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## Creating Connection: Group Expressive Arts Therapy with Incarcerated Women

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Creating Connection:  
Group Expressive Arts Therapy with Incarcerated Women  
Capstone Thesis  
Lesley University

May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2019

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Specialization: Expressive Arts Therapy

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### Abstract

The lived experience of incarceration isolates, disconnects, and retraumatizes women. Correctional mental health services fall short of adequately accounting for the pervasive histories of trauma and victimization that characterize the lives of most women prior to arrival in prison. The immediacy of the need to address this issue is underscored by steadily climbing rates of incarceration for women. The expressive arts are uniquely suited to the correctional environment wherein they provide alternative outlets for emotional expression, often stigmatized and perceived as unsafe. This research explored the use of a group expressive arts therapy method integrating psychodrama, visual art and collaborative poetry to enhance connection and ameliorate the negative impacts of incarceration among inmates with serious mental illness and histories of trauma. The method was implemented in a milieu treatment setting at a women's medium security prison. Participants engaged in two hour-long sessions facilitated by a third-year expressive arts therapy intern. The method focused on the enhancement of perceived intra- and extra-institutional relational connection. Participants demonstrated new insight into their relationships, engaged in prosocial behavior and implemented problem-solving skills through the visual art-making and creative writing processes. The method elicited positive memories of past treatment and group engagement and reinforced the strength of current relational bonds. This research has implications for future use of the expressive therapies as means for better serving the gendered needs of incarcerated women with mental illness and histories of victimization.

*Keywords:* Gender-responsive treatment, women, incarceration, prison, trauma, connection, social atom, poetry, group therapy, expressive arts therapy

### Creating Connection:

#### Effect of Group Expressive Arts Therapy on Incarcerated Women

*“People need people—for initial and continued survival, for socialization, for the pursuit of satisfaction. No one—not the dying, not the outcast, not the mighty—transcends the need for human contact”* –Irvin D. Yalom (2005, p. 24).

In the unstable and ever-changing correctional environment, vulnerable women relive cycles of oppression and isolation mirroring those in which they were ensnared prior to incarceration. Social stigma further limits the possibility of successful reintegration following release to the community. For incarcerated women, opportunities for interpersonal connection are critical to the maintenance of mental and emotional wellness. Clinical practice of the expressive therapies serves in part to integrate the personal, social and political spheres of inmates’ life experiences, creating connection from isolation. Creative expression in turn is a vehicle for social justice. In amplifying their voices through art, female inmates are afforded increased visibility, promoting enhanced understanding of the plight of the inmate in a flawed correctional system.

This research explored the therapeutic impact and benefits of expressive arts group therapy on perceptions of connectedness for women in prison. Incarcerated women experience elevated rates of mental illness as well as histories of abuse and victimization, as compared to male inmates and women in the general population (Bronson & Berzofsky, 2017; DeHart, Lynch, Belknap, Dass-Brailsford, & Green, 2014). Various institutional factors place female inmates at high risk of exposure to retraumatization and revictimization in the correctional setting (Dirks, 2004). Increasing rates of incarceration for American women highlight nationwide deficits in gender-responsive correctional mental health programming (National Resource Center on Justice Involved Women, 2016). The author was curious about expressive

therapists' means for fostering a felt sense of connection in a setting where identity and community are stripped away. Through the design and implementation of a therapeutic method, the author sought to center the lived experiences of incarcerated women and to give voice to silenced narratives of life in prison.

### **Literature Review**

Current research falls short of holistically addressing the treatment needs and recommendations specific to incarcerated women. This review provides a survey of the current literature as it pertains to expressive arts therapy for use as a unique treatment solution with this underserved population.

### **The Numbers**

The population of justice-involved women in the United States has continued to grow steadily for some years. From 1980 to 2016, the population of women being held in American prisons increased by over 700%. Groups which present as minorities in the general population are overrepresented in correctional settings. In 2014, despite recent declines in trends of incarceration for African American women, members of this group were imprisoned at rates over 2 times those of White women. Incarceration rates for Latinas were 1.2 times greater than those of White women. (National Resource Center on Justice Involved Women, 2016).

The lived experience of incarceration is uniquely nuanced for female inmates, necessitating gender-responsive approaches to treatment in a system designed to serve the needs of men. Evidence shows us that the baseline for most incarcerated women is one of coping with mental illness. A national survey found that 55% of men in state prisons exhibited mental health problems as compared to 73% of female prisoners. Additionally, over 65% of female inmates had documented mental health diagnoses (Bronson & Berzofsky, 2017). Women were found to

be twice as likely as men to have co-occurring substance use disorders, with rates of over 40%. (National Resource Center on Justice Involved Women, 2016).

### **Impact of Trauma and Violence Against Women**

Gender-based violence is a global public health issue and a human rights violation, impacting women of diverse backgrounds and life situations. Physical, emotional, and sexual victimization impacts incarcerated women at rates 6 to 10 times those of women in the general population (Dirks, 2004). Most survivors also report experiences of multiple types of victimization and high rates of adverse childhood experiences (DeHart et al., 2014). In a 2014 study, 86% of a representative sample of female inmates reported having been victimized by sexual violence prior to incarceration, with high prevalence of molestation by an adult before age 16 and forcible rape after age 16. When the definition was broadened to include all forms of traumatization and victimization, some studies suggested rates to be as high as 98%. While men's risk of being abused drops after childhood, women remain at risk throughout adolescence and adulthood (National Resource Center on Justice Involved Women, 2016).

In her seminal work on trauma and recovery, Judith Herman (1992) describes traumatic life events as “those that cannot be assimilated with the victim's ‘inner schemata’ of self in relation to the world” (p. 50). The experience of a psychological trauma—a deeply distressing or horrifying experience—significantly impacts the body and brain, manifesting in a variety of somatic symptoms and changes to the brain's functioning. Following a traumatic experience, the brain's *fight or flight* mechanism remains permanently activated. This constant hyperarousal of the sympathetic nervous system commonly results in the survivor startling easily, reacting irritably to inconsequential events, and experiencing difficulty sleeping, among other factors.

Herman (1992) describes a *dialectic* of trauma, wherein “the two contradictory responses of intrusion and constriction establish an oscillating rhythm” (p. 47). The individual cycles back and forth between two emotional extremes. At one end, the terror of the event is relived through intrusive and distressing flashbacks and memories. On the opposite end of the spectrum, she experiences numbing, dissociation and emotional detachment. As neither response allows for the integration of the traumatic event into the traumatized individual’s inner world, this cyclical process can be prolonged for extended periods of time if not adequately addressed.

In addition to the challenges resulting immediately in response to trauma exposure, survivors also suffer long term secondary impact. A 2017 study serves as testament to the power of intrusive thoughts and memories to impact daily functioning long after the traumatic event. Eisikovits, Tener, and Lev-Wiesel found that adult female survivors of childhood sexual abuse reported constant experiential presence of their attackers throughout life. Even in the abusers’ physical absence, it was only through psychological methods of cognitive restructuring that the women could find relief. Women’s experiences of interpersonal violence over the lifespan have predicted greater severity in symptomatology attributed to depression, anxiety and PTSD as well as predisposition to substance misuse. Individuals who have experienced multiple traumas are placed at still greater risk of subsequent psychological problems (DeHart et al., 2014).

Of the myriad emotional and psychological impacts of a given traumatic event over the short- and long-term, one of the most powerful is the damage done to the survivor’s relational world. Not solely in the wake of a recent trauma but for years following, an individual can face barriers to emotional intimacy and interpersonal connection. Victimization by another person, especially a known and trusted individual, often impacts all of the survivor’s existing relationships. Such an act disassembles the intricate systems of attachment which link the survivor to significant others. Betrayal and breaches of trust in the form of interpersonal

traumatization render survivors unable to continue forming and fostering meaningful connections with others as previously done. As Judith Herman points out, “traumatic events call into question basic human relationships. They breach the attachments of family, friendship, love, and community. They shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others” (1992, p. 51).

In addition to interpersonal challenges, survivors face toxic cultural stigmas about women’s culpability in their stories of victimization. These insidious forces impact survivors’ self-image, conjuring feelings of invalidation and blame as well as ostracizing them from once-trusted groups and alliances.

Traumatized people feel utterly abandoned, utterly alone, cast out of the human and divine systems of care and protection that sustain life. Thereafter, a sense of alienation, of disconnection, pervades every relationship, from the most intimate familial bonds to the most abstract affiliations of community and religion. (Herman, 1992, p. 52)

In response to this sense of utter disconnection and othering, survivors often elect to further isolate themselves and to disengage from relationships, affiliations and routines. This process may immediately provide a victimized woman some semblance of safety or relief from suffering, but causes further harm in the long term.

### **Women’s Pathways to Criminality**

Pathways to offending are shown to be gendered, with history of mental illness and trauma significantly impacting women’s and girls’ proclivity for criminality. History of polyvictimization, nonvictimization adversity and relationship dysfunction also factor in. Nonvictimization adversity refers to experiences of caregiver imprisonment or other ambiguous loss, family addictions, living in poverty, witnessing violence, and so forth. The “unrelenting



nature of multiple traumas in conjunction with additional adverse childhood experiences” often serves to normalize problematic patterns of thought and behavior as early as adolescence and even in childhood (DeHart et al., 2014, p. 139). For example, women may become accustomed to trading sex for the fulfilment of basic needs, retaliating violently against abuse, or self-medicating with illicit drugs.

Past research has shed light on the causal relationship between pivotal life experiences and particular criminal offenses. Witnessing of domestic or community violence has been shown to elevate the likelihood of engagement in physical altercations later on. Women’s engagement in sex work commonly occurs in response to the coercion and threats of violent men who fall in and out of various roles in their lives, including *boyfriend*, *dealer* and *pimp*. Mental illness and continued victimization—via intimate partner violence and adverse childhood experiences—have been linked to outcomes of criminality and delinquency, including substance abuse, running away, fighting and physical assault, use of weapons, and drug charges (DeHart et al., 2014).

### **Retraumatization and Isolation in the Correctional Setting**

History of victimization, traumatization and other adversity acts not only as a potent risk factor to criminality but also to subsequent deterioration in psychological wellness under the stressors of the correctional environment. Women are severed from primary social supports through sexism, racism, classism and other forms of institutional oppression. These conditions engender experiences of isolation, disconnection, and for some, the reactivation of prior traumatic life experiences. As Dirks (2004) points out, “...prison life is apt to stimulate the abuse dynamics already established in these women’s lives, thus perpetuating women’s further revictimization and retraumatization while serving time,” (p. 102). The criminal justice system consistently reinforces the social dichotomy of the *powerful* versus the *powerless*, reaffirming

the traumatized woman's longstanding belief in personal powerlessness. Incarcerated women must also face the loss of their own bodily autonomy. Lack of privacy, retaliation, physical assaults in the name of security, unequal power dynamics, restraints, reading of mail, and invasive searches mirror the dynamics of prior abusive relationships. Forced compliance with male correctional officers may further exacerbate these issues.

This population can be seen as an at-risk group placed in an increasingly vulnerable position. The absence of a safe space within the correctional environment bars inmates from opportunities to retreat or find sanctuary from ongoing abuse or the reactivation of traumatic memories. Potential for exploitative relationships between correctional officers and female inmates is also high. Human rights organizations have published reports detailing a span of prison staff members' assaults on female inmates, ranging from verbal abuse to rape. Male staff members have coerced and intimidated female inmates via terror, retaliation and repeated victimization (Dirks, 2004). Labeled as "bad girls" and "cons," inmates subsequently risk not being viewed as credible or deserving of support when making formal grievances or reporting instances of staff abuse. Such a cycle reinforces and perpetuates inmates' learned helplessness.

This process of alienation and relational disconnection resulting from trauma uniquely impacts female survivors. Research on female psychological development demonstrates how women's identity, self-worth, and sense of empowerment are defined primarily by and through relationships with others. Men, in contrast, tend to measure and value identity by the achievement of autonomy and place higher value on independence. In fact, women's criminality is oftentimes best understood as a function of unhealthy relationships. Owing to justice-involved women's disproportionately high experiences of abuse, trauma and neglect, their ability to achieve healthy, empathic and mutually empowering relationships is significantly compromised.

(National Resource Center on Justice Involved Women, 2016). A lack of such relationships acts as a powerful risk factor for criminal behavior.

Limited opportunities for socialization and community-building in prison exacerbate the issue. Access to communal spaces such as gyms, libraries, and chapels is highly controlled and restricted. A 2012 study by Yuen, Arai, and Fortune explored the impact of a weekly arts-based leisure program in a women's correctional setting. Participants had reported the perceived loss of their humanity and social roles, detachment from sense of self, and the pain of being labeled as brutal, crazy, savage and predatory. Women experienced the prison environment as an alternate reality, artificial and far removed from life in the community.

Study participants were able to form supportive networks through socialization and creative self-expression including musical performances and poetry readings. The program was implemented to "enable an individual to experience a sense of self outside of the oppression," (p. 284) and "provided a vital connection to something beyond the prison," (p. 289). Such programs provide evidence for the potential impact of the expressive therapies in the prison setting.

Feelings of isolation from loved ones and from the community can become further complicated by the paradoxical issue of feeling safer and better provided-for in prison. In the community, societal stigma, lack of education, and prohibitive cost can bar individuals in need from the benefits of treatment. In fact, mental health services are often more accessible during incarceration. But the correctional environment presents unique challenges to treatment, including multiple barriers to authentic emotional expression and communication of needs. Inmates may be invalidated or reprimanded by staff or risk being viewed as vulnerable or untrustworthy by peers. The therapist can serve as a neutral, supportive party, in contrast to other staff members who act as disciplinarians. Dirks (2004) argues that this very presence can be

healing, demonstrating for inmates that “intimidation and intimacy do not have to coexist in all relationships,” (p. 110).

Within the prison environment, programming tends to promote behavior change, independence and self-reliance while failing to address components of connection and community-building. The literature repeatedly outlines the efficacy of approaching mental health treatment of trauma survivors and incarcerated individuals through collective efforts toward connection. Yuen et al. (2012) speak to the shared responsibility of addressing issues such as poverty, addictions, trauma, and misogyny. These experiences are social in nature, the authors argue, and thus require social action and engagement. Following traumatic events and the subsequent shattering of sense of self, Herman (1992) contends, survivors’ only hope for rebuilding self-concept is through connection with others. Mirroring the findings of Yuen et al., Herman illuminates the importance of rebuilding internal and external relational structures following traumatic events by way of the same processes through which they were initially developed.

### **Connecting Through the Arts**

Kossak (2015) speaks to the particular ability of the expressive arts “...to illuminate individual or communal mistuned moments in a way that helps to bring deeper awareness, feeling and benevolence to unfathomable experiences,” (p.118). In his work on attunement in expressive arts therapy, Kossak explores the human capacity to somatically connect with and tune into the experience of another. Collaborative artistic practice serves as a direct pathway to the development of embodied empathy and relational attunement. Gussak highlights the usefulness of artistic practice in serving the particular needs of incarcerated individuals,

maintaining that “art becomes the great equalizer, humanizing those that have been previously dehumanized. Only when someone creates are they recognized as being alive” (2016, para. 17).

Natalie Rogers (1993) describes expressive arts therapy as a healing process of discovering ourselves through any art form that comes from an emotional depth. Rogers’ theory of person-centered expressive arts therapy provides a model for healing through connection. At the core of her theory is the concept that a significant connection exists between an individual’s soul or life-force and the energy of all beings. The inward healing journey through the arts is at once an effort in individual and collective healing, and offers a view of the individual’s deep relatedness to the outer world. By externalizing the emotional, intuitive parts of ourselves through art-making, we can discover, experience and accept unknown pieces of self, and in turn be afforded richer connection to others.

Engagement in the expressive arts therapy process can provide inmates access to a supportive, emotionally-rich and healing environment with less emphasis on the verbal disclosure that can feel unsafe in the correctional setting. A number of researchers have explored the usefulness of the expressive therapies in correctional settings. Hongo, Katz and Valenti sought to understand the impact of creative expression on aging incarcerated women with trauma histories. Elderly incarcerated women find themselves at a particular disadvantage, developing dependency on the corrections system as a function of its rigid structure. Despite the continued growth of this population, institutional services have not been adapted to reflect expressed needs. The researchers highlighted five elements which arose from the artistic process as impactful for the participants: (a) potential to dream, (b) feeling connected, (c) mutual understanding, (d) releasing feelings, and (e) unselfish concern.

In a mixed-methods study, Gussak (2009) found marked improvement in mood, socialization, problem-solving abilities and locus of control in female inmates engaged in art therapy. Participants were able to reflect on the personal meaning of their art early on in the group process, and collaborative art-making highlighted the importance of individual contributions to the larger group. Groups provided the opportunity for practical implementation of skills in problem-solving, communication, leadership, negotiation, and following suggestions. Participants' insight greatly increased, and correctional staff noted improvements in behavioral control and higher instance of healthy interpersonal interactions.

Barak and Stebbins (2017) researched the use of witnessing within the context of creative arts therapy and its power to enhance inmates' feelings of connectedness to the outside world. In the authors' estimation, witnessing "can make room for a denied or dissociated reality, and can help traumatized clients regain ownership of—and thereby control over—their own biographies," (p. 54). The process of witnessing was also viewed as a vehicle for social action. Through the act of witnessing and being witnessed in creative self-expression, creative therapists and inmates were able to reflect upon institutional injustices. Being witnessed in art-making also addressed inmates' needs for social acceptance, support, and sense of belonging to a group independent of the correctional facility.

Gussak and Ploumis-Devick (2004) viewed creativity and artistic expression as intrinsic to the correctional environment. Creativity allowed inmates escape, retreat and diversion, and served as a means of self-expression deemed acceptable to the prison community and the greater world. It also provided a vehicle for communicating complex emotional material. Tangible benefits included fewer disciplinary reports and lower rates of recidivism. An interdisciplinary model integrating the expressive arts with educational, wellness and cultural awareness objectives connected participants to their personal and collective history and cultural heritage

and instilled hope for the future. Participants reported finding “new meaning and purpose of self, a better understanding and acceptance of others, and more self-confidence,” (p. 38). Beyond the benefits for the individual participant, the interdisciplinary model facilitated mutually beneficial partnerships between state departments of corrections and universities, colleges, community-based artists, cultural arts groups and other local agencies.

Walsh, Rutherford, and Crough (2013) engaged incarcerated women in group discussions, journaling and freewriting about lived experience. A separate group of formerly-incarcerated women were guided through the creation of autobiographical videos. Themes emerged regarding the transitory movement between homelessness and incarceration, including history of violence, addictions, isolation and alienation, family and friends, resource gaps and system failures, lack of safe space, lack of adequate income, as well as fear, doubt and self-esteem. Participants demonstrated self-awareness, formulating and expressing needs for planning of reentry into the community. Participant-created resource guides and a peer mentorship program were among the longer-lasting effects of the research process.

Corcoran and Lane (2018) explored the use of arts-based inquiry to promote conversation around the global reach of gender-based violence. The authors gathered written and arts-based responses from attendees of an art exhibition centering the issue of violence against women and girls. Themes of individual and collective meaning-making, the power of art, and the exploration of critical social issues and political discourse arose. Results were discussed as revealing the power of art to surpass intellectual knowing and encourage emotional and visceral engagement.

A number of community-based programs and projects utilize the arts and creative expression to fashion the empathic bridge Barak and Stebbins (2017) view as connecting the oppressed with those able to alleviate the oppression. Dances for Solidarity (DFS) is an outreach

project that seeks to offer support and connection to inmates housed in solitary confinement. The project consists of letter-writing and ongoing collaborative dance performance and choreography between inmates and community members. DFS holds dance workshops in correctional facilities, schools and universities. The Boston-based Freedom Through Art Collective aims to engage and educate the community by initiating challenging discussions through art. In providing opportunities for collaborative work and participation in gallery showings and art sales, the collective seeks to humanize incarcerated artists.

### **Recommendations for Future Research and Practice**

Current research increasingly amplifies the voices of incarcerated women, increasing understanding of the deficits in correctional mental health care and promoting continued improvements to existing systems. But there remains a lack of supportive prison services designed with women's histories of victimization, traumatization, and intersecting oppression in mind (Dirks, 2004). The needs of women cannot be adequately addressed within the confines of a system designed to serve men. There is little published work centering the intersectional and compounded nature of incarcerated women's oppression, as a function of discrimination on the basis of race, class, gender expression, sexuality, ability and other social identities. In understanding women's criminal behavior as catalyzed by these persistent and pervasive patterns of abuse and oppression, questions arise. How can cycles of institutional abuse and revictimization be interrupted? How can correctional mental health services be tailored to better support the needs of the traumatized female inmate?

As DeHart et al. point out, "...violence not only characterizes the family, relationship, and neighborhood histories of justice-involved women, it also presents likely contexts into which women will be released after jail," (2014, p. 148). This truth underscores the importance of



facilitating and enhancing intra- and extra-institutional connection through creative expression, likely to result not only in improved personal outcomes but in decreased reoffending and recidivism, to the benefit of the greater community. An intersectional feminist and trauma-informed approach to expressive arts therapy can serve to humanize treatment, aid in the building of healthy alliances and connections, and enable individuals to envision an identity beyond that of prisoner. Such an approach can provide coping tools translatable to the outside world and better prepare inmates for successful transition to the community upon release.

## **Methods**

### **Setting and Participants**

The author implemented the proposed method at the women's correctional facility where she was completing a clinical internship. The optional expressive arts therapy group was held for one hour per week for two consecutive weeks on the facility's Residential Treatment Unit (RTU), a housing unit that serves as a milieu treatment setting for sentenced inmates diagnosed with serious mental illness. Sessions took place in the unit dayroom, which had three smaller tables and one large table.

Group size ranged from six to seven participants across the two sessions. The group consisted of White cisgender women ranging in age from 31 to 58 years. One individual was diagnosed with gender dysphoria. Participants identified with a range of sexualities. Participants were English-speaking and had a variety of educational and socioeconomic backgrounds. All participants had been diagnosed with PTSD comorbid with other mental illness. Diagnoses represented in the group included depressive, bipolar, psychotic and schizophrenia-spectrum disorders as well as anxiety-related, neurodevelopmental, and personality disorders. Some individuals also had histories of alcohol and opioid use disorders. Participants were serving

sentences of various lengths for a variety of criminal charges. Another staff member, an art therapist, co-facilitated the group per institutional policy.

### **Materials and Procedure**

Watercolors, chalk and oil pastels, crayons, and markers were made available for both sessions. During the first session, participants were provided sheets of 8.5"x11" white drawing paper for their art and sheets of printer paper for their expressive writing. For the second session, participants were provided the above art materials as well as pre-cut strips of paper, glue sticks, and one long, rectangular sheet of cardstock for all participants to collage their poetry onto.

Both sessions followed the same outline consisting of a brief check-in, warm-up activity, art-making, group discussion, and closure. Check-ins served as opportunities to voice concerns or comments before beginning group. Warm-ups were meant to offer grounding and to assist clients in integrating their physical and emotional presence within the group space. Art-making was prompted with a verbal directive, and participants were invited to ask clarifying questions as needed. Discussion was centered on collaborative processing of emotional material that surfaced during the art-making. Closures were brief and designed spontaneously to reflect the emergent group process.

The main goal of Session One was for participants to gain insight into their interpersonal relationships and the nature of connection between Self and Other through the creation of social atoms. The social atom is a diagnostic and treatment tool with a basis in the field of psychodrama, meant to visually organize and depict all of the impactful relational connections in an individual's life, both positive and negative. In creating social atoms, individuals are typically provided pen and paper and prompted to utilize prescribed symbols to represent interpersonal connections. A traditional social atom can be viewed as more of a visual aid than a work of creative expression. Participants were invited to utilize art materials within a minimally

structured directive in order to enhance the freedom of creative expression and potential emotional impact of the exercise. Intermodal transfer from visual art-making to expressive writing was introduced to further deepen the introspective process.

The goal of Session Two was to continue the work from the first session through the crystallization of themes, insights and ideas that emerged for group members around interpersonal connection. The collaborative nature of the directive was also meant to facilitate secondary goals of enhancing within-group interconnectedness, problem-solving skills, healthy communication and prosocial behavior. Creative writing and visual art-making were again utilized as the primary expressive modalities.

### **Data Collection**

The author utilized note-taking during group sessions and engaged in write-ups following sessions to document the objective group processes and outcomes of interventions as they unfolded. The author noted factors such as placement of group members in the room, level of engagement, materials used, requests for additional direction, ebb and flow of group mood and tone, energetic shifts, and content of verbal expression during group discussion. The author stored client art and expressive writing in a confidential file and referred to it for the purpose of additional objective documentation. Art and writing samples were briefly reviewed immediately following group sessions for the purpose of risk assessment, due to participants' risk histories.

Making use of journaling, creative writing, visual art-making and expressive movement practice, the author documented her affective responses and reactions to group processes and to the creative works produced by group members.

The author also elected to utilize creative analytic practice (CAP). This method was chosen to represent participants' reflections on connectedness during the expressive arts therapy intervention. CAP "encourages involvement, inspires curiosity, creates inclusivity, and

constructs depictions that remain in the thoughts of readers in ways that traditional representations sometimes do not” (Berbary, p. 194, as cited in Yuen et al., 2012, p. 287). The author utilized poetry to maintain the emotional integrity of the women’s voices rather than reducing the material to disembodied academic jargon. The intended impact was one of infusing in the reader a sense of attunement with the inmates and their experiences of isolation, disconnection, and the reach toward community, empathy and hope.

The voices of the seven inmates who participated in the intervention formed the basis of the CAP poem. The author lifted emotionally resonant language from notes taken during group discussions as well as from the creative freewriting produced by participants during Session One. Using these images and sentiments as inspiration, the author created an untitled response poem (see Appendix).

## **Results**

### **Session One**

Participants checked in with feeling words to represent how they were arriving to the group space. Although the group required additional prompting to begin, all participants eventually contributed. Words included ‘anxious,’ ‘apprehensive,’ ‘skittish,’ ‘calm,’ ‘good’ and ‘glad to be back.’ Participants declined the need for further elaboration and a mindfulness-based warm-up was introduced. The group remained attentive and focused on an exercise eliciting somatic awareness through deep breathing and a body scan. Participants then engaged in a guided visualization of releasing stressors and embracing intentions for the group session.

Working individually, participants were prompted to imagine a blank sheet of paper as their relational world and to depict themselves in the center of the page. The directive was intentionally kept brief and abstract so as to allow for a wide range of free expression from

participants. The majority of participants began working quickly, but additional direction was provided for those requiring it. Using the same sheet, participants were then prompted to depict those individuals who had made significant impacts on their lives. The author suggested that the participants consider details such as the history and current state of the relationship, the personal qualities of individuals being depicted, whether the relationship felt more positively or negatively charged, whether the individual was living or deceased, and so forth. For both directives, participants were further prompted to be intentional with their use of color, symbol, shape and line quality, as well as size and proximity of figures drawn.

Group participants were provided new sheets of paper and pens, and were prompted to engage in freewriting about this process. Questions were posed, including: “Which thoughts or feelings emerged from this exercise?”, “What helps you feel connected to others?” and “Which qualities or attributes do you bring to relationships that might help others feel connected to you?” The writing exercise naturally flowed into a group conversation. While only two participants elected to share their artwork, the remaining individuals remained engaged. In closing, participants were asked to share a feeling word in summation of their experience in the group.

## **Session Two**

Session Two opened with an opportunity to check in. Following was a warm-up activity employing expressive movement and mirroring to encourage bodily awareness, grounding, and kinesthetic empathy. The group formed a circle and sequentially, participants offered expressive movements which were mirrored back by the group. Participants expressed enjoyment and playfulness through laughter, smiles, and adding creative sounds to accompany chosen movements. Movements included stretches, creative and imaginative expressions, and gentle gestures toward self (e.g., hugging self, patting self on back).

Participants were invited to review their social atoms and expressive writing created in the previous session. The group then engaged in a brief discussion. Participants were provided strips of paper and were asked to copy onto them those words or phrases that stood out to them as they reviewed the previous week's work. As in Session One, additional prompting was provided as needed.

Next, participants were asked to bring their strips from their three smaller tables and gather together around one sheet of paper at the large table. Participants shared one by one what they had written on their strips—two or three per person—and were directed to use them to create a collaborative poem. One individual arose as a leader, aiding the others in structuring of the task. Next, the participants decorated the rest of the page with art materials. The participant-leader took suggestions and gained the permission and approval of each individual before adding a title to the top of the poem with a new strip of paper.

During the time allotted for discussion, participants considered the connections they felt to others on their housing unit, within the greater correctional environment, and the community outside of prison walls. The group requested unanimously that the finished product be displayed in the unit hallway on one of the bulletin boards. In closing, participants were invited to share feeling words in response to the experience of the group session.

### **Discussion**

Participants responded favorably to both sessions of the proposed expressive arts therapy method. Although attendance was not required and individuals had been urged to engage only to the degree they felt comfortable, participants displayed little resistance to directives, remaining actively engaged and attentive throughout the group process. Overall, the author deemed the method effective, based on observation of participants' performance as well as participant

feedback regarding the two sessions. Results were supported by the findings of a current and multi-disciplinary body of research, as detailed in the literature review.

### **Outcomes**

In designing the method, the author had been concerned about the potential of the directives to prompt fixation on loss and perceived *lack* of connection during incarceration. However, participants appeared to appreciate the opportunity to reflect on important relationships, and in doing so maintained a largely positive outlook. Participants included depictions in their social atoms of individuals with whom their relationships were now strained or altogether severed as a result of their criminal charges, incarceration, death or other factors. Despite the pain surely associated with pondering these complex relational dynamics, participants remained open and willing to engage in the group process. In fact, within-group connections were fostered and strengthened through the process, as participants found similarities among their stories and experiences and took advantage of the opportunity to work collaboratively.

Across its implementation over the course of two weeks, the method was shown to be effective in addressing the target areas of need which inspired its creation. Participants met the primary and secondary goals outlined for the intervention. During Session One, the author observed participants gaining increased insight into their interpersonal relationships and the inner workings of their relational worlds. Through their expressive writing as well as in the context of group discussions, group members also noted in the absence of prompting the new questions, ideas and realizations which had arisen during the art-making process.

Through continued exploration of their artwork and writing from the first session, participants met Session Two's goal of crystallizing their learning and insights. An initial sense of uncertainty gave way to an opportunity for collaboration during the second session. When

participants were provided the collaborative poetry directive, they found themselves lacking a strategy for getting started. One participant emerged fairly quickly as a group leader, and the remaining members of the group were able to take direction and worked as a team in negotiating the task. This show of trust in the participant who emerged as a group leader highlighted the group's willingness to pursue collective goals and to work collaboratively.

As the session came to a close, those who had actively participated encouraged the more reserved individuals to contribute, citing the importance of each participant's addition to the final product. Participants utilized open communication and respectfully assessed one another's needs and preferences. The author viewed these occurrences as demonstrations of secondary benefits born of the participants' engagement with the method. Among these benefits were the enhancement of within-group interconnectedness, problem-solving skills, healthy communication and prosocial behavior. These findings echo the outcomes of Gussak's 2009 research implementing art therapy directives with incarcerated women.

Four major characteristics of the method design rendered it particularly effective in enhancing perceptions of relational connection for the participants, among them responsiveness to population and setting; arts-based intervention; intermodal transfer; and flexibility of method.

### **Responsiveness to Population and Setting**

The nature of the correctional setting poses numerous barriers to the provision of impactful mental health services. Challenges born of the institutional setting and impacting this research included the lack of a well-established culture of expressive therapies; application of the method within a previously-established group; significant diversity in levels of functioning across group participants; participants' and facilitators' lack of control relative to scheduling and cancellations; restrictions on materials; overall instability of treatment environment; and strict regulations and schedules for intra-institutional inmate movement.



The inclusion of appropriate warm-up activities also played a particularly critical role in encouraging attentiveness and participation in each session. Within the correctional environment, peer and staff interactions and other happenings outside of the therapeutic space often cause inmates to arrive to mental health appointments feeling dysregulated, needing to vent and lacking focus. A thoughtfully-designed warm-up can aid group members in stepping away from the outside environment, priming them for meaningful participation. During the course of the method, embodied warm-ups aided participants in arriving mentally and physically to the space. Meditation, breath work and movement prompted present-moment bodily awareness.

In efforts to control for the interference of some of the abovementioned institutional factors, the author elected to implement the method over the course of only two sessions. The maintenance of a cohesive group of participants across sessions was favored over the implementation of a more lengthy intervention. Numerous themes and insights emerged and could have been explored further within the scope of a longer-term group. Despite the challenge of adapting the method to suit the necessary time constraints, the space of two sessions did appear to provide participants adequate opportunity for creative expression, processing and closure.

As noted above, the correctional environment is highly regimented—inmates are required to adjust to institutional scheduling and regulations. The present research was implemented with participants living and receiving services in a milieu treatment setting within the prison and thus accustomed to additional layers of structure and routine. The author altered the design of the method to better suit this subset of the prison population, identifying a layout to be mirrored across both sessions. Within the containment offered by this structure, participants were receptive to new directives and material.

In remaining responsive to the population, the author noted participants' potential experiences of revictimization while incarcerated. Institutional oppression can mimic the dynamics of prior abusive relationships, placing female inmates with histories of trauma (some 98% of them, according to The National Resource Center on Justice Involved Women, 2016) at high risk for retraumatization. As outlined in the literature review, the prison environment is also apt to reinforce a belief in personal powerlessness. This rehashing of traumatic experiences serves to compound the various challenges inherent to the correctional setting.

In designing effective and impactful therapeutic directives for this population, the lasting influences and continuation of abuse and traumatization need to be factored in. Dirks (2004) explores the exacerbating effect of the prison environment on trauma symptoms. The absence of a safe place of retreat prolongs and enhances psychological suffering. The group therapeutic space, if thoughtfully maintained with clear boundaries, can serve as a safe container for the traumatized inmate. Herman (1992) emphasizes the severe and damaging impact of trauma on interpersonal attachments as well as the necessity of repairing these attachments through social connection. Herman's approach to recovery through connection makes a case for an individual's continued presence and engagement in a therapeutic group having the potential to remedy the effects of trauma.

### **Arts-based Intervention**

Although participants were unfamiliar with the social atom prior to the session, there was little resistance to attempting the directive. Participants initiated art-making without delay. The author was curious about the factors contributing to this ease of participation. Despite a high level of group cohesion and familiarity, many participants had historically been hesitant with art-making in past group settings. In addition to resistance, the author had anticipated some negative participant responses to art products from one session to the next. In prior groups, reflective

distance had caused participants to react to their artwork with shame, embarrassment, disgust, and anger. Such feelings were neither observed nor openly communicated during the present intervention. In fact, the author noted an increase in participation from Session One to Session Two.

Of interest to the author were two points of significant energetic shift during Session Two. These energetic shifts call to mind Kossak's (2015) work on attunement. He posits that collective practice of the arts serves as a gateway for embodied empathy and relational attunement between Self and Other. It was evident that the shift from individual to collective expression and art-making enhanced participants' levels of relational attunement in the moment.

The first instance took place during the warm-up, as participants formed a circle facing one another and engaged in movement and mirroring. The tone of the group felt lighter as group members became more talkative, quick to laugh, and were playful with movement and sound. Later on in the session, participants were asked to relocate from the three smaller tables in the room to the large table, again gathering in a circle to face one another. This move from individual to collective art-making seemed to signal a shift from isolation to connection within the group room itself. As before, the tone shifted at this point, and participants became more talkative and playful, made jokes and encouraged one another along in the task. This developmental progression within the scope of a singular group has implications for the implementation of longer-term group expressive arts therapeutic interventions.

The collaborative poem resulting from Session Two was powerfully written and rich in emotional material, representing an authentic and unfiltered expression of connection and disconnection for the incarcerated woman. The writing portrayed the dynamics of social isolation, oppression, revictimization, the pain of maintaining extra-institutional relationships while incarcerated, and the fear of reentry to the community. Conversely, the poem also spoke of

the connection and attunement which can be born of parallel experience with peers, the strength maintained in bonds made prior to incarceration, the freedom of the expressive arts, and the value of empathic witnessing on the part of peers and mental health professionals. This creative treatment modality allowed participants a newfound ownership and means for self-expression of their experiences.

In the view of Gussak and Ploumis-Devick (2004), art-making constitutes a means of self-expression deemed acceptable to the prison community, and an alternate means of communicating complex emotional material. Framed in this way, one can surmise that nonverbal communication was less threatening for participants within the context of the first group session. Interestingly, the group demonstrated significant hesitance and resistance to verbal processing throughout the intervention. The author noted participants' significant delay in providing one-word check-ins during Session One. Individuals also declined to elaborate on their eventual responses when provided the opportunity to do so. Across both sessions, time set aside for verbal processing following art-making was largely utilized by only two participants. By the second session, discussion seemed to occur somewhat more organically, though it remained restricted.

### **Intermodal Transfer**

Intermodal transfer appeared to be impactful in further enhancing insight and in deepening the creative process. Individuals voiced their appreciation of the art-making as influencing the content of their expressive writing and expanding their awareness of their own inner experience. In her work on expressive arts therapy theory, Natalie Rogers (1993) emphasizes the usefulness of intermodal artistic practice in enhancing knowledge of self. Participants found value in varying approaches to the expressive writing task. While some wrote out narratives of the action playing out in their social atoms, others posed existential questions, wrote poetic lines, or dialogued with an imagined other. Participants who have found some

difficulty in writing tasks in the past appeared to work with increased ease, drawing inspiration from their visual art products and from the freedom of the creative process.

Participants were able to deepen their engagement with Session One's material as they distilled their artwork and creative writing process into words and phrases for use in Session Two. The group discussion throughout the second session opened a fruitful dialogue regarding human connection. Referencing the artwork and expressive writing created in the previous session, participants articulated their thoughts and insights anew.

The following themes emerged from the discussion: inevitability and importance of connection; tendency to isolate within the correctional environment; connection to Self; connection to nature; connection to others by proximity, familial bonds, and/or commonality of experience; connection and disconnection with staff members; and the power of art therapy to elicit connection. Throughout the session and especially during art-making, participants began to reminisce about positive and enjoyable experiences they had recalled from prior treatment settings with staff and peers. Participants also began naming personal accomplishments and pleasant memories from prior treatment experiences. Revisiting and working with themes for a second session and in various modalities opened participants to one another, the facilitators, and themselves. This process invited and supported vulnerability and emotional intimacy.

Particular themes that arose in discussion, namely *the tendency to isolate* and *the importance of connection*, were consistent with Judith Herman's seminal 1992 work detailing the dialectic of trauma and the steps toward recovery. The emergence of the themes supported the foundations of what is known about the course of trauma exposure and response as well as treatment. Participants' discussion of dynamics of connection and disconnection with various staff members as well as reminiscing on positive past treatment experiences served as an example of Dirks' (2004) position on the healing presence of the therapist. While participants

viewed many staff members as ‘robots’ who were disinterested in connecting with inmates, mental health staff were seen in a different light. The author and her co-facilitator exemplified the idea that “intimidation and intimacy do not have to coexist in all relationships,” (p. 110). Participants spoke of the efficacy of expressive arts therapy in generating deeply emotional bonds between participants and facilitators through the sharing process and in encouraging depth of conversation.

### **Flexibility of Method**

Flexibility of the method framework allowed for the active participation of individuals with a variety of mental health diagnoses and diverse levels of functioning. All of the individuals present participated meaningfully within the structure of a singular directive. Though some participants required additional explanation, directives were easily adjusted and the group goals and structure remained intact. The kinesthetic focus of the method was uniquely effective with individuals for whom verbal communication tends to be challenging. Participants chose distinct approaches to the directives offered, creating diverse social atoms and samples of expressive writing. The structuring of the method accommodated diverse approaches and enabled their being combined to form one seamless final creative product.

### **Limitations and Recommendations for Future Study**

The sample of participants was only partially representative of the larger female prison population. All participants had diagnoses of PTSD, reflecting statistics that suggest rates of traumatization in incarcerated women to be as high as 98% (National Resource Center on Justice Involved Women, 2016). Participants’ complex and chronic diagnostic pictures were also consistent with the literature. The findings of DeHart et al. (2014) demonstrated that women’s experiences of interpersonal violence over the lifespan predict greater severity in

symptomatology attributed to depression, anxiety and PTSD as well as predisposition to substance misuse.

However, multiple factors contributed to the imprecision of the measures implemented. A major limitation of the method as executed was the small sample size. The lack of diversity in race and ethnicity, age, and other factors further decreases generalizability to the greater population of incarcerated women. While all participants in the method were White, a review of the literature clearly demonstrates the disproportionate overrepresentation of African American/Black and Latina women in the correctional system (National Resource Center on Justice Involved Women, 2016). Though one participant was diagnosed with gender dysphoria, this individual's experience cannot be seen as representative of the experiences of all transgender individuals or those with gender dysphoria (of either natal sex) serving sentences in women's correctional facilities. A separate research process would be required to conduct an in-depth exploration of either of the aforementioned topics.

The participant group also shared unique characteristics resulting from their status as being housed on the RTU. Prior to the method being implemented, this group of participants shared relational ties not translatable to the majority of women housed in the facility. Structured group treatment, recreation time and housing in a milieu setting of fewer than 30 inmates foster robust emotional bonds and a sense of community for RTU inmates. This level of camaraderie is not replicated in the same way on other housing units. Additionally, as a result of staffing shortages, inmates on the RTU are some of the few with regular access to art therapy. Prior experience potentially predisposed participants to higher levels of comfort and ease with the arts-based method.

A level of bias exists in the design and implementation of the method by an intern with under a year's experience in correctional mental health care. Consultation with a multi-

disciplinary team of professionals with higher levels of experience in the field would be advisable in the work of designing future methods. Additionally, the author was required to work within the purview of predetermined structure and had a short time span for implementing the research methods. Future research would do well to broaden the scope of the current investigation, and to consider methods which provide the scaffolding for the benefits of prison-based interventions to be maintained in the outside community.

The present study constitutes a necessary divergence from the focus on the concerns of the male inmate. Outcomes of the present method provide initial recommendations for the future of women's mental health treatment in the correctional setting. Consistent with the existing research, participation in the present expressive arts therapy method elicited joy, playfulness, and positive memories. It enhanced prosocial behavior, problem-solving skills, and perceptions of interpersonal connectedness. By way of participating in the present research, inmates effected change not only in their own lives, but enhanced understanding of and furthered progress toward the continued improvement upon gender-responsive services in the correctional environment.

Continued integration of expressive arts therapy into correctional mental health care has the potential for multilayered and far-reaching impact. When incarcerated women are provided opportunities to communicate their stories through creative expression, progress is made toward the work of humanizing the dehumanized. In forging connection through the co-creation of art, poetry, and any other expressive medium, incarcerated women move further from the powerlessness, retraumatization and isolation that often define their lives. The expressive arts join and connect through shared humanity, increasing visibility and inspiring action toward the just and ethical treatment of women's mental health.



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## Appendix

## Untitled Creative Analytic Practice (CAP) Poem

Drawn to looking at my roots	daughter, my children	Missing them.
Out in the big bad world,	family, soul twin, friends	Understand me!
People who I love: buried.	someone you connect with.	There's a lot here I can't choose.
Mom and Dad have passed now	I love them the most.	A lot here I've lost.
Old friends, lost family	I miss them in my life.	
Now distant.		(exact opposite thinking
When one stops (me?),	The past took me places,	whenever possible)
It affects all others	taught me grounding and strength.	
Yet I still bear love for them.	I kept finding myself.	I'm happy to remember
Will they ever spiral back to me?		What I've learned
	Good or bad,	Working with others:
Without dwelling,	We are always changing and	Bubbly people
I never want to forget	evolving.	Who made me smile,
where I came from.	Clock gears spinning.	amazing people I admire,
Blood is thicker than water.	The past,	Drawn like flowers,
Family is fated.	once super important,	Bubbles and swirls.
Those who are here	still there.	Blue, purple, airy, & good.
Those who aren't	recycled.	Repaying their memories
Tethered to you		With calm movement
by a giant umbilical cord.	My turn. Parole.	and empathy.
	Thrust from this safe womb	Being connected.
People I've lost	in a few months	Feeling happy with my life,
will be remembered.	to interact with society—	Blessed.
I will always think about them.	Apprehensive as a result.	
Strong and set like stone.	I have found myself	Beautiful things
soulmate, granddaughter	Overwhelmed	matter the most.
best friend, stepfather	Skittish	
sister, husband	Anxious	I do too.