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Flowing towards freedom with multimodal creative therapy: The healing power of therapeutic arts for ex cult-members

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Introduction

The term "cult" is used to signify "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). However, a large grey area exists between what may be considered cults or non-cults such as religious sects (Cowan & Bromley, 2015). Recently, some organisations employing Multi-Level Marketing have been found to employ the above cultic structure and tactics, to the extreme detriment of their followers (BBC, 2019; Freedom of Mind Resource Centre, 2019). This exemplifies the insidiously disguised and multifarious nature of organisations which fall within the aforementioned grey area, yet do in fact perpetrate cultic abuse in the present day and age. Coupled with the difficulties in identifying or accessing those who identify as cult members or ex-members (Kendall, 2017), the number of individuals worldwide who are affected by cult-like organisations is difficult to estimate and may be many times higher than expected.

The mental health needs of cult survivors include depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress and dissociation (Aranoff et al., 2000; Dubrow-Marshall, 2015). Hassan and Shah (2019) describe many ways that cult members are recruited and indoctrinated to submit their individual will to the group, including ordered obedience to those in authority, manipulation of memories, intense and constant servitude, and "brainwashing" against leaving, under threat of terrible consequences if they do. These conditions – which some cult members have been born and raised under – result in profound and lasting psychological effects. These include emotional (e.g. anxiety, shame, grief, anger), cognitive (e.g. information processing, cognitive inflexibility, decision-making, paranoia, dissociation) social/relational (e.g.

IN PRESS

communication, forming relationships, social integration) and other physical and/or behavioural disturbances (e.g. physical and sexual symptoms, sleep and eating disorders, addiction) (Saldana Tops, Antelo, Rodríguez-Carballeira & Almendros Rodríguez, 2018). Many ex-members suffer from complex-PTSD (Rosen, 2017), severe trust issues around authority figures, and continue to feel vulnerable to abuse (Matthews & Salazar, 2014).

Common forms of treatment and recovery for survivors include psychoeducation to enhance understanding of mind control, group support with other ex-members, relational counselling and trauma-focussed psychotherapies (Jenkinson, 2017), whereas Arts Therapies (Art-, Music-, Drama- and Dance/Movement Psychotherapy) are seldom reported in research. Yet, Jenkinson (2010) highlights how creativity can represent an antidote to the coercive control and limiting nature of cults, and details creativity's strong alignment with Humanistic principles of psychology, therapy and personal development. Jenkinson describes how "Creativity can, in contrast, be an important component of recovery from cults, enriching and life-enhancing… therapists can use creative arts and playful creativity with former-cult-member clients to enhance recovery. This recovery includes healing, reconnection with their pre-cult personality, and moving forward to create a post-cult identity" (p. 152).

Taking a Positive Psychology lens, the playful, immersive and rewarding nature of creativity overlaps with many dimensions of psychological *Flow* (a sense of being "in the zone", fully engaged in a challenging yet enjoyable experience, which is linked to optimal experience, concentration, self-determination, creativity and embodied perception; Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). The Flow concept consists of nine dimensions, some of which may be experienced more than others, depending on the individual and the activity (Jackson, 1996): *Challenge-Skill Balance* (between individual and task)*, Automaticity* (feeing one's actions happening automatically), having *Clear Goals, Unambiguous Feedback* (sensing how well one is doing in the activity), deep *Concentration* on the task, a *Sense of Control, Loss of*

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Self-Consciousness, Transformation of Time (i.e. seeming faster or slower than usual), and *Autotelic Experience* (intrinsic enjoyment of the task).

Flow has been explored extensively as a positive mechanism in relation to learning, productivity and performance (e.g. sporting/musical/other arts), and Flow has been theoretically and empirically linked to creativity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). Reynolds and Prior (2006) proposed that creative activities instigate psychological flow because of associated feelings of accomplishment, control and autonomy. However, existing literature around creative and/or body-oriented therapies' relationship to Flow states is limited. Previous qualitative research reports phenomena that may be akin to Flow-like states as contributing to the therapeutic effect of Dance/Movement Psychotherapy [DMP] (e.g. Parsons & Dubrow-Marshall, 2019), while Taylor (2016) and Warren (2007) provide observational and theoretical accounts of their own Flow-like experiences in art therapy (especially the dimension of Automaticity). Previous research measuring Flow in a Music Therapy song writing session demonstrated that Flow predicted therapeutic outcomes (hope, and readiness to change), in adults receiving acute mental health inpatient care (Silverman, Baker & MacDonald, 2016). Silverman and Baker (2018) propositioned Flow as a potential mechanism in Music Therapy – in passive (e.g. listening) but especially active (e.g. song-writing) music interventions, and bi-directional in nature (i.e. experienced by both music therapist and client). As creative and body-oriented therapies (for example, DMP) involve producing creative material and engaging physically, there is a need to understand perceived Flow as a potential mechanism in creative, embodied, and/or multimodal therapy experiences, from the clients' perspectives.

One such physically-engaging, multimodal arts approach, Arts for the Blues (AfB), is a newly-developed, psychological evidence-based and pluralistic means of recovery (see Parsons et al., 2019; Haslam et al., 2019). An AfB workshop has been piloted in clinical,

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non-clinical and mental health professional populations, and is due to be tested in mental health community settings this year. It has not yet been piloted with survivors of cults or coercive control, yet may be well-suited due to certain appropriate features such as nurturing client autonomy, agency and expression, increasing insight and social support. Based on the initial support for using creative arts with survivors, and preliminary results from the AfB pilots that support its use in a range of contexts (see Haslam et al., 2019; Karkou et al., 2020; Parsons et al., 2020), it makes sense for a structured approach such as AfB to be offered as an evidence-based psychological intervention which goes beyond the use of non-structured and purely arts-based projects, as well as beyond other forms of therapy, in supporting ex-cult members.

The present authors are unaware of literature piloting the use of creative, body-oriented and/or multimodal arts therapies (such as AfB) with cult survivors, and there is a great shortage of literature exploring clients' perceived Flow as a potential mechanism in such therapies. By testing the AfB approach with the cult community, we hope to uncover potential implications for this population and others related to coercive control in terms of how the approach may be adapted. By exploring perceived Flow during the workshop, this may indicate to what extent those who have previously experienced coercive control are able to be self-determined, actively immersed in creative processes and other components of the Flow concept (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014).

Aims and objectives

This study aimed to explore how some ex-cult members can use the arts therapeutically, and to examine their responses to a structured and therapeutic multimodal arts group workshop (Arts for the Blues). In particular, to evaluate how and to what extent participants experience psychological Flow during the creative activities, and the perceived utility of Flow in individual therapeutic process and outcome when working towards a

IN PRESS

personal goal. It is hoped that this will provide us with increased understanding of Flow in creative therapies and the suitability, acceptability and potential impact of creative therapy interventions in the cult-survivor population.

Methods

Study Context

The pilot workshop took place within a medium-to-large conference room at the International Cultic Studies Association's (ICSA) annual conference, where conference attendees can choose which events/workshops they want to register to attend. The workshop was led by a Chartered Psychologist and Dance Movement Psychotherapist, and a Counselling and Clinical Psychologist, both trained in the AfB approach. Three research assistants were also on hand to help with paperwork and other workshop logistics.

Design

Just as the Arts for the Blues approach involves an eclectic integration of methods from both arts and verbal therapies, so the gathering and analyzing of data employed a pluralistic (McLeod, 2001) methodology in order to best answer the research question. A mixed-method approach was employed involving both quantitative, qualitative and arts-based methods, however of primary interest to this study were participants' subjective experiences of the AfB workshop and any lasting impressions from their creative process and work.

Qualitative and Arts-based design

An interpretivist and inductive approach was used to explore and evaluate participants' experiences and perceptions through 1:1 telephone interviews after the workshop, including discussion of creative and artistic material they produced. Any artefacts of this work were used by the researchers to inform the interviews and illustrate results.

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Quantitative approaches and materials

With a view to triangulating this qualitative data, quantitative pre- and post-measures were taken to record any changes in personal goal attainment using a *Goal Ladder* – a heuristic and visual single-item self-rating scale. This Goal Ladder forms part of the AfB approach, by asking participants to set an immediate, personally-salient goal for themselves (for example, "To feel calmer") and rate the extent to which they feel that they have achieved this from 1 (*I am nowhere near achieving the goal or haven't started working towards it*) to 10 (*I have already achieved this goal*).

An observational measure of Psychological Flow – the nine-item Short Flow States Scale (SFSS; Jackson, Martin & Eklund, 2008) – was taken at the end to evaluate the degree to which participants were in Flow state during the workshop. Example questions include "I did things spontaneously and automatically without having to think" (this question pertaining to the dimension of Automaticity, with the other eight questions pertaining to the other eight Flow dimensions listed in the introduction), with responses given on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*). A mean of all nine SFSS items is generated, with a possible range of 1 to 5, with higher scores indicating a more Flow-like experience.

Participants

Conference attendees were comprised largely of cult survivors, their supporters e.g. family/friends, and professionals/academics who work with or study this population. Attendees of the conference could still participate in the workshop, even if they did not wish to be part of the research study; seven people attended the workshop. Subjects were invited to participate on the basis that they were aged >18yrs, considered themselves to be a cult survivor, family member/supporter of a cult survivor or professional working in this area and

were able to understand and respond in basic English. Subjects were excluded if, at the point of recruitment, they considered themselves to be currently psychologically severely distressed, made heavy or dependent use of alcohol or other recreational drugs, or had any other difficulty preventing participation in the workshop or phone interview.

Ethics and Recruitment

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Salford prior to the conference. Although this was enough time to prepare the necessary documents for informed consent to be given, it was not possible to publicise a study advert to attendees over email prior to the conference. Hence, we had the task of publicising the workshop and study on the day, using flyers and Participant Information Sheets (PIS) displayed at the registration desk. We were not permitted to distribute further copies in the registration area, so we could only hope that those who signed up to attend had seen the recruitment materials. Attendees could choose to take part in the workshop only, or in the research element additionally. As attendees arrived for the workshop, we realised that most were not aware of the research aspect of the event, necessitating a delay of approximately 15 minutes to the start of the workshop to allow those considering research participation to take the necessary time to understand the PIS and sign the consent form. The PIS included a debrief sheet, with signposting to appropriate support services, should anyone feel distressed by the workshop. The consent form also asked participants for their contact details in order to complete the telephone interview within the next two to three weeks. Once those attendees opting in had provided consent, the workshop could begin.

Procedure

The Arts for the Blues approach is described in detail elsewhere (see Parsons et al., 2019; Haslam et al., 2019; Omylinska-Thurston et al., 2020; Karkou et al., 2020). During the

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90-minute workshop, participants attend mindfully to their internal experience to determine a personally salient and immediate goal (measured on the Goal Ladder), then use various artistic media of their choice (image making, writing, movement) to explore the goal. This could mean purposefully representing the goal symbolically, or simply experimenting with an instinctive creative response (e.g. spontaneous movement or doodling), with the option to change or mix artforms at any time. The use of creative media is induced gradually, with experiential “scaffolding” (i.e., therapist modelling, taster activities) to build clients' confidence. Lastly, discussing this experience in pairs and as a whole group and finally re-rating their goal attainment on the Goal Ladder. After the workshop, participants completed the Short Flow States Scale to rate how much Flow they experienced in the workshop, and could also choose to take their artwork home or leave it behind to be included in the analysis.

Interviews

Interviews took place over the phone two-to-three weeks post-workshop. One researcher – themselves a cult survivor and trained Counsellor with expertise in cult recovery – recorded the audio using secure software before transcribing. Interviews lasted 60-90 minutes each, using a semi-structured question guide to allow for divergence while also focusing on the research questions, which included reflecting on the participant's creative process and attending to the *Psychological Flow* focus of the study. An approach informed by Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2008) was used to probe and explore the essence of individual experiences as closely as possible and understand how the whole experience was meaningful in the context of participants' lives as they have been, are being and might be lived (Eatough & Smith, 2008), in relation to their perceptions of Flow, the creative process and perceived outcomes.

Data Analysis

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Three researchers (AP, RT and HI) analysed the transcripts, working with the data in a dynamic, iterative and non-linear way, examining each broader concept in light of its narrower components and vice versa, and also the context in which all concepts were embedded (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). This included the dynamic relationships between the single episode of the workshop and participants' wider lives, the individual interview and the larger research project. Adopting these different perspectives necessitated an openness to shifting our thinking around the meaning of the data (Eatough & Smith, 2008). This iterative process of interpretive analysis was used "…to make sense of what the person is saying…constantly checking one's own sense-making against what the person actually said" (Smith & Osborne, 2008; p. 72). Cases were compared for convergence and divergence, before arriving at themes through (re)grouping of meanings, and checking the accuracy of these meanings against the wider text.

Results

Three attendees agreed to participate in the research element of the workshop, but only two of these participants completed phone interviews; the third was not able to be contacted. To protect anonymity, we are not able to publish detailed demographic details of participants, other than gender (one male; two females) and nationality (one European; two US nationals). All were cult survivors.

Quantitative outcomes

Participants' self-rated goal attainment and Flow measures are presented as descriptive data only, in order to further illustrate the qualitative results. Table 1 displays the personal goals set by each of the three participants, and their self-ratings for goal attainment at the start and end of the workshop.

[Table 1 here]

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The three participants selected distinctly different personal goals for the workshop, and their self-ratings of goal attainment increased by an average of 2.16 on the 10-point Goal Ladder. Average score on the five-point SFSS signifies that participants had a highly Flow-like experience during the creative workshop activities.

Qualitative and Arts-based Results

The pseudonyms "John" and "Jane" were used for the two interviewees. Themes using representative participant vocabulary are displayed in Figure 1 and expanded upon below.

[Figure 1 here]

Varying degrees of comfort: Not all ex-members like to be compliant

Certain aspects of participants' mindsets were already primed to be wary of any attempts to recruit or place demands upon them. Participants were also wary of situations involving an element of uncertainty or relinquishing of control. Difficulties in advertising our study meant that, upon arriving at the room, attendees were unaware of the dual purpose (workshop experience and research study) of the event. This new information was met with resistance from some attendees, who were not all comfortable being recruited to the study. In addition to this initial hurdle, the AfB approach involves – by the nature of creative and somatic exploration – elements of uncertainty and "trusting the process". This was a difficult request to place on individuals who have experienced great pain and suffering as a result of trusting persons or organisations of perceived authority in their cult-affiliated pasts. John detailed some of these concerns and objections from a personal stance:

> "…some people were triggered by [the research recruitment procedure], you know my cult experience is thirty years ago so it didn't trigger me that way…"
>
> "...not everybody who is an ex-member likes to be compliant [laughs]"

IN PRESS

"…I guess that people having varying degrees of comfort when it comes to procedural issues…if you're in a cult you're told to do lots of weird stuff that you don't know why you are doing it and you never get an explanation and you can get put down for doing it wrong although you weren't told how to do it right. So, if you're with ex-members that's a context to be aware of and at least to address in the instructions."

"So, it isn't just 'ok I'm going to do something creative with some pieces of material', it's like 'what is this really for and how can they research this?'"

Despite the later aspects of the workshop available to contain and process difficulties with exercises and the offer of follow-up support in the PIS, it was apparent that John felt there was little space earlier on to voice and unpack these initial concerns. Jane, however, noticed these difficulties around uncertainty more in others, as well as an eagerness in the group to begin creating, and a frustration at having to wait because of ethics paperwork, as opposed to any general uncertainty in activities:

"…it kind of took a little bit for things to start getting rolling. You know, because I know we had to…fill out the paperwork for this and I know like it sounded like a few of the people there, they were just ready to create, you know."

"…I did notice this one lady, she was just, she mentioned it, she was ready to just create…it felt like she was just frustrated."

Both interviewees had noticed the delay in starting the workshop, and the apprehensive atmosphere that this then generated for participants. As John suggested,

"…part of it was the whole set up…if participants had been invited the day before…then we could start off with some kind of a bang, instead of there's a hurdle before we can really get into it…turning people off before you turn them on…"

Attendees had expected an immediate and purely experiential event in which demands would be minimal, and yet it was an unfortunate necessity that we had to give reasonable

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opportunity to digest the lengthy participant information sheet, allowing attendees to make an informed decision to be part of the research or not. It seemed that the gap between their expectations and our additional agenda triggered attendees' resistance and questioning.

Healing power of the arts: Free to move your body and free to create

Participants recalled times in the past when creativity played a crucial role in the survival and/or recovery from cultic abuse or control. Music was not included in the workshop, however for John, this modality had been particularly useful for survival:

> "I survived solitary confinement by composing music…I was locked up and I could do that for hours on end… I wouldn't have survived without it, at least, mentally."

Jane, however, spoke of physically active forms of creative expression and performance, which she had found immensely empowering in overcoming her previous cult's strict control of physicality:

> **"**…creativity has helped me so much throughout the years that's like one of my main things that I would say has helped me heal, from doing art, from dancing, doing acro-yoga, performing…"
>
> "[My cult was] very controlling, there wasn't too much of creative expression…we couldn't walk too much with our hips, the sway…of course, dancing and all that wasn't in the question."
>
> **"…**dancing has been a really big thing for me in terms of like moving your body...especially if you were raised in a restrictive background where you're told that you cannot move your body. You know like, it's seen as sensual or whatever. It's very freeing, just like being free to move your body and free to create…"

Both participants had experienced being severely restrained in some way and the arts had enabled them to transcend their restrictions either in the moment or later in life, and both still

IN PRESS

held the healing nature of creative arts in high regard in the present day. Despite the difficulties with the study procedure, detailed above, John objectively supported the basic tenets of the workshop:

> "So yes, so there's another reason I wanted to participate in the workshop is that I have great respect for the healing power of the creative arts and like it."
>
> **"…**this research is trying to prove something that I think is true, that creativity is healing and I don't know how what we did could lead to that conclusion but I'm all for it."

Jane had a more subjective stance in support of her current use of creative arts for healing in self and other:

> "[creativity] helps me express emotions that may have been bottled up for years or maybe that I'm feeling and I just don't want to speak them…"
>
> "I really enjoyed it. I'm a very creative person by nature and I really love the idea of using arts to heal and I got very involved because it's one of my passions so it was a wonderful experience for me."

It was apparent that existing creative interests had encouraged participation to begin with, and participants were keen to again feel the benefit of their artforms. During the workshop, John found that making visual art enabled a suspension of the conscious chatter and judgement relating to the research context:

> "…the [research] context made it hard as I say, but for art, at least for me, I can suspend all [judgement]."

Whereas, Jane found that the workshop's choice of modalities and personal control over the art-making process enabled both a release of emotion and increase of self-awareness:

IN PRESS

> "In terms of like art, just like drawing... helps release that emotion and then you can keep that art piece or then you can throw it away… and different kind of movements you move, it's like, 'oh what, what do I need more for myself', you know?"

Jane also explained that having access to creative opportunities in a structured workshop is especially healing for ex-cult members:

> "I feel that with a lot of us we were raised in those kinds of environments, a lot of the creativity potential is [suppressed], so then when we have the freedom to create…a lot of us may not know how to express that correctly. So that's why I feel that these kinds of workshops are an excellent way of helping people bring that out of them."

Jane found that the structured approach to working with a small goal or intention using different modalities led to an exponential expansion of personal agency in the healing of self and others:

> "The part where she suggested that we put our intentions…or like express them through the different creative outlets. I really liked that…"
>
> "I kind of created like this little circle and these different cloths that I attached to this circle, the clothing, and then I kind of like wore this as a skirt and then I would scrunch up a cloth and then I would shoot it out and it was kind of like symbolic of me expressing myself and me just really spreading out my energy and helping others. I really, really liked that."

It is apparent that Jane experienced more of a positive multimodal healing experience during the workshop, whereas John experienced a form of relief only while engaged in his chosen modality of visual art.

In the zone: Allowing creative flow to take over from inner critic

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John experienced some barriers to enjoyment and Flow during the workshop, as well as some enjoyable and Flow-like experiences. One aspect of the activities on offer that posed a problem was the variety of modalities offered, including some non-preferred modalities, but also the awareness of others in the room who were engaging in different ways:

> "…it wasn't just one creative exercise, I think there were three… 'Everybody's doing something different and how does this tie into…some kind of goal'…those were some of the thoughts that were in a way distracting from just having a fun experience…"
>
> "…trying to get some kind of symbolic interaction with some piece of material… I didn't want to be distracted by seeing other people because other people were clearly really getting into it a lot more. So, and it's very physical – movement is very different from say creating a piece of art."

John's mostly expressed his aversion and difficulty relating to the physical movement modality, which caused internal distractions in the form of mental chatter:

> "I don't think I really achieved [Flow] in the other [modalities] because it's kind of my inner critic got triggered and it didn't really go away…and if you have inner chatter going on you can't get into Flow very well."

The "inner critic" referred to by John was triggered to a large degree by the revealing nature of physical movement, causing some self-consciousness:

> "…there were three observers in the room and I'm ignoring all of them but I'm aware that at least while I'm moving around and feeling uncertain and silly that I'm being observed, I don't remember, were we filmed?"

Perhaps, given more time, the self-consciousness and difficulty in relating to different modalities, could have given way to a more creative state. Over time, John was able to enjoy the fun elements of the workshop, arriving in a Flow-like state once in his preferred modality:

> "I like Flow, and as soon as I started the drawing I was there."

IN PRESS

"…to get into a certain creative state, for some people it takes time and over time things develop."

"I enjoyed it because it was fun and different and a lot of it was a little vague…but I'm open and I didn't feel threatened in any way. So, I more or less went along."

For John, choosing the drawing option was a "no-brainer" which enabled him to relate, express, and shift into a more focused state of Flow, tuning out other distractions:

"I like to do artwork …so given the three tasks, if I had to choose amongst them that'll be a no brainer, I'm going to make art and I could have spent more time doing that."

"I could relate to it, I had some idea of what I was trying to express, abstractly, and I like to do that."

"…so that was the shift. The drawing, it wouldn't matter that we were [being observed] people weren't coming around and looking at the other drawings and so we were quite free from any experimenter influence for that chunk of time or at least I could tune it out fairly completely."

For Jane, however, her "no-brainer" was being in a state of Flow, as she felt that this was her natural state:

"I experienced [Flow] a lot because it's my natural state, like my Flow state. For me it's very natural and I experienced a lot of it I would say. So, that was a great aspect of it as well."

During the workshop, Jane felt free to create, and used her agency in an instantaneous act of "going with the flow". She seemed not to have experienced self-consciousness around her own process, and did things automatically, without conscious effort:

"It's just something that happens when you're in the zone, you start creating, you just feel free and I love, I really, I love the feeling of freedom."

IN PRESS

> "…to get in the flow, I don't really have a process for things I just create when it comes to these types of things… In the moment, yeah."

As well as goal setting and visual drawing, Jane reported that, unlike John, the embodied aspects of activities were highly conducive to Flow, with her body enabling her to "let go":

> "I'm in the flow, I just feel free and like I'm just letting go and allowing, I guess, my body to take over in these different creative expressions. So, the feeling of freedom and just like of ease though. And surrender, I guess you would say."

Therefore, the offering of a variety of modalities, was enough – in the end – to enable these two very different participants to experience enjoyment, to work in a way that suited them personally and enabled Flow when engaged in their preferred modality or modalities.

Conquering creative intentions: The drawing stayed with me and it worked

John did not remember the movement or writing explorations clearly, however the visual art modality was very memorable and led to a direct positive impact upon his personal goal accomplishment:

> "I remember my drawing and as I said there were three things we were supposed to do and I can't remember what the third one was… Making the drawing is memorable."
>
> "…I got to complete a little drawing and the drawing worked for me… it worked for me in terms of it actually led directly, it conquered the mini goal that I made for myself, which I accomplished, and the drawing was a definite key part of it because the drawing stayed with me afterwards, I remembered it…"

Both participants had achieved an impact on their goals through their creative work. Whereas Jane used drawing, movement and props to represent "like this big explosion" of healing and

IN PRESS

expression, John had used drawing to symbolically represent a flat stomach [see Figure 2 below]. John explains:

> "[I can describe the drawing] very specifically, which means talking about my goal…I was in Manchester for six days eating lunch and dinner out and eating too much. So, I decided for this lunch I'm going to eat a reasonable portion and no more. So, I made a bunch of different straight lines with different colours, kind of symbolic flat stomach and when I went to lunch I remembered it, ate a modest lunch and felt very good about the whole thing. So, from that point of view the experiment was hugely successful and I remembered it other times during the rest of the conference and again. But the other things we did, the two other creative exercises in my conscious mind played no role."

[Figure 2 here]

> "…the drawing was directly related to [my goal] and it worked… I don't think it's had any effect on the way I eat since Manchester… As we're speaking about it maybe it could. It's still a good thing to eat modestly."

Jane also enthusiastically appraised her goal attainment through creative exploration [see Figure 3 below]:

> "I drew a big explosion and different colours like coming from the centre point…"

[Figure 3 here]

> "I had my intention of kind of like becoming a big ripple, just like you know, exploding from all different areas in life, helping others just like this big explosion like as far as I can reach… I actually said I wanted to take more of that through my intention and with the creativity part and do some more drawing in that area of setting my intentions..."

When asked how feeling in a state of Flow affected her goal, Jane responded,

IN PRESS

"Very very, very well. I was basically setting the goal of expanding more and more, feeling the feeling of expansion. That's what happened which I'm very…very happy about, with the drawing, and then especially with the movement and the dancing that I created. So, I felt expanded at the very end."

Jane seemed to benefit from the Flow state experienced throughout the whole workshop and its different components, whereas John was still questioning the power of the short time spent drawing, especially for deeper, cult-related issues:

"…it wasn't that long… if I had picked something that was related to some kind of cult recovery issue then I could be curious about how it would have an impact on something that goes as deep as that, but I don't know… even if I had made some work of art for three hours, I still don't know what effect that could be."

On the other hand, for Jane, the variety of modalities complemented one another and the whole workshop had a lasting impact. She did not mention the creative writing station, but realised that she wanted to incorporate some of the purposeful drawing into her everyday life:

"I remember all of it…I was pretty present…there's like a place where you can draw, a place where you can create something with your hands. I chose the stations of like drawing something out and creating something with my hands."

"You know, actually, it's good that I'm doing this interview because during the creative process I wanted to incorporate definitely the drawing aspect more into what I have learned, or into my life and what I have learned at the workshop. So, I do want to start doing the drawing intention concept."

A broader and more general lasting impression for Jane was a reminder around the importance of intentional creativity and a "playful spirit". She was left with the idea:

"…to continue to have a playful, a playful spirit. I know it can be difficult in the world because you have to 'adult'…but for me, it's very essential that I always am

IN PRESS

able to have like play time and creation times…the spirit of continuing to be playful are some things that I am taking back with me…I think it's a good way of using creative outlets to create your intention."

This may have been especially prominent for Jane due to her upbringing within a controlling cult environment, in which free play and even movement were restricted. Overall, despite being sensitised to potential coercion at the start of recruitment, both participants ultimately expressed that their creative work had been enjoyable, memorable and impacted successfully on their goals.

Discussion

This paper sought to investigate how some ex-cult members use the arts therapeutically, and to explore their responses to a structured and therapeutic multimodal arts group workshop (Arts for the Blues). Furthermore, we aimed to evaluate any psychological Flow experienced during the creative therapy activities, and how this reportedly impacted participants and their goals. Findings show that, in the case of two interviewees, creative arts have played a significant role in their survival and transcending of cultic abuse in the past and present, which affirms Jenkinson's (2010) support for these methods used therapeutically. Furthermore, these existing creative interests had encouraged participation in the current study's pilot workshop to begin with, as has been found previously with Dance Movement Psychotherapy clients (Parsons & Dubrow-Marshall, 2018). Although the research context and hence the start of the intervention was problematic, the creative exploration undertaken ultimately fulfilled its purpose for all participants (as reported by John and Jane in interviews and in the numerical goal attainment data submitted by all three participants). While the Goal Ladder used to measure this is not a validated instrument, it does provide some insight as to how participants felt they had progressed in the brief 90-minute activity, providing a potential sense of mastery.

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Jane relished the variety and multimodal creative exploration which lies at the heart of AfB, whereas John did not like unfamiliar ways of creating (in particular movement with props) and therefore only truly enjoyed the relatively short period of time spent in his preferred modality. John found it hard to engage with movement and props, thereby preventing Flow because of a lack of clear linkage to his goal, distraction seeing others fully engaged and because of feeling self-conscious when moving, which caused mental "chatter" and questioning that only stopped when he began using visual arts. Loss of self-consciousness, Challenge-skill balance, Clear goals, Unambiguous feedback, and Concentration are five of the nine dimensions of Flow (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014) which are of relevance here. John was not so accustomed to using creative movement, and therefore may have felt that the challenge of relating/expressing through movement was too difficult, or not a good person-activity fit, for him in this therapeutic intervention (Silverman and Baker, 2018), unlike with visual arts. Hegemonic conceptions of gender, dance and physical expression within Western culture may have posed an additional barrier here (Risner, 2007). Also, a possible fear of "putting themselves out there into the unknown" (Parsons & Dubrow-Marshall, 2018): John found the invitation to explore "a little vague", so did not have Clear goals for working with this modality in a way that linked to his personal goal, nor Unambiguous feedback – a clear idea as to how well he was doing.

The movement modality was the first artform that participants were invited to explore, and upon reflection it is possible that the clear explanation of the approach provided at the start of the workshop may have been somewhat rushed due to the late start. Alternatively, perhaps it had fallen on ears which were still deafened by the discomfort of the study recruitment process – triggered to freeze and shut down as is typical of the dissociative trauma response not uncommonly observed in cult survivors (Aranoff et al., 2000; Dubrow-Marshall, 2015; Saldana Tops et al., 2018). Our research reveals the extra sensitivity that is

IN PRESS

required in operating the agenda of a research project when working with cult survivors. Although in our recruitment process we did offer follow up resources and state the potential for difficult feelings surfacing when working creatively, this could have been highlighted more explicitly verbally at the start, to avoid compacting some of the difficulties with Flow experiences for some participants, through the validation of their experience with a sense of prior anticipation.

One of the fundamental relational features of AfB is having a *Coherent explanation of therapy* (Parsons et al., 2019) – building clients' confidence in the process and mechanisms. So, while John had understood the process of using visual arts (which he already had mastery over) to work on a goal, something had prevented this same understanding with movement. As John alluded to, cult survivors are not often comfortable with vagueness or hidden mechanisms which can make them feel vulnerable to abuse (Matthews & Salazar, 2014). Lastly, the distraction of seeing others engaged in movement, and of having others witness him moving, meant that he was unable to achieve the Concentration and Loss of self-consciousness (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014) during movement, unlike with the visual arts modality.

Oppositely, Jane found the props and movement the most engaging. Once participants were able to get into the creative activities they enjoyed, they experienced a Flow-like state, as reported by both interviewees, and as shown by Flow scores of all three participants. While John described how, in Flow, he had a clear idea of what he was aiming to express through drawing and was able to tune out other people/distractions while focusing on this medium, Jane described how in movement she was able to "surrender" and let the body "take over" in a feeling of "freedom". In terms of the clear linkages to Flow theory, the sense of letting go of cognitive, conscious control speaks to the dimension of Flow known as Automaticity ("It's just something that happens when you're in the zone…"; "I don't really

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have a process for things, I just create…”). These perceptions are not dissimilar to those reported by DMP clients elsewhere, for example in Parsons and Dubrow-Marshall (2019) a participant describes how thoughts can visualised and simultaneously transformed into movement. The embodied nature of this active process is also clearly aligned with one of the key tenets of AfB – *Encouraging vitality through active engagement,* as well as some specific “ingredients” of the approach – *Engaging with the body* and *Connecting body and mind* (Parsons et al., 2019). The sense of freedom, empowerment and release that took physical form in this participant is apparent – an energetic outwards expression through props and movements, with the intention to heal self and others.

As well as this movement expression, Jane’s artwork took the form of a flowing explosion of creative energy, whereas John’s artwork was used for a very specific purpose and used straighter, more orderly lines (see Figures 2 and 3). This drawing – something of a visual rehearsal for how John would approach lunchtime – fits well with the AfB features of *Learning skills to manage self, Experimenting with thoughts and actions* and *Problem solving and planning* – the aspects of AfB more oriented towards Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy and Behavioural Activation. These two examples show how two different individuals and personalities were able to engage with therapeutic creativity from two different theoretical angles, afforded by the multifaceted and pluralistic (McLeod, 2001) nature of AfB, thus *Nurturing autonomy and agency* (another key AfB tenet) in how to work. For this reason, the workshop was able to offer something still memorable to both participants several weeks later. While John did not detect any lasting effects of the brief episode, he still had a vivid memory of his drawing connected to his intention to “eat modestly”. Likewise, Jane vibrantly described her movement and drawing, and was motivated to continue using visual artwork intentionally to enhance her sense of playfulness and creativity.

IN PRESS

There are some basic principles that other practitioners may be able to glean from these participants' perspectives, which may prove useful when working with ex-cult populations and when using creative/embodied therapy and research methods. One finding to emerge, which was not intentional or foreseen, was the difficulty in recruitment of participants, as already noted by Kendall (2017). This partially arose from the low turnout to begin with and the fact that unfortunately most attendees had not obtained the study information sheets so were naïve to the research element. We do recognise that the limited time participants had to consent might have served as a potential trigger. Coupled with sitting in a circle and the nature of therapies that involve a surrendering to the creative process into the unknown, these factors introduced what may have felt a cult-like dynamic into the space. Durocher (1999) highlights that when dealing with cult survivors, a keen awareness of their needs – and even the particular context of the cult from which they exited – is necessary to tailor one's therapeutic approach and avoid resembling a cult in any way.

In future studies, researchers should ensure plenty of time to advertise a new or one-off project, and gain any necessary consent from participants far in advance of the start of the project or session, because preliminary explanations and paperwork may take more time with ex-cult members and especially if using new or innovative practices. While some demographics may be happy to sign up for studies without thoroughly reading the lengthy Participant Information Sheet, ex-cult members require a fuller and more detailed disclosure of the rationale of any activity they are invited into, which may take a long time. This difficult start could have been avoided if the research team were able to advertise and answer questions about the study for at least several days (if not weeks) before the start of the conference. When it became clear that only seven attendees were going to be present, it may have been better to abandon the quantitative measures aspect of the study, and instead offer

IN PRESS

the group the information sheet to take away and consider later on whether or not to contact the researchers for the telephone interview only.

As a reminder for future research conducted, loosening our agenda might help prevent future difficulties, as some cult research seems to suggest (Ayella, 1990). Another improvement could have been to spend more time demonstrating and building up to activities. Although flexibility and gradual transitions by "scaffolding" new activities is a key tenet of the AfB approach, the time pressures experienced may have impacted on these elements, which are even more crucial for building trust in the current study. The offering of AfB may be improved for this particular population, by incorporating higher levels of flexibility and a slower process.

Last but not least, extra emphasis in future research needs to be placed around the powerful potential of working creatively in re-triggering cult survivors. Paul Klee (1879-1940) said, "Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible". There is a strong potential for particular frozen and unconscious somatic memories becoming explicit and brought to consciousness through the use of various creative media (Talwar, 2007). For any future research this raises a salient point for careful management and conscious application of holding/containment skills. We met this need to some extent by providing a sharing space towards the end for some processing of their feelings.

This study is limited by several factors. Firstly, the small sample size, which renders any inferential statistical analysis meaningless, as well as garnering only two interviewees' perspectives of a short, one-off pilot. Therefore, we cannot recommend this therapeutic approach with certainty for this population. Secondly, the seven attendees are not representative of the wider ex-cult population, not least because they self-selected to i) attend the conference and ii) attend our creative workshop. These individuals – some of whom reported their professional involvement within cult recovery, and personal use of arts – likely

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had a greater interest than others in creative approaches (as has been previously reported in Dance Movement Psychotherapy clients; Parsons & Dubrow-Marshall, 2018) and interventions. Lastly, the cult recovery field is a distinct area of research and practice, so attendees of the annual conference are a closer-knit community of associates than those of larger professional disciplines. This will have created a markedly different dynamic than would normally occur in the group therapy space, where dual relationships are proscribed (Prepper, 2007). In addition, they may have felt an obligation to support us as "conference colleagues", rather than professionally removed individuals offering a pilot service. This role-boundary confusion may resemble some dynamics in which individuals can become ensnared in a cult (Durocher, 1999).

However, findings are strengthened to an extent by implementing more robust data collection and analysis. By having a member of the research team who is themselves a cult survivor and trained counsellor (and was not in the room during the workshop) conduct the interviews, we feel that the chance of socially desirable responding has been reduced. In addition, all steps in the data analysis process were documented so that the line of logical decision making could be followed. Although the first author developed and refined the final analysis, the resultant themes and quotes were audited for coherence and alignment with the original data by the other contributors who had analysed the transcripts, along with further evaluation by the wider research team. As a creative arts psychotherapist who puts stock into pluralistic approaches such as AfB, the first author was mindful to bracket their own biases and preconceptions through discussion and reflection. However, together with the two other authors who conducted the initial analysis, we three researchers are diverse in our backgrounds, therapeutic occupations/orientations, ethnicities and first-person cult experiences (or lack of), and so hope that this and the subsequent wider-team audit will have limited our bias to some extent.

IN PRESS

Conclusions

Creative arts can help survive and overcome cultic abuse and can continue to heal and enrich lives years later. The AfB approach, employing various arts modalities offered in a therapeutic framework, can enable diverse individuals to successfully attain their immediate personal goals in a group setting. Scores indicate that participants did experience Flow, and their insights around this suggest that six dimensions of Flow may be more pertinent: Loss of self-consciousness, Challenge-skill balance, Clear goals, Unambiguous feedback, Concentration, and Automaticity. Likewise, key ingredients of the AfB approach – some experiential and embodied, some more cognitive and rational – were described as impactful, which speaks to the adaptable and pluralistic nature of the AfB approach. In future, practitioners should allow additional considerations and time when researching this population; any suspicion or resistance may contaminate the trust that is needed for positive Flow states to occur – especially with dance/movement. We hope to have obtained an in-depth and candid account of the two interviewees' lived experiences in relation to using creative arts generally, the AfB therapy approach specifically, and the experience and impact of psychological Flow in creative therapeutic activities. Future research is needed to pilot the AfB approach with a much larger sample of participants, allowing quantitative analysis and further exploration of Flow in creative therapies.

IN PRESS

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Table 1. Participants' personal goal attainment and Short Flow State Scale scores

Participants personal goals/intentions for workshop	Goal Ladder at Start of Workshop	Goal Ladder at End of Workshop	SFSS Score
Eat a moderate lunch	3	6.5	3.56
I want to feel more forgiveness and release towards my son's father for the selfish and deliberate pain he has caused me	5	7.5	4.56
To feel the feeling of expansion more/to trust myself more	9	9.5	4.89
Mean	5.67	7.83	4.34
SD	3.06	1.53	0.69

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Figures (no need for colour in print):

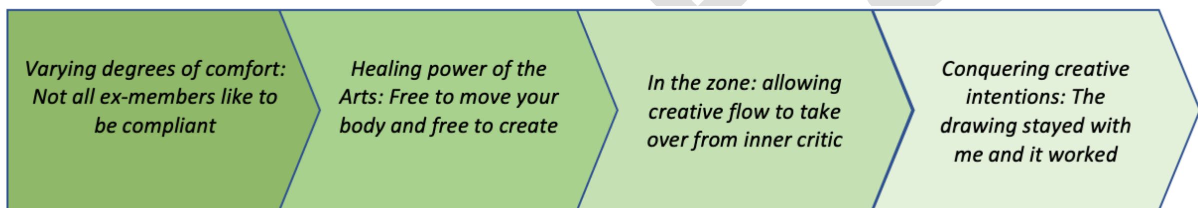

Figure 1. Thematic motifs illustrating development from baseline challenges to positive experiences and outcomes

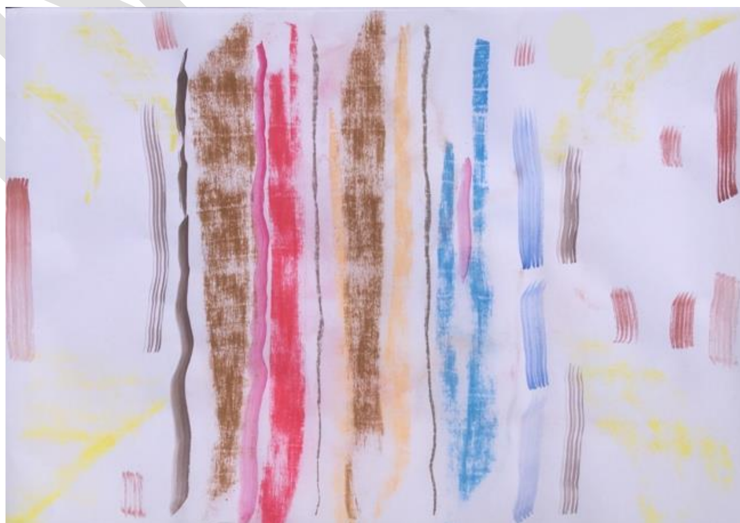

Figure 2. Artwork produced by John

Figure 3. Artwork produced by Jane

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