues to be expressed through gestures and body language. The skin, thereby, is considered a social, relational, and emotional organ and a psychological system in its own right (Wilson, 1998).

In Clay Field Therapy, the clients are encouraged to follow their hands and to reflect on their bodily sensations. The role of the therapist is to be able to read the hands and to offer a conscious gaze to the client rather than an instructor who determines what they need to do. Thus, the therapists accompany along the journey, where individuals working in the Clay Field can safely engage in their experiential discoveries. When working with adults, the clients are invited to close their eyes in order to facilitate an in-depth exploration guided by the senses, impulses, needs, and intuitions rather than conscious conditionings (Başoğlu Yavuz, 2023; Elbrecht, 2012).

### **Complicated Grief and Loss as a Psychological and Spiritual Phenomenon**

Complicated grief is a phenomenon observed in 10-20% of individuals and is often associated with traumatic loss such as multiple losses, witnessing a difficult dying process, unresolved grief from prior losses, lack of support systems, or lack of faith (Caroff, 2002; Enez, 2018; Shear et al., 2013; Pies, 2012). It can manifest in various forms, such as prolonged grief reactions that persist over extended periods, individuals who suppress and delay their intense grief response to avoid the pain of

loss, or those who are unaware of the patterns that disrupt their lives as a result of their loss (Baker, 2021; Caroff, 2002; Enez, 2018; Shear et al., 2013; Pies, 2012).

Freud (1957) posited that individuals suffer from grieving due to their internal attachment to the persons that they have lost and that the aim of mourning is to be detached from them. As a consequence of the grief process, the ego can eventually be liberated from its previous attachments and becomes capable of forming new attachments with living individuals (Baker, 2021; Freud, 1957). On the other hand, existentialists perceive death and grief as much broader and deeper concepts than ego functions or narcissistic injury. Therefore, death and loss are one of the main issues of existential analysis. (May, 1994).

Heidegger (2001) delineates human existence as being “thrown” into the world and questions the place of death in the experience of anxiety and other emotions. He argues that if we disregard death, our reflection upon life will remain superficial and incomplete (Heidegger, 2001). He asserts that the reality of death introduces a dimension of temporality to existence in the world. Despite the relational nature of life, death confronts individuals with the experience of loneliness. The temporal boundaries of an individual’s existence, along with those of their immediate environment, are inherently finite. The duration of this temporal period is not subject to individual prediction. Sartre (1943) argues that in the inter-subjective world, *Being* cannot be considered independently of *Nothingness*. He contends that individuals’ perceptions of the world are shaped by the presence or absence of others, given that the world does not belong to the individual. Therefore, lost objects are as significant as present ones (Sartre, 1943, 1966).

For existential analysts, anxiety does not arise from the conflict of drives as suggested by psychoanalysis, but rather from the inevitability of death, creating a sense of despair and existential conflicts. According to Rollo May (1994), this anxiety is the fundamental source of human creativity. The finitude of life, the constraints of time, and loss can enable individuals to view life from a broader perspective, moving beyond their personal narratives. Death and loss can also initiate the search for meaning and provide individuals with a source for living a meaningful life (May 1994).

Jungian analysts also agree with existential analysts that Freud’s theories on mourning provide only a partial understanding of loss. Jung (1999) proposes that when individuals face loss, the unconscious may facilitate new adaptations, leading to the emergence of a transcendent function. He suggests that grief holds the potential to transcend ordinary experiences and awaken individuals to their spiritual essence rather than merely being a source of emotional distress or trauma. For Jungian analysts, the mystery surrounding death presents an opportunity for individuals to delve into spiritual realms, and embracing grief can lead to soul growth (Jung, 1999).

Recent studies also demonstrate that the individuals' spiritual experiences facilitate them to cope with their loss (Biancalani et al., 2022; Doka, 2002).

### **Study Aim**

The study presented here is formulated based on the following considerations. There is a considerable body of study on the use of art and expressive therapies for grief processing and on the spiritual dimensions of art therapy (Kırca, 2019); however, few of them present research that offers a detailed examination of the process. It is also important to remember that art psychotherapies and expressive therapies represent an umbrella of various modalities, and Clay Field Therapy is a sensorimotor art therapy with its unique system and structure (Başıoğlu Yavuz, 2023; Elbrecht, 2012). Again, although there are numerous philosophical, spiritual, and psychological sources emphasizing the importance of skin, touch, and haptic perception, studies directly addressing these as therapeutic phenomena are quite limited. Hence, this paper may be the first longitudinal phenomenological research on grief processing in Clay Field Therapy and one of the first studies to investigate in detail the haptic and tactile experiences as spiritual and existential phenomena in psychotherapy.

This study presents an in-depth analysis of the experiences of individuals undergoing Clay Field Therapy due to specific losses. The research presented here aims to answer questions about how individuals attribute meaning to their experiences in Clay Field Therapy, what changes occur during the process, how these changes manifest, and what are the underlying causes of these changes within the context of the spanning time and experiential encounters within Clay Field Therapy. It employs Longitudinal Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (LIPA) to elucidate the nuances of the Clay Field Therapy process, prioritizing individuals' own reflections on their experiences and *bracketing* any theoretical constructs or preconceptions.

### **Method**

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is focused on individuals' subjective experiences and is built upon three core principles: phenomenology, idiography, and hermeneutics (Smith, 2004). It suggests that individuals are meaning-making, self-interpretative, and inter-subjective beings, so an IPA researcher is dedicated to the detailed and in-depth examination of the first-hand experience (Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 2009). IPA also requires bracketing from the theories or prior knowledge about the phenomenon and researchers' self-reflection on their preconceptions (Cooper et al., 2012; Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 2009). Thus, the study begins with a comprehensive research question rather than positing a hypothesis.

IPA incorporates double hermeneutics, indicating a dynamic interplay between researchers interpreting participants and participants interpreting their own experiences.

In IPA studies, data is collected through semi-structural or non-structural interviews and idiographic inquiry. The idiographic inquiry focuses on experiential narratives as well as the existential concerns of the participants. IPA is a highly recommended method, especially for the examination of new and complex phenomena in psychology, and it is the most widely used qualitative research method in current clinical psychology and psychotherapy studies (Smith, 2004, 2011; Smith et al., 2009).

Longitudinal Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (LIPA) is employed in studies that investigate how an experience undergoes changes and transformations over a specific period. LIPA adheres to the fundamental principles of IPA. On the other hand, it places a particular emphasis on the hermeneutic principle, the evolving nature of interpretation within time and context (McCoy, 2017). It, therefore, differs from IPA in certain aspects, including data collection and analysis. In the domain of clinical psychology research, the IPA suggests a sample size of three to eight participants. However, for longitudinal studies, a smaller number of participants is recommended to allow for the examination of detailed aspects of the process. (McCoy, 2017; Smith, 2011; Smith et al., 2009; Thomson & McLeod, 2015). In LIPA studies, data is gathered through two or more interviews, providing access to both prospective and retrospective accounts of experience (McCoy, 2017). Besides, data analysis involves a more extensive process compared to IPA since it necessitates comparisons not only between cases but also within each case. The research presented here has been designed with the consideration for quality and validity assessments associated with LIPA (Farr & Nizza, 2019; Farr et al., 2021; Smith, 2011; Thomson & McLeod, 2015).

### Study Population

Five Clay Field Therapy clients were recruited for this study. Participation was voluntary, and participants were free to withdraw at any point during the course of the research. The study presented here was conducted with four participants, as one participant dropped out. All participants were females from the middle socio-economic class, and they were working at the time the study took place. The age range was 30 to 45 years old (Table 1).

**Table 1**  
*Demographic Information of the Participants*

Participant's Pseudonym	Sex	Age	Type of Loss
Deniz	Female	30	Mother's death due to a medical condition.
Elif	Female	36	Death of most relatives due to an earthquake.
Esra	Female	40	Father's death in an accident.
Sena	Female	45	First, the mother's death following a prolonged severe illness. Later, the father's unexpected death due to a medical condition.

The participants were selected for their unique inner turmoil stemming from a specific loss experience and complicated grief, and they were in Clay Field Therapy to

address these issues. They represent individual cases of creative psychotherapy process that operates through skin sense and haptic perception. All of them had a history of talk therapy. However, none of them had any previous Clay Field Therapy experience.

Two participants (Deniz and Sena) initiated Clay Field Therapy after more than fifteen years of experiencing the loss, while the other two participants (Elif and Esra) began therapy within the first one and a half years following their respective losses. All identifying information was altered, and pseudonyms were used to protect participants' confidentiality.

### Data Collection Tools

Following the principles of qualitative studies, data were collected by semi-structured, one-to-one, and participant-led interviews with open-ended and neutral questions. Prior to commencing the interviews, a schedule containing topics relevant to the research question was prepared (Table 2).

**Table 2**

*The Interview Schedule*

Key Questions	Prompts
What brought you to Clay Field Therapy?	-How has the loss you experienced affected you? -What were your expectations from Clay Field Therapy?
Can you tell me about your experience in the Clay Field?	-What did you feel when you first touched the Clay Field? -What did you experience during the first session? -What did you experience during the last session?
How do you evaluate the process you went through in the Clay Field?	-How do you interpret what you experienced? -What do you recall about your touches during your time in the Clay Field? -How did this contact/ touch make you feel? -What does this movement mean to you?
What stands out to you when you reflect on your sense of self, life, or perception before and after Clay Field Therapy?	-How/why do you think these transformations occurred? -What do these transformations mean to you?

Being different from a structured questionnaire, the interview schedule was used as a guide for the interviewer to engage in an in-depth dialogue with the participants so that the questions were modified according to the participants' authentic language and personal experiences. All interviews were recorded by a voice recorder, with the permission of the participants.

### Procedure

This study was conducted following the ethical approval from Istanbul Galata University Ethical Committee, Turkey (Approval Date: 22<sup>nd</sup> of October, 2024 Approval Number: E-77300296-050.04-13149) and was adhered to the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki and the ethical considerations in qualitative research (Cieurzo & Keitel, 1999). The researcher explained to the participant that the aim of



this research was to encourage the participants to speak in their own voice and witness their unique experience of grief processing in Clay Field Therapy. The participants have also been informed that both the records and transcripts will be permitted for use solely by the researcher, who will be responsible for preserving their anonymity in every aspect. The researcher clearly indicated that the participants had all the rights to retrieve their consent, with no explanations needed. The interviews commenced after participants read and signed detailed information written in the consent form.

The timing and frequency of data collection were planned according to the methodological recommendations of LIPA (Farr & Nizza, 2019; Farr et al., 2021; McCoy, 2017). The first interview took place following the participants' first Clay Field Therapy session, while the second interview was conducted after the participants' twelfth Clay Field Therapy session. The rationale was to facilitate the participants in recounting their experiences within both the first and twelfth sessions, as well as between sessions. This also aims to open up space for participants to reflect on the changes and transformations that they undergo during the process and to engage in both retrospective and prospective interpretations.

Taking into account the requirements of qualitative studies (Cieurzo & Keitel, 1999; Cooper et al., 2012), the choice of the location for the interviews was left to the participants' preferences, and the interviews proceeded in the office where Clay Field Therapy took place. The audio recordings were transcribed by the researcher in the original language, Turkish, and served as raw data for the analysis.

## **Analysis**

Data analysis proceeded following the six stages recommended for IPA and LIPA (Farr & Nizza, 2019; Farr et al., 2021; Smith, 2004, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). The researcher continued to take reflection notes throughout the entire process, including before, during, and after the interviews and analysis. It is important to note that each participant's recounting was analyzed individually. In other words, the analysis of the second, third, and fourth cases commenced after completing the analysis of the previous case.

The first stage of data analysis involved reading and re-reading the transcript. The initial readings were performed with the aid of audio recordings to develop familiarity with the text and check the accuracy of the transcripts. Meanwhile, the researcher recorded initial impressions and comments in the research journal. Subsequent readings continued with the line-by-line analysis of the transcript, where the researcher marked descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments on the text. Once the analysis of the participant's first interview was completed, the researcher moved on to the second interview and repeated the same steps. The initial themes,

reflecting the participant's unique process, emerged through the identification of interrelated concepts between the two texts.

After analyzing the first participant's data, the same procedure was applied to the others. Finally, a comparative analysis of the individual findings was conducted with sensitivity to the divergence and convergence between cases. Through the abstraction of themes that were common and relevant across all participants, the superordinate and subordinate themes emerged.

## **Findings**

### 1. Beyond words:

- Words don't come easy
- Skin speaks more than words

### 2. From nothingness towards existence:

- Touching the nothingness
- Holding loved-ones and being touched

### 3. From tangible experience to a transformative spiritual experience:

- Intuitive destruction and recreation
- A transcendent experience

### 4. A comprehensive sense of being

The findings are supported by the quotations from participants. These were written in English by the researcher, who was sensitive to the participant's own linguistic characteristics. The quotations presented here have been selected based on their ability to illustrate the themes most clearly and demonstrate the participants' diverse experiences.

T1 (the transcript of the first interview) and T2 (the transcript of the second interview) indicate which interview the extract is taken from. Pseudonyms were used, and all identifying information was changed to protect anonymity.

## **Beyond words**

The longitudinal nature of this study captured experiential changes by presenting the different steps that participants had gone through. The first superordinate theme provides essential information about participants' unique loss experience and their

intention in Clay Field Therapy, aiming to elucidate the contextual meanings of their narratives. This theme thereby serves as a focal point of other superordinate themes.

It is also important to note that these details were elicited from the interviews, such as responses to questions like “What brought you to Clay Field Therapy?” or their reflections linking the tactile relationship at the Clay Field to their lives.

### **Words don’t come easy**

Deniz lost her mother when she was a teenager. She underwent extended talk therapy, used medication, and attempted self-healing through body-focused therapies and reading self-help books. Despite experiencing improvements in various aspects, she expressed that she always felt “*setbacks*”, a constant sense of “*meaningless*”, “*emptiness*,” and feeling “*lost*”. Deniz mentioned that she had recently recognized the residues of loss in her relationships and that she was in Clay Field Therapy as she was reluctant to “*talk and analyze*” anymore.

Sena lost her mother when she was a teenager and, a few years later, her father. She recounted that she went to the extent of denying it ever happened, even did not mention her loss experiences to her closest ones. Due to “*unbearable nature of living in constant meaningless*” and “*numbness*”, she sought psychotherapy. She expressed that her “*inability to contact with [her] emotions*” in talk therapy led her to start Clay Field Therapy.

Esra recounted that she withdrew from life and became completely isolated after the loss of her father so that isolation led her to “*become aware of many things that [she] had not noticed before.*” However, she began to fear “*losing her mind*” recently because she could not make sense of what she was experiencing; she therefore sought therapy. Despite deriving significant benefits from previous talk therapy sessions, she expressed that she was “*no longer the same person*” and she was reluctant to engage in a dialogue even with a therapist, as she feared that she would “*lose something again*” and “*being tamed*” when she puts her experiences into words. She stated that she wanted to give a try to Clay Field Therapy due to its non-verbal nature. Elif lost almost all of her relatives and closest-ones in the earthquake. She mentioned that she had attended talk therapy for a while, but every time she verbalized her feelings, she felt even more overwhelmed, “*finding it more painful,*” and she “*couldn’t remember some memories or didn’t want to remember them*”. She practiced some body-focused therapeutic approaches, as she was experiencing intense physical symptoms, “*but they only provided temporary relief*”. She expressed that she was “*exhausted of constantly feeling angry or tired or broken into pieces*” and “*pretending to cling to life while actually not finding a place for [her] self,*” so she decided to try Clay Field Therapy.

Despite the significantly different loss narratives of each participant, they all feel disconnected both from life and themselves. They seem to be trapped in meaninglessness, emptiness, and profound helplessness. For participants, the loss they experience seems to be beyond words, constituting a complex and profound phenomenon.

### **Skin speaks more than words**

The participants recounted that they had struggled to perceive the language of hands, what the skin communicates with materials, and the voice of the body in the first session. However, They clearly pointed out the insufficiency and superficiality of words by using the expressions like “*artificial*” “*disconnected*” “*losing its sense*”, “*becomes mundane*” “*sort of insincerity*” “*incomplete*”, compared to genuineness and deepness of the touching. This distinction was also evident from the participants’ attempts to define their experiences in Clay Field Therapy, especially during the first interview:

Words might capture a part of the feeling, but I can’t convey the entirety of that feeling. I feel like I can’t explain it or put it into the exact words.... skin definitely speaks more than my words. (Deniz, T1).

As the participants gradually deepened in the Clay Field Therapy, they realized that the movements of their hands and tactile sensations encompassed their entire bodies. In this context, the participants underlined the difference between experiencing and narrating or imagining.

I cried a lot. Um... but overall, it was really hard for me to ask myself how I felt and get an answer. I mean, I didn’t really feel much, or maybe I did feel something, but when I asked myself, I couldn’t get an answer, so it was difficult to do that, to express it, or to try to understand it on my own... It’s like I was missing the sense of touch for a long time. (Deniz, T1). Thank goodness there’s a space like this, because there are things we really can’t express with words... It’s just too shallow to translate verbally, translate to words, in talk therapy. Clay Field is something deeper! It’s like being in that child’s body again. (Deniz, T2).

Moreover, participants emphasized that the tactile relationship with the clay field led them to experience “*preverbal*” encounters and brought forth memories, even those they were not consciously aware of:

While talking, maybe, you know, I would mention it or describe it, I don’t know, but it would trigger something, maybe. I was swaying in the field, and in that movement, lots of lots of things happened. I probably wouldn’t sway like this by talking... Something spontaneous came up there... At that moment, it hit me! I could connect that swaying to my childhood... I’ve forgotten it but there it came to me that I used to have this swaying thing in bed when I couldn’t sleep... in my infancy, in my childhood... I used to sway when I was a child, I swayed there in the same way... It’s quite intense emotions, something I’ve never known before. (Sena, T2).

Touch has definitely something that the talking does not. Because things unconsciously come out without I even notice it. It's like, what might take a very long time to come out through talking, can come out much faster....It touches a much more non-verbal or pre-verbal place, it 'touches'! Honestly, overall, I mostly felt childlike things. I mean... I felt things that I wouldn't be able to express if I was a child. So, there are definitely things that are not in words. (Elif, T2).

While the participants' hands were engaging in a diverse dialogue with the materials, their skin sense and haptic perception served as an "*amplifier*" that transformed the abstract content left beyond the words into a tangible extract of their inner world:

There was a different version of me at every moment. I was in so different states. You know... my mood, were very different. Um... so, it's like the clay somehow amplifies what's inside... I think this is much deeper. I mean, today I realized that it felt much deeper to me than talking. (Esra, T1).

I guess in the first interview, I said that clay field was amplifying what has already been there. It really does, and it continued that way. So, if there's something, it brings it out in a bigger form and throws it out, I mean lets it out. It's not something inside anymore, such as a struggle, a discomfort.. Clay takes it from there, and shows it by magnifying like, 'Here it is!' also take it away or remove it. (Esra, T2).

I can describe you my experiences by imagining the clay as a person. And within it, there's a little pebble, and what the hands naturally feel lets you say, 'There's something here!', 'Something has emerged!'. But when you pick it up and examine it in your hands, and then put it back, well, it becomes just a part of the clay. Maybe it has dried up a bit. Let's say you moisten it a bit and knead it with the rest of the clay. Now you know it's there, but it's not something that get stuck in your hands anymore. It's just a part of the whole it's just something that has been experienced. I believe it plays a role in not making sense to that experience as a separate or only or traumatic or embarrassing thing in your life. It becomes like , 'Yes I've felt this way, this has happened, but along with the other things'. Maybe it's a kind of acceptance. (Elif, T2).

The participants' sense of uncontrollability, despair, chaos, disconnection and anxiety stemming from an unnamed content, was replaced by a sense of relief, attunement, control and safety derived from experiencing an embodied and expressive alternative. Thus, they appear to found some responses to their intention of being in Clay Field Therapy.

### **From nothingness towards existence**

This superordinate theme presents how the participants encountered their conflicts and negotiated on their loss, within their hands. The different stages of this process are described in the subordinate themes "touching the nothingness" (emerged predominantly from the fist interviews) and "holding the loved ones and being touched" (emerged from both first and second interview).

## **Touching the nothingness**

The participants emphasized their shock at experiencing their own stories so vividly and profoundly, even in the very first session. They described how the specific hand movements put their inner conflicts on the stage:

I did something there, but then I thought, ‘What am I going to do with this thing?’ On one hand, I need to protect it. But when I protect it, I can’t move. So, I decided to break it into pieces and felt terrible again. It’s something I want to protect but can’t, something I don’t know how to protect... In general, I try to protect everything. Yes, that’s probably the summary of my life, trying to preserve but not being able to, trying to move on and not being able to... (Sena, T1).

It felt like I was harming the clay when I tried to grasp a part of it. It wasn’t like holding it; it was more like being torn away, but there wasn’t really a place to hold onto. Even without holding anything, I could still be torn away... I wet the clay when it felt hard, but when it’s wet, this time it slips through my fingers, and I can’t hold it. When it slips away, I lose all control, I guess. It’s slipping through my fingers, I can’t hold it, I can’t hold onto it! (Elif, T1).

The “*nothingness*”, “*emptiness*” “*darkness*”, and “*loss*” that they encountered in the meeting of their hands with the clay field, seems to bring their fears to the surface, in the rawest form:

When I dug into the clay a bit and split it open, the space inside seemed incredibly deep, almost like it went on for miles. I remember saying ‘black hole!’ at that moment. Where did ‘black hole’ come from all of a sudden! I can’t recall ever saying something like that before, using that word for anything. It hurt when I touched. Yes, ‘black hole.’ It’s like I’ve had this thing for years, you know? Like, even when everything’s going fine, when I don’t have any problems, there’s this part in my brain that’s like a black hole. It always says everything is meaningless and empty. That’s the black hole in the clay. (Deniz, T1).

When I closed my eyes and started touching, I went to some really deep places, got lost. It felt like I was in a struggle with the clay, reminding me of things in my life that I need to deal with... So, it took me to a very suffocating place. It became a place where I felt lost in deep, deep depths. That profound emptiness, where the struggle took me, that nothingness scared me. Then I opened my eyes; I can’t say I felt much better, but at least I felt a bit more relieved when I opened my eyes. I could at least see where I was. (Esra, T1).

The intensity of their initial experience in the Clay Field Therapy was clearly evident in the participants, as reflected in their stillness, vocal tone also, bodily and facial expressions during the first interview. The participants expressed that, although they did not reach a resolution in the first session, they ended it emotionally safer, more stable and regulated:

I laughed, then suddenly remembered and cried. Now, I feel kind of tired. I feel like I’ve experienced these emotions very intensely. There’s a slight dizziness. Well, my energy has dropped a bit. (Sena, T1).

I came in with feelings of wanting to harm someone, either myself or someone else. I had a severe headache. Um... I wasn't in a state of thinking sanely. Um... and I was extremely angry, I mean very, very angry... I started crying and feeling very sad at the beginning, as I live reluctantly. I mean, I started without wanting to do anything... Then I tried to relax myself a bit more to release my emotions. Because when you're angry, you're keeping your emotions inside the same way. And when I played with the clay, everything, both aggression and sadness, like I said, came out... But overall, it was very difficult to ask myself how I was feeling and get an answer... Still, it changed in a positive direction, like I said, I had a headache, and my headache went away. I calmed down a bit more. The desire to harm things disappeared. (Elif, T1).

I remember that after all that chaos, I remember that I put my hands in the water. It was like I got in the water. Warm water. Being in there, and playing in the warm water, made me calm. Yes, that was where I've been calmer. (Esra, T1).

### **Holding the loved ones and being touched again**

In the initial interview, the participants reflected on the changes in their experiences during the first Clay Field session. In the second interview, on the other hand, they not only described their experiences in the twelfth session, but also gave a detailed account of the transformative experiences that had occurred in the intervening sessions. In this manner, it has become possible to illustrate the nuances of how the grief processing underwent transformation within the distinct tactile relationships established by the participants with the clay field.

The participants seem to gradually surrender to their grief, paralleling to surrendering to the tactile sensations that made them feel out of control in the initial sessions. As it enables them to “*project*” their inner world to Clay Field, they appear to allow themselves to engage in a process of acceptance wherein they could explicitly experience their longings that they had been attempting to suppress:

Towards the end of the session,... With that swinging thing I stretched my arms out and put one on top of the other... with the feelings in that swinging thing... A swing was hanging on a tree and a child is swinging there. That brought me where my dad used to make swings... it's all about death. Pain, losses... oh... my desire to be a child. My desire to be my father's daughter. My need to share with my dad. Their absence and the fact that they would never be here anymore. These are the things. I always feel like something is missing.” (Sena, T1).

I could never say that I loved, that I was angry. That I was sad. That I was happy. Always a censor, yes, “censor” is the right word! I never knew what I felt, because of that censor, because I had always ignored that feeling. Longing. I never said that I missed... I never said that I missed so much. I've always ignored that I miss my mom and dad, that I miss them a lot. (Sena, T2).

The participants appear to be reconnected with their loved ones, through their interactions with the Clay Field materials. The participants' description of this

experience is presented in various relational forms, including the qualities of skin-contact and body motion and, the spatial and temporal representations:

At that point where I covered my hand with clay, I remember how it gave me a very motherly feeling. I mean, when I covered my hands with clay, it felt really good. Like a blanket, you know... it felt like I put a warm vest on my back. It's like my hand was giving care to the other. And that made me feel like my mom did something. It was as if I was receiving compassion from my mom. (Deniz, T1.)

Ah, I remember the tunnel! I mean, the session where I unintentionally made a tunnel! It was the 3rd or 4th session. I was doing something in the Clay Field, and then I created that tunnel. I remember making one side of it the sea and the other side the mountains. Then, as I, my hands and elbows passed through in between them. That feeling suddenly came, it was beautiful. I realized that there was actually a motif of our last family trip in it. With my dad, mountains and roads, I always felt safe. Adventure. (Esra, T2).

Then we held each other. When I held the clay, it didn't let go of me. It was very shocking. I don't know how to explain it, but it felt like, 'Even if you let go, I'll still be here'. When I held it and it didn't let go, I don't know, it's really hard to describe, like 'I don't disappear when you let go'. You know, it was like your hand stays in that holding position even when you part ways, I guess. And it was something that made me feel safe... It was the moment when I held onto and could stay, the moment I felt peace. It was like reaching calmness similar to relaxation after crying, and I hadn't even thought about it until you asked just now. (Elif, T1).

In the last two or three sessions, for example, I felt the sensation of sliding, it was like being on a slide. Like a child, I slid inside the clay rhythmically. In the background, there was also a slide, a scene of slide was coming in front of my eyes at the same time. It was the slide from my childhood. So, I experienced both its momentum with my hands and, well, doing that again, the feeling of running, those sensations, I lived them all. It felt like it gave me something, hmm, like a game, and the clay was soothing. Those rhythmic movements, at the edge of the box, dancing like that, playing, and I'm really surprised. It's quite strange; I don't do such things. I mean, I wanted to embrace it. I wanted to hug it. I mean, it's just a box and clay. So, imagine someone like me wanting to hug it. (Sena, T2).

From the participants' responses in the second interview, it's clear that the haptic experience within clay field has evolved to a reflective interplay between their hands and the materials. The Clay Field, hereby represents for them a storyteller that enable them to make sense of their inner world:

Everything that was in my mind, all the chaos, they were projected in there. At first, making it tangible felt good. Then, it didn't feel good; I felt overwhelmed." (Esra, T1).

Then, well, I was able to get into it. When I buried my hands under it, it was like I made a bit more peace there. It was already sort of a miraculous session! That was the session where everything inside was synchronized with the clay. From there, they started to catch up with each other. It was... maybe the next session when I created the cave. There, a bit more, you know, the inner cave and the one in the clay sort of overlapped. It slowly turned into something, maybe the inside shaped the clay, and the clay shaped the inside. The all melted in



each other. And next session, I think I finished the next session with earthly shapes! And that were, I mean, the sessions where the inside was harmonized with the outside. It's like a story of gradually making peace with the clay and internalizing it I realized that I could bring the inside out and transform it. That was the most touching thing for me. (Esra, T2).

I put whatever I had into the clay field, as if I let it all there. I projected into it everything that I couldn't verbalize I can say that the clay understood me better than I did. (Deniz, T1).

Because there are things happening inside of me and continue to happen. But the clay is more like something outside. The box, the water, they are all outside. You don't see, you don't know beforehand; things just happen through touch and feelings. It's very strange. The clay field is now like an external world that I can interpret, like a connection to the external world. So, it contributed in that way, I could realize that. An external world that I can interpret. An inner world that I can interpret. There's now an external world that I can shape and interpret. Both of them, both inner and external. (Deniz, T2).

This reflective relationship appears to facilitate the participants to “*find out some parts of*” their loved ones within themselves, with the “*freedom*” to experience different feelings than pain. Clay field thereby seems to represent a space wherein the “*nothingness*” turns into the existence under the skin:

That session made me feel like I was in my mother's embrace. It transformed into something like we were in each other's embrace. Now, I can calm myself down just like my mother used to. In daily life too. It's as if I've found some parts of my mother within myself, like they were always been there. Or, like, I have this maternal feeling, motherly things or motherhood. I can show myself kindness, some compassion. (Deniz, T2).

So, in that session, as I poured water into the clay field and started working with my hands, moving around, suddenly, a memory about my dad came to me. There was something very vivid about my dad. When I was a child, we went on a vacation, and there was a pool with a cave-like entrance. And at the exits, water used to flow down from above. I was there with my dad, and there was this sense of adventure we shared, it was fun, something beautiful. The words or memories that I wouldn't normally associate with my dad. The most striking part of that moment for me was the possibility of having a fun and beautiful memory with my dad and the freedom to remember it! Because I had suppressed it a lot, I guess, and my dad always seemed sad to me. If he's feeling bad or he's gone then I can't be good. Apparently, I can be good. And I had to digest it. What I did, what I felt in clay field, made me realize that the suppression was preventing me from living. It allowed me to release some of those suppressed feelings. When I say more curious, I mean like, 'Oooh what is that?!', 'let's explore it!'. It's like feeling something different from 'I haven't tried' or 'I can't try' or 'I can't do it.' (Sena, T2).

As the participants' haptic perception shifted from what they did not have to what they did have, their feelings of guilt, loneliness, and helplessness seem to be faded away, giving way to a sense of gratitude and acceptance:

When I pulled the clay towards myself, it felt like I was digging through earthquake ruins Just waiting under the wreckage for someone to help me, and not being able to rescue those

who were still there was my great helplessness... When I pulled my hands out from under the clay, put them on the surface of the box, it felt like I was getting out from the wreckage. My hand helping my hand gave me the feeling that 'Oh, I can help myself.' It created the sense of 'I am here!'... I also felt I was like holding to something else! It's like feeling more solid.... There's no need for me to tear myself apart like I'm the guilty one because I survived. I'm just sharing the same pain with them. (Elif, T2).

Clay Field seems to provide the participants a safe space to release their vulnerable feelings. Moreover, their new experiences of touching and being touched, embraced, and held appear to assist them in developing a growing feelings of safety, peace, compassion, and joy, as well as a sense of confidence and control.

### **From tangible experience to a transformative spiritual experience:**

This superordinate theme illustrates how the participants' deepening intuitive processes in the Clay Field also served as a gateway to a spiritual experience. The key components of participants' changing experiences are described in two inter-related subordinate themes: an intuitive destruction and recreation and, a transcendent experience.

#### **An intuitive destruction and recreation**

As demonstrated in the first superordinate theme, participants initially projected their fears of loss onto the Clay Field, in their early sessions. Despite their intentions, they struggled to engage with their emotions and found it difficult to let go of their thoughts. However, participants expressed that throughout the process of Clay Field Therapy, they gradually began to "*follow the hands,*" "*follow the rhythm of the hands*" "*yield to the impulses,*" and loosen the control:

I remember, in the initial sessions, there was tension in me, a lot of tension. And when I was touching the clay, I was setting goals, like 'I'm going to push this out now, yes, or I'm going to place this thing in the top right corner of the clay,'. Goal-oriented, that's my life, that's me, I was living it right there. I remember the tension in my face, the tension in my back, it was like I was doing it with such a rage... But in the last sessions, I followed my hands, the rhythm, the sensations in my hands. I didn't know where my hand was leading me. There was no goal. Yes, doing it without a goal, like 'let's see what happens in the moment?'... Doing it without a goal, I mean, doing something based on what I felt, an attempt to capture the sensation that the clay was giving me. (Sena, T2).

When my eyes are closed, I feel more in the moment. I mean, I feel like I've let go more and I feel more in control. When I open my eyes, uncontrollable things enter... Seeing is like an illusion compared to touching. What you feel doesn't always match what you see. But by touching, I can yield to the impulses. (Elif, T2).

Alongside their hands' "*intuitive*" and "*spontaneous movements,*" the participants' courage of destruction has progressively developed. The pleasure that participants

had derived from destroying and recreating in the Clay Field was clearly evident in their enthusiasm when they were describing these experiences during the second interview:

There was chaos there, at first. I tried to do something, but it was like a voice in my head saying ‘let it stay here, don’t disturb it, let it stay here, don’t mess it up.’ It’s like my brain was more in control... At times, I made intuitive movements. These were very brief moments. For example, I pierced the clay. No shape emerged from it, but the expressive quality was much more valuable for me. (Deniz, T1)

I’ve noticed that I go deeper into it, feel more, especially towards the end of the sessions... So, when I follow the rhythm of my hands, more satisfying results emerge I broke it as I wanted, dismantled it, put it back together, turned the box, moistened the clay or took it out. It’s like there was always a sense of ‘I can’t’ that tied my hands and arms, and this gradually turned into ‘I can!’ in every session. (Deniz, T2).

In the initial sessions, the clay felt like something I had to do, but then I made peace with it. However, the box felt very restrictive and something I had no other choice but to expose it. I mean, I had to stay here. It felt like I had to do something here, not just stay with it! What it reminded me of were the environments and situations I’ve encountered in my life, like there is one and only way of being for me. But after that session, these feelings dissolved. After being able to push the clay out, after being able to place it somewhere else, that sense of being captured or obligated have dissolved. Then, as I was able to use the box in different ways, the relationship with the clay and the box began to change. ‘Oh! If I can’t do something here, I can put it there.’ ... I turned the box upside down, ‘Oh! There’s not just one thing that needs to be endured; I can change it’. That creates an incredible sense of freedom. That freedom continued and I kept destroying and creating. Oh.. my arms were so strong! I was very strong. I destroyed and created, destroyed and recreated. I created my own space I created my universe! (Esra, T2).

This tangible process of creative destruction within the Clay Field appears to have led the participants to deconstruct and reconstruct their sense of self and the meanings of their own lives. This transformation seems to involve a shift from the sense of helplessness to the sense of control, from a perception as a victim to competency, freedom and self-validation.

### **A transcendent experience**

The participants emphasized that the later stages of Clay Field Therapy process no longer revolved around their parents or losses. It seems that after experiencing fulfillment in working on their past, the participants’ intention shifted to broader existential issues in the Clay Field. It is evident from participant’s descriptions in the second interview that they engaged in a transcendent experience through their haptic perception at the Clay Field, in their own unique way.

As previously mentioned, during the first interview, Esra expressed a profound fear of losing her sanity due to the contradictions and fragmentation in her perception of life and sense of self. Nevertheless, in the second interview, she recounted a transformative experience where she felt as though she had “*died, lived, and died again,*” and created her own “*unified world.*” It appears that she cultivated a profound sense of completeness, belonging, and joyfulness throughout her unique transcendent journey:

It was like a continuation of the previous session. I had ended the previous session with a kind of death. And next session was about after death. In the earlier session, I was born, lived, died, lived and died again. In the next one, I shattered the external world, everything physically existing outside. After that, I created things and then I shattered them too. That part was like life an afterlife, beyond world. Then everything became new, came together in my ‘unified world.’ I was so excited, and at the same time, a relaxation spread throughout my entire body. I felt a sense of freedom in my legs, my lower back, my entire spine. So, I can say it was a relaxation mixed with freedom that spread through my whole body. (Esra, T2).

Sena characterized her haptic experiences in Clay Field therapy as akin to a “*trance*”, that initially frightened her but into which she gradually became more deeply immersed. As a rational and materialistic individual who had not previously attributed significance to alternative forms of experience, she appears to be profoundly astonished by the novel sensations she encountered that she could define only by spiritual expressions rather than worldly or emotional explanations:

You know, I used to say I don’t believe in things like this, whether it’s meditation, therapy, or playing with clay and expecting something to happen I remember saying, ‘I feel like I’m in a trance’ while I was doing something with my hands in that session. At first, I was horrified; I thought I was going to lose myself. But then, I just let myself go into that trance! It was really amazing! Oh, and I yawned constantly during the sessions, unstoppable yawning! Oh, I said, ‘bad spirits are coming out.’! I don’t usually use expressions like that. I don’t know, maybe it was the old residues or the feelings that were holding me back, came out. But it was different from just expressing, discharging some feelings. It was like cleansing, purifying the soul. I know it sounds crazy. Honestly, I can’t even believe myself when I talk about it. But after those yawns, everything became so different... A freedom, I’ve never felt before. (Sena, T2).

Deniz and Sena identified their experiences with naturalistic representations. Deniz explained that she was grounded and “*spread*” like “*the roots of a tree*” and underscored the intensity of her perception by drawing attention to the “*sharp sensation*” in her ankle and highlighting its distinction from previous meditation experiences. Elif, on the other hand, recounted how the cave that her hands spontaneously created, transported her “*to sacred place*” wherein she experienced a “*pure, genuine and overflowing joy*”:

A few sessions ago, it was like this incredibly uplifting experience! I felt really amazing that day! What I was doing there had turned into a mountain without me even realizing it. I hadn’t made a mountain; it just emerged. And then, I had carved out the bottom of that mountain,

creating a cave. I even put water inside. It became a place of both shade and uninterrupted scenery, a safe haven. I had created something really beautiful! And while I was playing with water inside the cave, it had turned into a sacred place. My hands were playing in the water like a child, but it wasn't childlike. If you ask what's the difference, it's childlike in the sense of being far from childishness. It was pure, genuine, overflowing joy! A state of elation. That feeling dominated through me entire day, and the next days! And you know what? It was just magnificent! When I remember it, I smile a lot, and I feel the same way again. What I did with the clay doesn't really matter because I think what's important is the feeling I got. And I got that feeling so strongly! And... I'm so happy right now when I remember it! I'm really happy; I feel like the tears are welling up in my eyes. (Elif, T2).

What was happening there wasn't about my mom, dad, or things that happened to me anymore. I think it all started in that session... My hands were under the clay, my fingers spread out like they were sticking to the bottom of the box. There, I felt like I was a tree with roots spreading everywhere. But this rooting was so unique! It was very different from the tree grounding in meditation or yoga. My ankle! My goodness, can you feel your ankle like that? It was such a sharp sensation!... It became like an anchor for me. I mean, even during the day, when I felt a bit lost or like I was going into the darkness, I could instantly find that sensation in my ankle. (Deniz, T2).

Despite the diversity of experiences reported by the participants, a commonality emerged in their embodied feelings of enthusiasm, serenity and a sense of being grounded, a deeper contact with life as well. This profound experience within the Clay Field seems to permeated into their lives.

### **A comprehensive sense of being**

This superordinate theme primarily emerged from the extracts relating to the second interviews. The participants underlined that the perception of their "*existence in the hands*" was predominant, especially in the last sessions. This unique sense of being alive seems to evoke in them a profound feeling of enthusiasm and admiration:

I carried my existence to the fingertips. It was feeling my existence in the hands, in my palms. (Deniz, T2). I felt my heartbeat right in my hands! (Sena, T2).

I felt my presence in my whole body, my veins, my bones. (Esra, T2).

In those movements there, I'm active, there's resistance in the clay, the weight of the box. That activity, that energy! It's like my muscles in my body came to life. I started to feel my arms, the muscles in my arms, 'Oh, they are here!' It's like the awakening of areas in the body that you never normally feel. It's not just about finding who I am in an abstract sense, but it's more about being a 'living me'. I mean, not the 'me' who questions life from the outside, not the one who doesn't know what to do and feels lost. It's a 'me' who exists in life, in motion, independent of what it's doing. From that perspective, it's a satisfying feeling! (Elif, T2).

The participants recounted how their experiences of "*becoming a whole*" with the materials evolved into a feeling "*wholeness within*" themselves. Their feelings of

loss and numbness thereby seem to be transformed into an embodied sense of their presence:

The wholeness I mean, in the sense of all coming together, maybe that's why I feel it in my belly today. Therefore, feeling it in my gut, in my core, means a lot of selfhood to me. That's why I felt very unified with everything today. (Deniz, T2).

I was there as a whole... Holding the box like this with my arms feels comforting. It's like I'm holding it as a whole, in sync with what's inside. From my arms to my legs, from head to toe, I felt the wholeness within myself. So even when I feel bad, it's like my feet are grounded better. Or when I feel like my wholeness has been damaged, even when I fall into a familiar bad feeling, I still feel a bit more in control. (Esra, T2).

Participants' responses in the second interview revealed that their individual tactile relationship with the Clay Field not only influenced how they perceived themselves, but also led them to reflect on their relationship with the world. The participant's expressions, such as '*a comprehensive perception*', '*my place in the world*', '*seeing life with curious eyes*', appear to represent their changing perspective on life:

The clay touched my face, my hair was in the clay, I hugged the box, wrapped myself in it. And while doing that, I felt at peace, I was happy, you could say. Maybe it was happiness. It was a peaceful kind of happiness... I mean, I had said I'm not curious about nature. But when I opened my eyes at the end of that session and looked around, I noticed the plum tree outside. And as I thought, 'Wow, those plums look really nice!' suddenly I stopped. 'Wait, did you just say the plum tree is beautiful?' Nature, for me, was like, 'If it's a tree, it's a tree, if it's green, it's green, that's it, why make a big deal out of it? Same difference.' But now I felt this peace. I would have hugged the tree... It's like seeing the world with more curious eyes now. (Sena, T2).

My works there became about more macro things, I mean a world bigger than me, wars, life... It wasn't just about my life today; it felt like something broader, more encompassing. And for example, in the past few weeks, I've realized that individual events don't really matter all that much... Because events are not under control, I can't control them. Something will always happen anyway. 'What matters is not managing events but managing your perspective.' I've been reading these things for years, trying to apply them to myself, but it hasn't worked for me. It was very different there in the field. I don't know how to explain it; I felt it to my core. I experienced that comprehensive perception in a different dimension. I felt it deeply like in my bones. (Deniz, T2).

I think I've been working on my existence in general. The existence of my emotions, the existence of my body, um... the existence of my thoughts, and also my existence in the world. Overall, my existence. I believe I worked on these. My place in the world... Sometimes because of the tranquility it provided, I remember saying, 'I'm going to faint, what is this?' It was so beautiful! I felt like I was above the clouds. I don't know what it means to be in the clouds, but I can describe it that way. Or we can say, it's like lying on your back and flowing with the waves in the middle of the sea. It could be described that way. It made me feel like I was within everything. (Elif, T2).

The participants' senses of "*meaninglessness*" and "*emptiness*" appear to have moved towards an account of increasing appreciation of being alive. Moreover, by experiencing the possibility of finding "*security within insecurity*" at the Clay Field, they seem to develop an acceptance of the indefinite and impermanent nature of life, rather than perceiving it as a threat that they need to control:

In the last session in the clay field, I felt like I was in the universe wherein everything was uncertain. But the most exciting part was that it was both a universe for me and beyond me. I wasn't afraid; it was more like an adventure. It was something I didn't know, but at the same time, it felt like I knew something with my feelings and intuitions. I remember standing right in the middle of it. Completely centered. In fact, now that I think about it, I've wanted to go on a journey for a long time, but I've been afraid of leaving things behind me, or losing what left for me. Now, it's like I'm ready for that journey, and I even want to hit the road as soon as possible. (Esra, T2).

My dominant feeling at the beginning of clay field therapy was helplessness and insecurity. I didn't know what to do with the clay and the stuffs in there, my eyes were closed. But then, it was like I experienced a different kind of security, finding security within the insecurity... The lives of the most precious people in my life could end in just a few minutes. It could end with a single grain of rice. So, feeling safe within the insecurity, at least feeling secure somewhere in me, was essential. You can't escape from death or evil. The earthquakes, diseases can catch us in any moment. Things we know could happen to us. It could happen, yes, I know, but I don't always have the energy to keep my eyes open, to stay awake as if something could happen at any moment... And if I do that, then when that evil happens, I don't have the energy to deal with it. It's a bigger helplessness then. Seeing in the Clay Field that I could deal with what's in my hands, that I could handle it without calculating beforehand, made me feel really good, like using my energy wisely. (Elif, T2).

The participants' account of their intuitive and spiritual experiences in Clay Field Therapy seems to be turned into an existential inquiry that they construed more comprehensive meanings of life and death. They were also able to extend the new sensations and emotions they discovered during the therapy process into their daily lives.

## Discussion

The present study explores the experiences of clients undergoing Clay Field Therapy to address their inner conflicts arising from specific losses. This LIPA study elucidates how individuals' experiences and meaning-making processes have evolved throughout their tactile engagement in the Clay Field. Data were collected through semi-structured and in-depth interviews conducted after the first and twelfth Clay Field Therapy sessions, and four interrelated superordinate themes emerged from participants' narratives, including: Beyond words; From nothingness towards existence; From tangible experience towards transformative spiritual experience; A comprehensive sense of being. The subordinate themes provide a thorough examination of the process, with findings substantiated by excerpts from the interviews conducted for this study.

Despite the uniqueness of individual's haptic experiences, the emergent themes show that the process in Clay Field Therapy evolves along a similar pathway. The first superordinate theme, "Beyond words", represents a branch of this pathway where participants externalized their initial conflicts onto the clay field materials and gradually became able to reflect on their psychological world by transmuting abstract content into tangible experiences.

The second superordinate theme, "From nothingness towards finding the existence within", illustrates the stage wherein "touching the nothingness" with their bare hands allowed them to experience their losses directly in here and now rather than attempting to analyze some past narrative. The participants did not only remember the nurturing moments that they shared with their beloved-ones but, but also highlighted that they vividly lived these throughout *touching and being touched* (Husserl, 2000) in the Clay Field. They could thereby experience the regeneration of joyfulness, curiosity, confidence, and enthusiasm, as well as the feelings of being held, safe, and secure. This stage can also be interpreted as processing the internal attachment to the objects that they lost and the relational representations (Baker, 2021; Freud, 1957). On the other hand, being different from psychoanalysis, Clay Field Therapy does not appear to be primarily a representational work; however, it seems to provide individuals a space where they can "*touch the invisible*" (Merleau-Ponty, 1979), and feel the existence of their beloved-ones under the skin.

It is evident from the participants' narratives that this embodied feeling of fulfillment served as a gateway to a deepening intuitive journey and encouraged them to engage in a process of creative destruction without a fear of losing their self-control. Clearly, for them, the later stages of Clay Field Therapy present an engagement in a transcendent experience rather than solely addressing their losses and sufferings. The third superordinate theme, thereby, "From tangible experience towards transformative spiritual experience," shows that Clay Field Therapy can also offer individuals to transcend their everyday experiences and awaken their spiritual essence.

The fourth theme, "A comprehensive sense of being", emerged from participants' accounts of their haptic experiences in Clay Field Therapy, where they construed new meanings of life and death. Examining the final theme alongside the first theme reveals that participants developed unique responses to their initial inquiries and distinct existential dilemmas, including the liberation of love, appreciation of life, "*feeling the existence in the hands*", contemplating on their "*position in the world*," suppressing the conventional issues and evolving a "*comprehensive perception*" of life, feeling the "*wholeness*" within self and the worlds, contemplating impermanent and unpredictable nature in life and, "*finding security in insecurity*."

The findings indicate that the Clay Field Therapy process facilitates the resolution of complicated grief and traumatic elements of loss, while initiating an existential



journey for the individual simultaneously. Clay Field appears to be a touch therapy wherein the existential and spiritual meanings of both skin (Ben Ayed, 2014; Bhattacharyya, 1958; Easwaran, 2007; Fulkerson, 2011; Husserl, 2000; Josipovici, 1997; Jütte, 2008; Merleau-Ponty, 1979; Nancy, 2020; Rajagopalachari, 2018; Segal, N. 2009; Wilson, 1998) and grief (Heidegger, 2001; Jung, 1999; May 1994; Sartre, 1943) transcend theoretical discussions, manifesting in individuals' first-hand real-life psychotherapeutic experiences. In other words, in the context of Clay Field's practice, a phenomenological space is offered wherein the sensitivity of the skin and the guidance of haptic perception can facilitate individuals' engagement with the profound layers of loss that often elude verbal articulation (Anzieu, 2016; Bion, 2014). This engagement, characterized by an embodied transcendent experience, is believed to foster the development of creativity in the hands, thereby enabling the construction of a novel sense of self and a redefined meaning of life. This can be described with a new concept, 'Embodied Reflection,' drawing on the language of phenomenological and existential philosophy.

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