Reflections on Offering a Therapeutic Creative Arts Intervention With Cult Survivors: A Collective Biography

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Abstract

A new, evidence-based, multimodal, and creative psychological therapy, Arts for the Blues, was piloted with survivors of cultic abuse in a workshop within a conference setting. The five facilitators, who occupied diverse roles and perspectives within the workshop and research project, reflected on their experiences of introducing this novel intervention to the cult-survivor population. In this underreported territory of using structured, arts-based, psychological therapy with those who have survived cultic abuse, the authors used a process of collective biography to compile a first-person, combined narrative based on those reflections. This approach allows for a visceral insight into the dynamics and obstacles encountered, and the countertransference responses of the facilitators. This reflexive process shined a light into aspects of research and practice that were not all visible to the individual researchers previously, with implications for research ethics, psychological therapy, and creative arts within the cult-survivor field.

Arts for the Blues

Arts for the Blues (Haslam et al., 2019) is a new, evidence-based, multimodal, and creative psychological therapy, originally developed for depression by academics and practitioners from a range of disciplines, including clinical and counselling psychologists, dance-movement psychotherapists, and performance and literary artists. In response to a need for a helpful model of treatment for depression as an alternative to traditional talking therapies, this multidisciplinary team of researchers and practitioners, including some of the present paper's authors, devised the approach following a thematic synthesis of 76 research articles on broad, helpful factors or specific "active ingredients" in treatment for depression (Parsons, Omylinska-Thurston, et al., 2019). Following this synthesis, the team devised a 90-minute workshop, which has been piloted within university settings in the United Kingdom (see Haslam et al., 2019), and also with staff and service users from a National Health Service (NHS) Mental Health Trust (Karkou, Omylinska-Thurston, et al., 2020), male athletes (Mohamed & Parsons, 2019), counselors/psychotherapists (Parsons, Dubrow-Marshall, et al., 2020), and parents experiencing difficulties. Workshop trials within these diverse contexts have generated positive feedback; therefore, the intervention is thought to be suited to a wider range of populations and symptoms than only its original purpose of treating depression.

Beginning with a focus on somatic awareness before the use of different creative expressions (as individual clients prefer), the Arts for the Blues approach is framed by a relational, flexible, and client-tailored ethos (Parsons, Omylinska-Thurston, et al., 2019). During the pilot workshop, participants individually explore their somatic "felt sense" (Gendlin, 1981) to determine a personally salient and immediate goal to work on. Then they work with this goal using

different artistic mediums of their choice (e.g., movement, image making and/or writing), before they discuss their experiences in pairs, and then finally as a whole group. The embodied approach aims to nurture client autonomy, agency, and expression; increase insight and social support; and enable the processing and integration of personal material. This approach reflects one of the core principles of the British Psychological Society's (BPS's) Power Threat Meaning (PTM) Framework (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018) of examining "embodied humans behaving purposely in social and relational contexts" (p. 8). Therefore, the current authors felt that it may be particularly suitable to conduct a trial with survivors of cults and coercive control, as a therapeutic intervention that would not overly pathologize or disempower them as trauma survivors.

Cultic Groups and Recovery

Although some authors propose alternative definitions (e.g., Richardson, 1993), and a large grey area exists between what one may consider *cults* or *noncults*, such as religious sects (Cowan & Bromley, 2015), cults are commonly defined as "A group or movement exhibiting a great or excessive devotion or dedication to some person, idea, or thing and employing unethically manipulative techniques of persuasion and control . . . designed to advance the goals of the group's leaders, to the actual or possible detriment of members, their families, or the community" (West & Langone, 1986, pp.119–120). The impact on individuals who survive these groups includes depression, anxiety, complex PTSD, and dissociation, which can result in profound, lasting, and detrimental emotional, cognitive, social, practical, physical, and behavioral effects (Aronoff, et al., 2000; Dubrow-Marshall & Dubrow-Marshall, 2015; Rosen, 2017). Many former members suffer from severe trust issues in relation to authority figures and continue to feel vulnerable to abuse (Matthews & Salazar, 2014).

Commonly reported forms of psychotherapeutic support for former members include psychoeducation to enhance understanding of thought reform ("brainwashing"), group support, relational counseling, and trauma-focused psychotherapies (Jenkinson, 2017), whereas creative approaches are less common. In a special edition of the *Cultic Studies Review* devoted to cults and creativity, Wehle (2010) presented psychoanalytic and other theories around the individual and societal importance of creativity as related to the interpersonal and intrapersonal dynamics and environments of coercive control. Many others have presented accounts of how creativity has been used in recovery from cults—for example, sand-tray work and Gestalt therapy (Jenkinson, 2010), fine-art photography (Gelbert, 2010), and acting (Russell, 2010). Furthermore, the International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA) has, since 2006, supported the Phoenix Project (https://www.icsahome.com/arts/phoenixproject), which offers a safe environment for survivors to share and present artwork associated with their involvement in and recovery from cults. However, the current authors are not aware of any literature that has specifically reported on art therapies (that is, art, music, drama and dance/movement therapy, and the formalized and evidence-based use of these art forms as a mode of psychotherapy, facilitated by suitably qualified practitioners) with this population. Yet, these methods may be especially suited to this population, owing to the natural qualities of creativity—enriching, autonomous, exploratory, life-enhancing and playful—that sit in direct opposition to the coercive repression and sublimation of the self (the "atrophying of imagination" [Wehle, 2010]) that is inherent in cultic abuse

(Jenkinson, 2017). Therefore, as an evidence-based and novel form of creative therapy, the current authors decided to offer the Arts for the Blues pilot workshop to survivors of and experts in cultic abuse, at the ICSA's annual conference, to see how this population experienced our approach.

Collective Biography

As a team of five diverse academics and practitioners facilitating or assisting with the workshop, we each occupied different roles, interests, and perspectives in bringing this emerging therapy to a new, untested group at the conference. In carrying out the workshop, we encountered several challenges that speak to both the nature of conducting research within former cultic populations, within conference settings generally, and in relation to using creative methods with former cultic populations.

Because this group had been subject to coercion previously, we were aware that they might potentially struggle with making their needs known to facilitators and might be overly compliant or conversely overly resistant. Exploring countertransference (feelings that the therapist transfers to the clients) as part of the socially constructed meaning making of the group-therapy experience (Rubenfeld, 2005) might illuminate these processes and dynamics. The obstacles we encountered were difficult to foresee at the inception of this study, and so we concluded that a visceral yet reflexive first-person account of our varied experiences in our collective efforts might offer a useful perspective to researchers and practitioners who face the challenge of working with people who have been abused and coercively controlled within relationships and groups.

Collective biography is a research method that collates researchers' written memories about an experience for collective analysis (Hawkins, et al., 2016). Collective biography holds that significant memories are critical in the constitution of the self, and that, through collective analysis of these memories, researchers can uncover elements of the wider social landscape (Davies et al., 2002). Reflexive research offers an important learning process for counselors/therapists, those undertaking new research, learning, and development in this field, and especially in previously uninvestigated territory (Etherington, 2004). Collective biography has previously been used to explore students' development as practitioners traversing the liminal space between *counsellor* and *counseling researcher* (Dalzell et al., 2010). Therefore, we felt this approach might offer a rich account of our experiences traversing the roles and identities of therapists/facilitators and researchers in our conference-workshop and research study.

Collective biography shares certain features of—and arguably has its roots in—*narrative therapy* (Speedy, 2007), a nonpathologizing approach that helps clients arrive at increased understanding of and compassion for their story by conceptualizing their sense of self and relational constellations through a systemic postmodern lens (Countryman-Rozwurm & DiLollo, 2017). Narrative therapy also is respectful of another core principle of the BPS Power Threat Meaning (PTM) Framework (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018, p. 8): "We need to take meaning, narrative and subjective experience seriously." We felt that, since our choice of methodology shares particular emphasis on the epistemological feature of critical reflexivity sensitive to power relations (Hawkins et al., 2016), the methodology was in alignment with the sensitivity of cult survivors to abuse of power and oppression. We remained curious on what learning we can derive as researchers, professionals, trainers and facilitators through engaging in a research project with this rich, narrative-based approach, and we hoped that our

findings might have relevance to narrative-therapy work with cult survivors.

Gaps in Literature

The authors are unaware of any previous research using this method to report on work with cult survivors, or to describe the experience of introducing structured and evidence-based, arts-based, therapeutic approaches. A collective, first-person account of this sort may offer important implications for both therapists and researchers using creative therapies, and also for those working with the former cultic community, or in conference settings generally.

Aims and Objectives

The purpose of this paper is to report on a team of researchers' and facilitators' collective, first-person experiences in offering the Arts for the Blues therapeutic workshop, and concurrently conducting research on this intervention, with a group on cult survivors within a UK conference setting.

Method

Context

The pilot workshop took place at the ICSA's annual conference, within a medium-to-large-sized conference room, which allowed space for a circle of chairs and separate tables for research administration, art making, creative writing, and an open area for movement with props. Attendees at this conference were largely cult survivors and their supporters (e.g., family/friends, and professionals/academics who work with or study this population). Attendees chose which events/workshops they wanted to attend.

A team of five researchers and clinicians carried out the workshop and research, comprising two lead facilitators (a Chartered Psychologist and Dance Movement Psychotherapist, and a Counselling and Clinical Psychologist); two "helper-participants" (a registered Counsellor and a PhD researcher focusing on collaborative art making), who assisted attendees in filling in the participant materials and later in modeling and guiding participation in the various workshop activities; and one research assistant (RA; a registered Counsellor), who stationed themselves outside the door to assist with recruitment paperwork and prevent intrusions.

Design

The study we planned to carry out was a quantitative and qualitative evaluation of the effects and reported perceptions of the Arts for the Blues pilot workshop on those who participated (conference attendees); these evaluations are reported elsewhere (Parsons, Turner, et al., in press). The present study is a qualitative, retrospective, reflective and collective biography of the facilitators'/researchers' experiences in and reflections on facilitating the workshop research study, as a team.

Protocol and Analysis

In producing the collective biography, our team process was informed by the methodology outlined by Hawkins et al. (2016). The collective biography developed in several stages, as follows:

1. Each researcher/facilitator (herein referred to as *researchers*) composed a reflective biography of their candid, first-person experience following the workshop, as a means of written debrief.

2. Each researcher read and commented on others' biographies to clarify the meaning and elucidate finer details of any unclear aspects, and also the additional spatial and embodied recollections.

3. The biographies were spliced together in chronological order to the extent possible.
4. The researchers met to determine which parts of the biographies were aligned, which perceptions were unique or more disparate, and how to resolve these differences by writing about them as either shared experiences or variations in perceptions.
5. The lead researcher knitted together the resulting parts of individual and shared accounts as one group narrative, according to what was agreed with the rest of the team.
6. The group proofread and edited the final draft to make final alterations and ensure whole-group agreement with the final collective biography, whilst ensuring all our voices were threaded into one collective voice.

This whole process was iterative and reflexive in nature, as we considered and reconsidered how to go about the analysis; how to present the full account in light of our multiple perspectives, roles, and identities; how to integrate different accounts representing the same phenomena; and how to ensure that each member of our team felt adequately and equally represented. Although the lead researcher edited the draft, integrating the various perspectives (shared and divergent) together, this was done by way of an annotated team meeting to agree on how to integrate the material. Furthermore, an online word-processing platform (Google Docs) was used so that all team members had access to and were able to annotate or edit parts of the biography at all times during the writing process.

Results

The following account is a collective biography of the experiences of five therapists/researchers written in the present tense as they facilitated a pilot workshop and research project with a group of cult survivors in a conference setting.

Summarizing Preliminaries

We are running this workshop as a team of five, with varied professional positions and orientations toward the project. One of us is leading the workshop and research study as part of a PhD, while another lead facilitator is a Psychologist expert in the field of cults and coercive control. The three of us assisting with the workshop do so by invitation of the two lead researchers, bringing with us additional perspectives from outside the Arts for the Blues research team. Therefore, our different roles and experiences yield a variety of stances toward the task at hand; in particular, management of the group process and apparent dynamics, with some confusion and shapeshifting within the overlapping roles of therapeutic facilitator, researcher, RA, survivor, or "participant-helper."

Our preliminary feelings toward the workshop involve trepidation, along with curiosity and hopefulness. We have gained ethical approval for the study just a few days earlier, so despite our best efforts handing out flyers around the conference in the morning, we have a concerning hunch that few people know about this element of the workshop. We have doubts about recruiting the number of participants needed for the quantitative (pre/post) arm of the research design. To add to this, one of us is struggling with damage done by a previous cult and fears that they might do something wrong. This member was not allowed to disagree with cult leaders; so in the RA role the member avoids making any suggestions. So it is a relief to the member when one of the facilitators suggests that the member stand outside the door to welcome and explain the project to people.

We think that these anxieties around authority were likely to be prevalent in the conference demographic, and that this feeling

could cause people to take an oppositional stance toward the research invitation, or not wish to act independently in the creative activities. We are all keenly aware of how we come across when interacting with attendees. Nevertheless, we look forward to observing participants' artistic expressions, and we anticipate the precarious balance of holding a group whose members are sensitive to issues around control, whilst also holding the research agenda in mind.

Setting Up the Space

As soon as we gain access, we hastily begin to set up the room, which comprises several different creative areas and purposes. We have just 15 minutes to do so and wonder about the unknown quantities: How many attendees will come to our offering? How many of them have seen the research flyer? How many will consent to participate? How should our helper-participants act if not many people arrive or consent to the research? We feel very aware of how former cult members may feel. We are mindful of the role that abuse of power has in creating distress, as emphasized in the BPS Framework (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018), and possibly even oversensitivity to power dynamics sometimes; and we worry that it is potentially overpowering to have too many facilitators in the room, and also participants.

Someone is already seated in the room and we greet them, explain the research, and ask whether they would consider taking part. We are standing, holding out the Participant Information Sheet (PIS), and their initial enthusiasm transforms to suspicion upon being offered this; so they will participate in the workshop, but not the research. Another attendee declines in what appears to be a sharp manner, despite our permissive stance. We can sense that our team is disheartened by this bad omen for what's to come, yet we strive to communicate things in a nonthreatening way to anyone else coming into the room. So far, hardly anyone has come; but when someone enters, we feel a sense of responsibility to make them feel welcome while we push tables, drag chairs, arrange art materials, and try to remember where the different paperwork is. . .

We must put our trust in the process despite our apprehension, allowing things to unfold despite the sensitivity. Some more people enter the room, looking apprehensive and scanning the surroundings. Some of us have professional connections to others in the group, which may affect our attention ("must not look too much at this person" or "look at that person because I'm aware that they're vulnerable right now").

As the seated circle forms, we feel torn between the role of facilitator and (for our participant-helpers) coparticipant. Should we offer small talk and get their names, or wait until everyone has arrived and filled in (or declined) the consent form?

Gaining Consent

We settle into the circle of chairs to begin, with only seven attendees in addition to our four team members in the room. Our efforts to advertise the workshop are "too little, too late." The wait for attendees to read the eight-page PIS and decide to give consent is increasingly awkward. We can see attendees who declined the research getting frustrated with this; one asks, "Can we start now?" Some of us feel a sense that we are ambushing those entering the room, and an urge to sacrifice the study in the name of providing "what people came for," as we now recognize that the majority are unaware of the research element. One academic participant offers some reassurance to the rest of the group, that this long-winded ethics procedure is normal. We feel very grateful to them for that, while we remain apologetic for the delay. We hold on just a little longer to give the consent procedure a chance. Could we try to diffuse the tense situation somehow?

In the end, three attendees elect to participate in the research, and we begin, 15 minutes later than intended; so some parts of the workshop will need to be shortened. We are determined to provide the best possible taste of our approach from this point forward.

Beginning the Workshop

During initial goal setting, we invite participants to make some marks on paper using art materials. We have been so bogged down with the initial hurdle that we have not put the art materials by the chairs in the circle! One of the lead facilitators, feeling a sense of fumbling, grabs the pastels and paper off the adjacent table and places them in the middle of the circle.

While one facilitator feels it is wrong that participants must go down to the floor to collect or use the materials: "You can work seated upright in your chair rather than hunched over if you like!", another participant-helper finds creating on the floor quite a relief from the awkward start; it feels good to "get down" and create.

Each participant seems to engage in the artwork, with one or two more hesitant than others. What could be causing some to be so free and willing to express, yet others showing a more slow, hesitant start? The exercise seems to allow participants to relax a little and is perhaps a container for their feelings in the moment, as eventually everyone becomes involved and more focused on whatever they chose to create.

Performing the Body Scan

Next comes the mindfulness body scan. Those of us not leading the exercise use this as an opportunity to participate by "dropping in" to our bodies and processing the stressful aspects of the experience so far, acknowledging areas of physical tension and releasing where possible. We listen for any movements or paralinguistics from the others in the group (such as sighing, shifting, in chair) as changes in posture and small movements are encouraged. We wonder how many others are taking up the invitation—we hear some activity, but do not want to intrude by looking because we are modelling participation. During this activity, the attendee who had asked if we could begin decides to leave; we peep our eyes open as they appear to signal to one of us that they are okay. We worry momentarily, sensing their (and perhaps, our) frustration at wanting the freedom to create, at the slow start, and at the delayed process of getting into purposeful creating. The contract for the session provides participants with the choice to leave at any time, so they are completely justified and within their rights to do so. They state to the team member standing outside the door that the workshop was not what they expected. During the workshop, two people attempt to get in but are too late to join.

Trying Creative Modalities

Some of our team consciously decide to view our role as participants, taking active part in the exercises, in an effort to help people, and giving permission for attendees to fully engage in the process. At the same time, we simultaneously notice people's responses in the room and are on alert for our colleagues in case help is needed with anything else.

The tension begins lifting as the attendees begin to engage creatively, yet we are aware of some of their "blocks." We ponder how hard it can be for them to allow their creativity to flow: People's fear and conditioned beliefs about themselves (e.g., "I'm not good at coloring. . .") can get in the way of their free expression, blocking their fluid engagement with life/activities. We hope the creativity we offer may form a portal to loosen up this structure and introduce more fluidity.

Some people seem completely engaged in exploring movement with props, seemingly separated from everyone else in the room and

focusing on allowing themselves to be completely immersed in the free movement. A few others display cautious, apprehensive movements, self-conscious eye movement, perhaps not sure how to move naturally with their object (or is it just our own fears?). We make ourselves available through body posture and eye contact in case they need support. Some people seem to engage a lot more with spontaneous drawing, which has a somatic, emotional response to it. With silence apart from the sound of our movements, one participant later recommends having background music because this silence feels strange for some. Movement can be very revealing, and in our other arts therapy work, we often see this quite strong divide in comfort levels. Nevertheless, this part feels like home turf to one of the facilitators, who is an arts therapist, as if, finally, we are providing the group with what they came for.

Expressing Creatively

Everyone settles upon a medium of their choosing around the room (movement, writing, drawing, or combinations of these) with which to deepen their creative acts, and this part feels even more relaxed and rewarding than the previous. Those in the drawing area appear to draw very intentionally, while others throw themselves into dance/movement, no self-consciousness evident. One participant seems most comfortable sitting in the corner writing, away from the rest of the group.

We try not to look too much at the participation of our friends/colleagues, including attendees and participant-helpers, kind of looking at them "from the corner of our eyes"—they seem engaged and comfortable, so nothing to worry about. Our participant-helper discovers some coincidental shared themes in the poetry created and reflects on how a creative-writing medium uncovers a "shared ground" behind our diverse experiences.

It is also interesting to see individual differences in the creative response, as we focus attention on two participants raised in a very oppressive group. One is dancing, swirling a scarf in tune with her movements—how utterly free and beautiful she looks! The other one has pain that is much closer to the surface—her pain is palpable as she draws intensely using strong, angular lines while very openly crying at the same time. Her movements of stroking the paint seem to mirror her distress, yet she does not stop as a result of becoming emotional but continues to express through both tears and paint. We are concerned: What if she gets triggered after the experience because she has opened up these painful areas? We do not know if she is receiving any therapy.

With activities progressing in silence, it would interrupt the whole room if we go over and check to see whether she is okay. One facilitator whispers this dilemma to the other, and we decide it best to allow the person to continue to express her emotions without interruption or drawing attention by going over.

Before too long, the silence is ended by the next activity—attendees working in pairs to verbally discuss the creative work produced. We are glad that we did not use a chime bell to signify the start and end of the creative expression stage because this could have been an additional trigger as a result of possible cultic associations. The sharing in pairs feels like a tangible moment of group cohesion, without any sense from participants of meddling, instructing, or being observed by our team.

Holding A Whole-Group Discussion

We open the group discussion sitting back in the circle of chairs. Inviting attendees' reflections and opinions of what they have

just experienced, we feel more relaxed than in the beginning, with some much-welcome crosstalk between participants, which shifts the power dynamic to a more equal, natural, open, and transparent arrangement. Now it feels much more comfortable to be in the circle. Our participant-helpers take a more active role in this debriefing process while they still occupy both participant and helper roles. It seems the discomfort of role shape-shifting is shared by one attendee, who explains the difficulty of shifting from a role of facilitator to participant: Attendees are usually the ones in the facilitator role, so this creative personal process is different.

The participant who became emotional earlier expresses gratitude to us for a safe space to be able to release personal anger and frustration in their own life. They also resolve to throw away their artwork symbolically later, as a way of releasing anger and negative emotions toward a significant other from their past. Despite the release of pressure through the group sharing, some of our team can still sense some remnants of distrust in the group, while others just feel a mix of emotions. Perhaps these emotions are just a residue of what was brought out through the activities, which they do not wish to verbalize here; or perhaps they are concerned by what we facilitators will do with their verbal reflection—would we manipulate it or use it against their will? Our team member with personal experience of cultic abuse feels the latter is most likely the case.

Closing the Workshop

We invite all attendees to re-rate their goal, hoping that they would now see the point of the workshop, that it had been of value in working toward their goal, despite the frustrating beginning. We close the workshop and collect post data from those three participants who opted in. We go out of our way to check on the pained attendee, who will be speaking at the conference on a panel; we hope they are ready for this and are not being pressured. We attend with care to avoid inadvertently exploiting these participants: We feel our responsibility toward them, because in some cases they have been raised in abusive groups as children. They tell us they're fine; we're glad to have asked. The attendees leave one by one as we try to locate their various bits of questionnaire and artistic data that we are to collate, while the facilitator who designed the study toward their PhD wonders if there is any point, given that our sample is so small. Gathering together the various props, paper, pens, pastels, paints, pencils, completed data sheets, unused data sheets, ethics materials, attendees' artwork, pens, chairs, and personal belongings, and packing them into a now-muddled and overstuffed prop bag, a large grocery-bag-for-life, a box file, and a messenger bag is a long-winded process. We cannot help but feel disheartened.

Discussion and Retrospective Reflections

Collective-Biography Process

We intended to explore and present a visceral, multiperson account that makes sense of our experiences in bringing a multimodal creative therapy workshop to an uncommon population and under a number of challenges. In doing so, we have become aware of and been able to process and integrate different perspectives within our team. We found many areas of commonality and some unique experiences in the group, which shone a light into parts of the experience that we did not fully perceive at the time, and which thus are enhancing our reflexivity in research and practice as we are deconstructing and reconstructing collectively our meaning-making processes (Speedy, 2007).

Etherington (2004) states that collective biography is especially useful for unexplored areas of teaching, learning, and research in the field of therapy and counselling. In this

case, our team piloted a new therapeutic approach using creative/arts methods with the cult-survivor population—thus far underrepresented in the creative-therapy research literature—and in a conference setting. It is our hope that anyone wishing to conduct a similar activity will benefit from our first-person hindsight.

Evaluation of Results

We feel disheartened that more people didn't attend or agree to participate in the research, yet upon reflection it makes sense: We conducted this research in an incredibly challenging context, and it's difficult to explain to those who have not been in a cult just how mistrustful and wary of authority figures former members can be (Matthews & Salazar, 2014). As a former cult member, our RA is personally extremely vigilant around authority, or potential deception or sense of being used in any way. So we suspected there was the potential for participants to be triggered because of a number of factors at the workshop: the presence of academics in the room, the emphasis on the research project and the risk of that seeming more important than any personal benefits to the participant—or perhaps even that the project was "designed to advance the goals of the group's leaders, to the actual or possible detriment of members . . ." (West & Langone, 1986, pp. 119–120). Even if no recapitulation of cult power dynamics occurred, there is intrinsic tension in the interplay between holding the therapeutic qualities whilst also holding firm research boundaries (Sollitto, 2003).

Furthermore, attendees may have been resistant to our approach (or indeed, any form of therapy), given the existence of psychotherapy cults, in which corrupt leaders occupy multiple controlling roles over patient-followers and make exaggerated claims of power and skill, often based on pseudoscience (Singer et al., 1990). It is very difficult for our RA to be vulnerable around any person in a position of power because in their cult any information shared with leadership was used to manipulate and control them; we wonder, how much that was also the case for participants? Interviews with two of these participants revealed that this heightened sensitivity is almost certain to have played a significant part in their difficulty (Parsons, Turner, et al., in press). In addition to avoiding the use of a chime bell to signify the start and end of certain exercises, perhaps we could have organized the chairs in a different shape instead of a circle because both of these elements feature a certain cult-like aesthetic.

Implications for the Arts for the Blues Approach and Research in This Subject Area

Arts for the Blues is the first pluralistic, arts-based therapy approach to be developed using a systematic framework of helpful factors collated from published psychological evidence (Parsons, Omylinska-Thurston, et al., 2019). Fundamental helpful factors or specific key ingredients must be present for clients to feel safe enough to immerse themselves in creative work, and thus unlock the psychological flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997) of creativity. Although the approach has been piloted in numerous other conference settings (see Haslam et al., 2019; Parsons, Dubrow-Marshall, et al., 2020), for cult survivors it may be especially challenging to trust the automatic, creative, and group process without excessive cognitive evaluation. Our reflective process highlights that certain key factors of Arts for the Blues stand out as even more crucial for this population: autonomy, safety, coherent explanation of the approach, structured yet flexible activities, and working in a relational, client-led way characterized by a supportive alliance. Unfortunately, the time pressure and aforementioned tension between research and attendees' therapeutic

experience mean that these factors were potentially undermined from the start.

It's hard to say how we could have managed this differently, but perhaps more process work, to hold all the feelings present in the room, might have helped. We might have reduced anxieties by being more authentic and empathic in an immediate sense: At the time, we didn't of course know that attendees did not have the information, so we were in a similar state of anxiety, ambushed by circumstances and working in the dark. We wonder whether, if we had reflected this back and expressed our genuine shared state, it would have provided more space for processing this shared anxiety, improving our therapeutic alliance. Instead, our modus operandi was to move forward as planned—this is our only 90-minute slot, and we have a protocol to deliver. Although the several different creative stations offered the freedom to move around the room, allowing different personalities and preferences the autonomy to create in the way that they were comfortable, participants were asked to engage in a very structured, time-limited, purposeful way.

This *structured yet flexible variety* provided attendees with *boundaried autonomy in tasks* (Parsons, Omylinska-Thurston et al., 2019). Yet, one of our facilitators wonders how controlling this had felt for them, while other team members do not share this concern; one participant even mentioned that they would have liked more guidance. Perhaps they were distracted and did not hear the guidance being given across the room, or perhaps we were so worried about pressuring people that our invitational instructions were too vague. We hoped that the inclusion of the participant-helpers within the exercise also created less pressure for participants to "know what to do" or "do it in the right way," although it is likely that four team members were too many for this small group.

Nevertheless, in the group discussion, participants stated that they had experienced some moments of being "in the zone" during their preferred creative activities, and they reported that the workshop overall reported had been of some value in helping them clarify and work toward the goals set. The structured and boundaried aspects of the workshop, which in this case had felt cumbersome, are a necessary component of the Arts for Blues approach, without which the participants' purpose may have been lost. We were left hoping that the payoff was worth the difficulty and effort for this group. Indeed, participants did report successfully achieving their personal goals during and immediately following the workshop (for a fuller interpretative analysis of participants' experiences of the workshop, see Parsons, Turner, et al., in press). So despite the initial tension, the experience was reportedly useful for the participants. It is our objective as researchers that our reflections on the experience might contribute to the research community by offering a "geographic understanding of feelings" (i.e., a place- and context-specific account of our intersubjective experience; Hawkins et al., 2016) when working in this conference room-therapy-research context with a client group who often feel out of place in the wider society.

Recommendations for Conducting Research in Conference Settings

What could we have done differently from a research perspective, given the same context and population? With hindsight, it is clear to us that, in future conference workshops, certain steps (which were not possible on this occasion) may have helped:

(a) Designing research around low numbers; qualitative-only research might have been more appropriate. Furthermore, we could have initiated recruitment (for post-hoc research interviews) *after* the creative

workshop rather than having to recruit beforehand to collect *pre*-workshop quantitative data.

(b) Advertising the study to attendees much earlier—handing out flyers in the foyer was not successful, so this could take the form of giving a short talk about the study during preceding conference presentations to ensure that people were aware of it before it started.

(c) Having a specific registration desk for our workshop, so that researchers could distribute the PIS, answer questions, and obtain participants' informed consent prior to the workshop time.

(d) Softening the start of the workshop by providing attendees with an immediate, no-pressure opportunity to get into the mode of creating early on, while participants and/or late-comers complete filling out forms. This would avoid the impatient feelings some participants might feel around the awkward, period in which forms were being completed. Admittedly, this last strategy would have affected our baseline measures, yet it would have alleviated some of the attendees' anxiety and "therapy vs research" tension.

Conclusions

The entire experience, along with our awareness that these participants were cult survivors, caused a profound shift in our emotions and understanding. We started off feeling light, excited, and curious. We ended the exercise feeling humbled, open, empathetic, and full of desire for light, happiness, and peace for all those who were involved; while those more involved in the research felt a little defeated in addition to the other feelings. Even though we were facilitating, and even though we were all creating our own separate pieces, we felt honored to be witnessing, through the various artistic expressions, the lives of the others in the room and as though we were a very small part of something much bigger than ourselves.

Afterward, we resolved to be less preoccupied by the loss of the intended research and more understanding of attendees' trauma and the need to deal with it in whatever ways they required. As researchers, we were left with the wish that more people had recognized the value of participating in studies such as this, with the aim being to benefit the wider cult-survivor community. Writing our reflections and processing them as a collective has served to transform some of these frustrations and reveal our many individual blind spots; also, we hope these reflections will be of benefit to other practitioners and researchers who conduct similar research or use creative methods with this demographic in the future.

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