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Expressive Arts Therapy for Healing Gang Trauma: A Community Engagement

Capstone Thesis

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Abstract

Many ex-gang members have experienced trauma. The purpose of this thesis is to explore the benefits of arts-based programs for rehabilitating gang members who have experienced trauma. The literature reviewed explores arts-based programs for those who have been incarcerated and those who have experienced trauma. The author was part of a community engagement with a gang-rehabilitation program in Los Angeles. The author participated in Music, Art and Drama based programs with ex-gang members. This experience further demonstrated the benefits of the expressive arts being used as a tool for treating trauma, especially in a community of people who have participated in gang life.

Keywords: Expressive arts, gang, trauma, therapy, gang-rehabilitation, arts-based

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Introduction

A young gang member is walking down the street, a car drives by and opens fire. The young man hears the screech of the tires and the screams of his friends and passersby. He feels a bullet enter and exit his flesh and he falls to the pavement. He tastes the blood and asphalt on his tongue. He sees his friend die steps away.

Trauma is a multi-sensory experience. Because trauma is such a multi-sensory experience, healing trauma should be multi-sensory as well. Steele and Malchiodi (2012) discussed trauma-informed practice in the expressive arts. They explored the idea that trauma is a sensory experience and explained that expressive arts therapy was a highly effective tool for processing trauma, because it involves using the body to express feelings.

Every day, hundreds of children, join a gang community. For many the gang membership is fostered through relationships with relatives and friends. For some it is an option that seems appealing as a form of community or for many it is the only option. Father Greg Boyle, founder of Homeboy Industries, a gang rehabilitation center in Los Angeles, explained that kids do not join gangs because they want to be a part of something, they are most likely joining a gang to get away from something. Boyle explained in Tippet's (2013) podcast On Being, "It's about a lethal absence of hope. It's about kids who can't imagine a future for themselves. It's about kids who weren't seeking anything when they joined a gang. It's about the fact that they're always fleeing something — always, without exception." (Tippet, 2013, para 23)

This distinct trauma is the center of the research of this thesis; children who have experienced trauma often join a gang to get away from a bad situation. It is likely the trauma continues in the gang and they can become incarcerated as a consequence of their involvement

for a variety of reasons. They then become traumatized by things that happen in prison as well. Ferszt, Hayes, DeFedele and Horn (2004) explained that when trauma happens to prisoners they do not have an outlet to heal the trauma. Then one day they are free, and the only place that seems safe to them is the place that traumatized them in the first place, and the cycle continues. Father Greg Boyle's organization's mission statement states that Homeboy "provides hope, training, and support to formerly gang involved and previously incarcerated men and women allowing them to re-direct their lives and become contributing members of our community" (Homeboy Industries). When someone begins the eighteen-month rehabilitation program at Homeboy, they begin by working on themselves. Mental health counseling is a big part of helping to improve their self-worth and increase their self-efficacy. The results from Father Boyle's program indicated that helping someone with their self-worth or helping someone improve their self-worth they are less likely to reoffend. If one has self-worth, one is more likely to make good choices for themselves and their lives.

Expressive arts therapy can provide a therapeutic environment where self-worth is gained and actualized. Trauma is a multi-sensory experience it is not just experienced intellectually or emotionally. Expressive arts therapy combined with trauma informed care is a more complete method of treating the entire individual. My review of the literature indicates that a more effective way to approach the trauma of rehabilitating gang members who have been traumatized may be through the multi-sensory experience of expressive arts therapy.

The aim of this Capstone Thesis Project is to examine the benefits of expressive arts therapy for rehabilitating gang members dealing with trauma and a review of the literature supported the efficacy of this approach. For example, Ferszt et al., (2004) shared the benefits of art therapy for incarcerated bereaved women. Additionally, Ezell and Levy (2003) successfully

used an arts based program as a therapeutic tool for juvenile offenders. Hohmann, Bradt, Stegemann and Koelsch (2017) discovered that using music therapy or music based interventions had noticeable effects in the areas of motivation, openness to treatment and desire for change. All of these goals are instrumental in the rehabilitation of gang members. Belkofer and Konopka, (2008) assessed brain activity before and after art making and they were able to see the positive effects of art therapy treatment. These are just a few examples of the benefits of arts based therapy for people who have suffered trauma, such as rehabilitating gang members.

In addition to understanding the research, as a researcher in the field, recognizing the importance of and practicing cultural humility is a very important part of this research and community engagement. Working with a community that is mostly non-white for the purpose of this thesis, it would be important to understand not only cultural views on therapy, but how the arts have shaped them personally and culturally. Only after this kind of consideration could expressive arts be introduced as a viable healing tool, especially when being applied by a white practitioner.

In summary, trauma is a multi-sensory experience and expressive arts therapy is a multi-sensory treatment. Therefore, this paper will report the benefits of expressive arts therapy as trauma treatment. Homeboy has shown that increasing a rehabilitating gang member's self-worth makes them less likely to reoffend according to Boyle (2010). Expressive arts therapy is an effective method of achieving a greater sense of self-worth.

Literature Review

There is a great deal of research regarding the arts as a therapeutic tool. There also exists research about expressive arts therapies as a tool for healing trauma. Using the arts for those who are currently, or have been incarcerated is also researched to some degree. However, there

is not much research specifically about using expressive arts therapy for men and women who have been affected by the trauma experienced in gang culture and in the prison industrial complex. Some researchers, such as Ferszt et al. (2004), as well as Ezell and Levy (2003), used a qualitative approach to research the topic of using arts based work in healing those that have been incarcerated. Hohmann, Bradt, Stegemann and Koelsch, (2017) used a quantitative approach to test the effects of arts based methods for those dealing with substance use disorders. Belkofer and Konopka, (2008) used the quantitative data of electroencephalogram (EEG) test machine to collect data supporting the use of arts as therapy. Many of the other resources in this literature review will show the benefits of an arts based approach in therapy. All of the studies that were reviewed had positive results. The community engagement was developed and guided by the positive results in this literature review.

Qualitative data reviewed focused on results regarding the benefits of an arts-based approach for incarcerated women who have lost a loved one, and incarcerated juvenile offenders. Ferszt et al., (2004) provided individual art therapy sessions for eight incarcerated bereaved women over a period of eight weeks. They used art therapy as a means of allowing the women a safe space to explore their feelings of loss that they have not expressed in the prison environment. Participants were women who had experienced the death of a significant person during imprisonment, had the ability to speak and read English, had no major medical or psychiatric health issues, and who would be incarcerated during the entirety of the sessions. During the eight-week period each participant had an individual session with the art therapist. Each session involved a different art therapy directive.

This methodology seems to be an effective approach. Ferszt et al. (2004), noted that many incarcerated women are not able to express their feelings for fear of showing weakness.

Offering women an outlet to talk about their feelings allowed them to work through their emotions, especially when dealing with the loss of a loved one. Using an art therapist and an art-based approach offered the participants a new way to explore their feelings and also allowed for a safe environment in which to express themselves.

The participants of this study completed eight-week sessions. Two weeks later the researcher conducted “post-interviews where women could describe their personal experiences and responses in regard to the art therapy sessions” (Ferszt et al., 2004, p. 193). The researchers assessed the approach through analyzing post-interview data mixed with process notes showing the participants’ progress during the sessions. The outcome was positive: “Six women in this study described in great detail how the art therapy allowed them to express feelings that were ‘bottled up’ or were ‘shut down’ for fear of ‘getting into trouble’” (Ferszt et al., 2004, p. 197). For one participant, Ashley, “This therapeutic process helped her to begin to identify and grieve the multiple losses in her life” (p. 197). Five women showed increased self-esteem and sense of competence as well as a positive affect each day after the art therapy session. The researchers noted, “Seven women recommended that the program be continued and suggested that it be increased in length; one woman preferred traditional talk-therapy” (p. 198). These individual art-therapy sessions seemed to have a positive effect on most of the participants.

This data (Ferszt et al., 2004) showed the power of the therapeutic relationship and the arts process. These incarcerated women expressed the inability to go through the grieving process prior to the study. The individual sessions in a private space where trust was built allowed them to grieve for the loss of their loved ones. The art materials gave them a new platform in which to explore and express their feelings.

Ezell and Levy (2003) conducted a study in which the approach was not clinical or therapeutic; however, the data was relevant to this project since the study demonstrated the positive effects of the arts on incarcerated youth. Ezell and Levy explained, “This article focuses on the evaluation of an innovative arts program that facilitates teaching and interaction between artists and institutionalized juvenile offenders” (p. 108). The program that Ezell and Levy studied, *A Changed World*, provides art workshops for juvenile offenders. Susan Warner, the program's creator, asserted that art provides a means to express the self, feelings and ideas. Her program also offers opportunities for decision-making and allows the juveniles to take ownership and responsibility for something. The goal of the approach is to “reduce the recidivism of juvenile offenders through their participation in culturally relevant, experiential arts activities” (p. 109). The art workshops ranged from two weeks long to two months long (2003). The methods included individualized curriculum within a team approach; creating a safe, non-judgmental environment; countering negativism with positive role modeling; guiding the decision-making process; being committed to the students; and nurturing leadership qualities.

This seems to be a successful and positive program for incarcerated youth. It serves as a model for using methods to benefit incarcerated youth. Many of these youths have experienced trauma or their adult role models are compromised due to severe psycho-social stressors. The safe space nurtured their positive self-esteem and also provided them with an outlet for their feelings. It seems these young people are at a time in their lives where they can be guided in the right direction and the arts-based approach allowed them to become leaders and take ownership over something they've created. Therefore, they can also take ownership of their own feelings.

Ezell and Levy (2003) used pre-test and post-tests to measure changes in self-esteem, peer relations, cultural awareness and community identity. The youth self-reported on self-

esteem and peer relations, and the staff recorded their observations on cultural awareness and community identity. Learning goals were also set for each workshop and were assessed by their art teachers. Ezell and Levy collected all of these data over a three-year period. There were not significant changes over the course of the first year. However, by the second and third years the teachers observed that “youth participants were highly engaged in the workshop and their projects, were quite happy to get a break from their usual routine of their institutions, and were open about personal issues” (Ezell & Levy, 2003, p. 112). Similarly, staff reported that “participation in the workshops significantly reduced rule breaking and misbehavior” (p. 112). Finally, the four major processes that occurred with the participants were “connecting, expressing, learning and discovery” (p. 113). This study shows that an arts-based approach had a positive impact on a majority of the juveniles that participated.

This study (Ezell & Levy, 2003) was a useful analysis of arts-based approaches, though not clinical in nature. The findings are vital to my study because it shows the power of an arts-based approach. The children in this juvenile center had an opportunity to express themselves with the arts, and as a result they were able to connect with others and learn something new.

Both of these articles show qualitative data that will be helpful in my thesis concerning incorporating expressive arts therapy for ex-gang members coping with trauma. Both articles show the power of the arts process. They also show how the arts can be a tool for self-expression and improved self-esteem.

In my search for quantitative data I decided to focus on results regarding the benefits of an arts-based approach. The first article I read was “Effects of music therapy and music-based interventions in the treatment of substance use disorders: A systematic review” (Hohmann, Bradt,

Stegemann & Koelsch, 2017). This was a good place to start because the authors examined quantitative data in music-based interventions.

In their study, Hohmann, Bradt, Stegemann and Koelsch focused on interventions dealing with substance use disorders. These disorders could also be part of the issues that ex-gang members face as a result of their trauma. This review included five quantitative studies.

Hohmann et al. (2017) explored studies that differed in treatment settings, frequency, duration, persons guiding the session, and outcome variables. All of these studies included music therapy or some sort of music based intervention. They explained that their subjects were suffering from substance use disorders and were in a range of ages, genders, and seriousness of their disorders. They also included subgroups like women and adolescents. (Hohmann et al., 2017).

Hohmann et al.'s (2017) results are fleshed out in several different categories. The authors discovered that using music therapy or music based interventions had noticeable effects in the areas of motivation, openness to treatment and desire for change. Of the ten results they collected, eight (80%) showed a strong sense of self-esteem. The authors did not reach clear-cut results on the category of depression. Five of the studies resulted in inadequate numerical data, and only three out of eleven (27%) showed a high level of self-worth.

Hohmann et al. (2017) also focused on the overall helpfulness of Music Therapy. They found that with a high level of self-worth being shown, nearly 40%, when they compared music therapy to a group using verbal therapy. The authors explored coping skills. There was not a high result for using Music Therapy with coping skills. Only 33% of those studied showed evidence of self-worth. Hohmann et al. (2017) concluded that there was evidence for the benefits of Music Therapy and Music Based Interventions. Nearly 67% of those tested showed positive effects as compared to the control group (Hohmann et al., 2017, p. 21).

Data from Hohmann et al. (2017) can be helpful in my own research because they show the benefits of Music Therapy. I am focusing on an inter-modal experience, and since music therapy is a part of this focus, this information is very helpful to my own thesis.

The second article I read was conducting art therapy research using quantitative EEG measures (Belkofer & Konopka, 2008). The authors conducted a quantitative study in which the subject made art for an hour then was connected to an electroencephalograph (EEG). Belkofer and Konopka (2008) expected that the EEG results would show the differences in the participant's brain following an hour of painting and drawing (Belkofer & Konopka, 2008, p. 56). The authors hoped to understand how the brain reacts to art as stimuli. They explained, the technology of neuroscience is giving art therapists an opportunity to see and understand the benefits of art as therapy (Belkofer & Konopka, 2008, p. 57). The results of the test were positive. Belkofer and Konopka (2008) noted that the alpha band frequencies showed no difference in power in areas of the brain that are relaxed and aware. However, in three lobes of the entire brain (occipital, parietal and temporal) the power increased in strength (Belkofer & Konopka, 2008, p. 59). By assessing the brain activity before and after art making they were able to see the positive effects of art therapy treatment.

This type of research is helpful to my topic because it shows that quantitative data exists. This data proves scientifically that art therapy has an impact on brain activity. I, like Belkofer and Konopka (2008), hope researchers will conduct more tests like this in the future using more subjects.

In my search for arts-based research, I was unable to find much that focused on my specific topic. I was able to find articles that explored art-based research and its importance to the research process. These articles showed the benefits of arts-based research. Arts-based

research expresses the experiences of the researcher and participants as a source of understanding.

The first article I read was “Posttraumatic Growth in Youth Survivors of a Disaster: An Arts-Based Research Project” (Mohr, 2014). Cruz and Berrol (2012) explained, art-based research uses art to collect data. They also explained it is a way to recognize the creative process. Mohr (2014) used art-based research to see how young people have grown since the experience of a traumatic disaster. Mohr focused on post-traumatic growth, which is “a positive experience of change that may occur as a result of a struggle with difficult challenges or trauma” (Mohr, 2014, p. 155). Mohr continued, “Distressing negative events often catalyze personal development” (Mohr, 2014, p. 156).

Mohr (2014) utilized eleven participants who were 11-19 years old. All the participants met the same criteria: they were survivors of the same earthquake, they were interested in the arts, they participated in previous art therapy interventions personally and as active helpers. The purpose of her research was “to explore perceptions of posttraumatic growth in youth survivors through and in relationships to their creative work” (p.157). Mohr believes that arts-based research is about creating art as a way of examining an experience.

Mohr (2014) used photography as a way for the participants to explore three subjects, “first, what they considered to be their personal strengths; second, what or who had helped them most since the earthquake; and third, how they felt they had changed since the earthquake” (p. 157). Using their photographs, they created a mixed-media collage. Participants were asked if they could see a storyline in their collage. Several similar themes emerged from the participants. The most distinct ones were honoring remembrance and the need for relatedness or connection. Through the interview process and the reflection of the artwork, Mohr was able to “open a

reflective exchange” and they were able to “utilize the interview and art-making time as a process of holding and honoring this key experience” (p. 158).

Mohr (2014) discovered the power of the community for these young people. She also discovered the importance of family for all of them. These were both themes that arose in the deconstruction of their artwork. This deep connection to community and family acted as a catalyst to rebuild their community after the earthquake. Rebuilding their community helped give them an opportunity to move forward together. Mohr concluded, “The process of posttraumatic growth appeared to take two main forms: one inward and personal and the other actively engaged in the community” (Mohr, 2014, p.160). The arts proved to be a useful tool for comfort and gave participants an opportunity to validate each other’s lived experiences.

The second article I read was “I Followed the Butterflies: Poetry of Positive Emotions in Art Therapy Research” (Chilton, Gerber, Council, & Dreyer, 2015). This study also used an arts-based approach. This particular study explored “the dynamics of positive expressing positive emotions, within the inter-subjective art-making process in an art therapy-like experience” (Chilton et al., 2015, p. 3). The researchers hoped to discover what happens in the process of communicating positive emotions in art making.

The method Chilton, et al., (2015) used involved arts-based research, the researchers used art making to explore the research topic. The researchers also used art making as a way of allowing the participants to explore the emotions they felt. Making artwork in a trusting relationship was also part of the methodology. After creating one piece of art they were asked to make a follow-up piece. The researchers participated in the art making, which is typical for arts-based research. The researchers “created artistic symbols and metaphors involving nature imagery to make visible subjective emotional experience” (Chilton et al., 2015, p.10).

One participant was involved in inter-subjective meaning making. Together with the researcher, the participant searched for words that could describe her experience. Another researcher used rhythm and repeating to “capture the emotional impact of appreciating beauty” (Chilton et al., 2015, p. 6). Researchers also found ways to have further discussions about the artwork presented. The goal of the researchers was to find meaning in the stories that emerged from the visual arts.

The researchers (Chilton et al., 2015) explored the art that was created by participants, then invited them to make more art, and found ways to further discuss and explore that as well. The researchers found that meanings changed over time. Since nature and other imagery from the world was used, there were many opportunities for metaphors. The use of metaphors was common among most participants. Chilton et al., explain, “Art and poetry served to translate knowledge of felt experience, mapping through aesthetic expression the forms of life” (Chilton, et al., 2015, p. 10). The researchers knew that artistic symbols had the power to help participants explore and find emotions. These symbols had the ability to help the participants express themselves in different ways. This was the goal of the researchers in this study.

Arts-based research is helpful to my topic because it shows the importance of arts-based research. I hope that I am able to discover more arts based research related to my topic of ex-gang members and trauma. It seems that arts-based therapy is very useful in helping clients explore feelings that are hidden in their subconscious. I agree that arts-based research can be even more helpful as it is a fuller study that uses the arts not just to find the data, but also in doing the research. Arts-based research uses the experience of the participants as well as the researcher to get information and gain understanding.

A large part of the healing process when working with rehabilitating gang members is the use of trauma-informed care in connection with expressive arts therapy. A few different researchers explore the benefits of trauma-informed care. Steele and Malchiodi (2012) recognized the importance of understanding the trauma your client has experienced, and validating your clients by recognizing the signs and symptoms of their trauma. They believe in responding to their trauma using the arts and fully integrating their experiences into the experientials. Steele and Malchiodi (2012) believe that you should also empower your clients so they will not be re-traumatized. Malchiodi and Steele (2012) explain “the importance of not only how trauma influences mind and body, self-regulation, and trauma integration, but also the impact of relationships, environment, and development throughout childhood and adolescence. Each of these aspects is critical to creating individualized and comprehensive trauma-informed care that addresses the sensory experiences of young clients who are traumatized” (p. xix). They believe in Trauma-Informed Therapy.

Trauma-Informed Therapy uses many steps to assess and work with a client who has experienced trauma. Steele and Malchiodi (2012) explained, you should always keep in mind “there is not one method that works in all situations. You need to take it case by case. The client needs to feel safe in the environment if you want to have success” (p. 52). Trauma-Informed Practice is about understanding, validating, responding, and empowering.

Bath (2008) explained the two types of trauma, “type I, or acute trauma, which results from exposure to a single overwhelming event, and type 2, or complex trauma (a.k.a. developmental or relationship trauma), which results from extended exposure to traumatizing situations” (p. 17).

Bath (2008) goes on to explain the three pillars of trauma-informed care, “[the]

development of safety, the promotion of healing relationships, and the teaching of self-management and coping skills” (p. 18). Safety is one of our core needs as an infant, therefore Bath (2008) explained that this must be the first goal of trauma-informed care. A client must feel safe in order to begin the process of healing trauma. Where clients feel safe trust can begin to form.

This trust is built in the second pillar, the promotion of healing relationships. Bath (2008) explained, “Positive relationships are necessary for healthy human development, but trauma undermines these life-giving connections” (p. 19). Bath (2008) says some children that have been traumatized may associate adults with that trauma, so building that trust may initially be difficult. Bath (2008) says, “The task for care providers and other mentors is to help restructure these associations so that the children can develop positive emotional responses (e.g., happiness, joy, feelings of security) with some adults and can learn to accurately distinguish between those who threaten harm and those that do not” (p. 20).

The final pillar of trauma-informed care is teaching of self-management and coping skills. Bath (2008) explained, “A primary focus of work with traumatized children needs to be on teaching and supporting them to learn new ways of effectively managing their emotions and impulses” (p. 20). Ultimately, Bath (2008) believes that children who have been traumatized need adults that can “promote healing and connection” (p. 21).

Black et al., (2012) also discuss trauma-informed care, focusing on adolescents. Black et al., (2012) explained, “Factors such as the length of time an individual experienced a particular trauma, as well as its severity, lead to an increased likelihood that the individual will suffer from long-lasting difficulties” (p. 192). These long-lasting difficulties are known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Black et al. (2012), believe that trauma-informed care is beneficial for

PTSD. The researchers explained there are many “trauma-informed treatments currently available for treating adolescents with symptoms of trauma” (p. 194).

Black et al., (2012) shared, “Multimodal trauma treatment (MMTT)...is grounded in the theory that experiencing trauma at a young age disrupts development, and it attempts to use age appropriate CBT techniques to help the children/adolescents overcome trauma” (p. 194).

Because Expressive Arts Therapy is a multi-modal approach, it could be a useful treatment for treating PTSD. Black et al., (2012) described the five common therapeutic techniques. Those techniques are “psychoeducation, coping skills, creating a trauma narrative, cognitive restructuring, and creating a post treatment plan” (p. 198). All of these techniques would be useful in working with rehabilitating gang members. The arts are a beneficial way to explore these techniques, especially creating a trauma narrative.

In 1988, Father Greg Boyle began working with a community that was affected by gang violence. His mission was to help find jobs for ex-gang members trying to re-enter society and stay away from gang culture. It began with a simple question, “What if we were to invest in gang members, rather than just seek to incarcerate our way out of this problem?” (Boyle, 2010, p. 8). Boyle (2010) explained, “Here is what we seek: a compassion that can stand in awe at what the poor have to carry rather than stand in judgment at how they carry it” (p. 67).

Inspired by the countless stories of success at Homeboy, Father Boyle wrote his first book in 2010 about these life-changing, and life-giving, experiences titled, *Tattoos On the Heart: the power of boundless compassion* (2010). Homeboy Industries is now a multi-million-dollar non-profit organization with a nearly 80% rehabilitation and reintegration success rate. Boyle (2010) explained, “Homeboy Industries is not for those that need help, only for those who want it.

In this sense, we are a gang-rehabilitation center.” (p. 7). One of the main components of the rehabilitation of its members is mental health counseling.

Using trauma informed care as a basis for healing, the main focus is the trust built between the therapist and the client. Boyle (2010) discussed this relationship, and its benefits to the healing process for rehabilitating gang members, “Compassion is not a relationship between the healer and the wounded. It's a covenant between equals...Compassion is always, at its most authentic, about a shift from the cramped world of self-preoccupation into a more expansive place of fellowship, of true kinship (p. 77).

A large part of the healing process is an increase of self-worth. Those that have self-worth are less vulnerable to the traps of gang life. Boyle (2010) explained, “Author and psychiatrist James Gilligan writes that the self cannot survive without love, and the self, starved of love, dies. The absence of self-love is shame, ‘just as cold is the absence of warmth.’ Disgrace obscuring the sun.” (p. 46). This self-love is the basis of a successful transformation.

After the success of his first book, Father Greg Boyle published a second book filled with more examples of the power of radical kinship. Boyle’s second book is titled, *Barking at The Choir: The power of radical kinship* (2017). He further explored the idea of self-love, “The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change” (p. 27). The value of self-efficacy is clear through the countless stories of success Boyle shared. Boyle (2017) continues, “Homeboy receives people; it doesn’t rescue them. In being received rather than rescued, gang members come to find themselves at home in their own skin” (p. 57). When a person is ready for change only then can the healing truly begin.

In an interview with Krista Tippett, Father Greg Boyle addresses cultural awareness around therapy. Boyle explained, “Homies would always say, ‘Oh, I’m not crazy,’ and there was

a stigma. And then...I'd say, 'You know, it might help you to talk about all the stuff you've been through in your life.'" (Tippett, 2013). After years of trying to change the stigma around therapy within this community, finally Boyle received this response, "And then a homie once said to me, 'You mean like *Analyze This?*' He referenced that movie with Billy Crystal and Robert De Niro. And then I started hearing that, and you talk about a tipping point, where suddenly, it was OK for people to be in therapy" (Tippett, 2013). Boyle explained that today, "I don't sense any kind of stigma, which is really healthy and wonderful, because they have a lot of work to do. They've been through a lot" (Tippett, 2013).

Ottmiller and Awais (2016) discussed using the arts in community-based practice. This is relevant to working with a community of rehabilitating gang members. Ottmiller and Awais (2016) explained, "Community-based art therapy involves collaborative, therapeutic art making among members of a specific group, facilitated by a trained art therapist and aimed at expressing or generating empowerment at large, reducing stigma, and strengthening connections among participants" (p. 145). These four goals are vital when working with people who have been incarcerated or who have been part of a gang community. Allowing members to connect with other participants who have had similar experiences can also be helpful in healing. The authors go on to say, "Engagement in this kind of work is cyclical and draws on theories that emphasize empowerment, social justice, cultural considerations, and relationships, as well as the unique set of qualities that art therapists bring to community-based work" (p. 146). This article emphasized the benefits of using art therapy in community-based work.

Bhatt and Tweed (2018) discussed the impact that gang violence can have on an entire community. They researched the importance of university and community acting together to address youth violence and gang involvement. For their research they used seven academics

from four postsecondary institutions, and 11 community groups to address youth involvement in violent and criminal gang activities in their suburban region. Bhatt and Tweed (2018) gathered a group from the community and reported that, “They all felt that the policymakers had not exercised their due diligence in providing an adequate legal system to protect the public safely” (p. 152). It was because of this need for change that the community agreed to be a part of the solution. The authors further explained, “The goal was to give the findings to the community which would then take the lead in developing tools and action tasks for implementing prevention strategies” (p. 152). The researchers focused on the strengths of the community to encourage people to participate. They decided that if they focused on the way that the community had failed their youth they may be less likely to participate in the recovery process.

In addition to the community, they also had youth that were vulnerable to recruitment into gang life participate in the process. Besides giving them ownership over the project, it also provided the opportunity to learn leadership skills. The researchers recommended it was important to engage the parents of these youth. Once they had a strong group of people from the community they found ways to include policy makers in their work. The researchers shared, “As we concluded the project formally, the positive aftereffects have continued. Several community agencies are implementing research-based prevention strategies to address youth violence” (p. 159).

Walters (2014) focused her research on the use of art therapy in restorative justice. She performed an eight-week art therapy course with victims and offenders. Each session included an art-based intervention, psychoeducation and a group discussion. She found that these art-therapy sessions were not only beneficial to the offenders, but to the victims as well. Walters (2014) stated that, “This research opens a wider consideration regarding the potential inclusion

of art therapy utilizing restorative justice approaches in school-based groups to address peer violence issues within school systems” (p. 7). There could be benefits of restorative justice for rehabilitating gang members. Walters (2014) added that, “Restorative justice approaches have been correlated to significantly lower recidivism rates among many populations” (p. 8). Walters gathered data through her understanding of how the participants experienced the group therapy process. She explained, “As the sessions progressed, participants also shifted their focus from provocation to self-control” (p. 47). By the end of the sessions several of her participants were willing to refer a friend to the same program.

Brewster (2014) explored a quantitative evaluation of The Impact of Prison Arts Programs on Inmate Attitudes and Behavior. Brewster asserted that it is our responsibility to rehabilitated those that have been incarcerated. He led arts programs at four prisons for his research. Brewster (2014) stated, “arts education can help those struggling with issues of self-worth, confidence and empowerment” (p. 2). Other authors that were included in this literature review determined that increasing a person’s self-worth will make them less likely to re-offend. Brewster hypothesized that arts based programs in prisons offer inmates an opportunity to be self-reflective. He also theorized these programs promote further learning and help build self-esteem. Brewster’s “study measures attitudinal and behavioral changes in inmates who participated in theater, visual arts, poetry and writing courses offered in four California state prisons” (p. 5). Many of his participants reported that the arts helped them with self-expression as well as relieving stress and helped them make better choices. One of his areas of study was intellectual flexibility, and the author emphasized that a person with intellectual flexibility is better at problem solving and innovative thinking. Brewster explained “intellectual flexibility was found statistically to have the highest correlation with arts education than any of the other

life effectiveness skills” (p. 15). If inmates are able to increase their intellectual flexibility perhaps it would make them less likely to reoffend. Ultimately Brewster concluded that, “inmates with arts education and practice are statistically more likely to approach problems with greater creativity and intellectual flexibility compared with those without exposure to the arts” (p. 23).

Coholic et al., (2009) explored the helpfulness of arts-based methods for children living in foster care. One of the main focuses was trauma. Coholic et al. (2009), shared “It is widely accepted that healing from trauma entails the creation of a detailed trauma narrative” (p. 65). A client needs a safe space and a safe technique to create this narrative. Coholic et al. (2009), used holistic arts-based methods and subsequently asked participants if the arts based intervention was helpful. This was a qualitative study. They did the sessions for 17 weeks with 38 children and 20 foster parents. Coholic et al. (2009) stated that, “the children gained knowledge about themselves and that many had learned and applied new skills, were coping in a more constructive manner, connected with feelings, and felt more positive about themselves” (p. 69). These skills were a result of a holistic arts-based approach. The children were engaged throughout the process and acquired new skills to help heal from their trauma as well as new coping skills.

Numerous authors shared the benefits of arts-based programs. Many of the participants in their studies engaged in the arts and as result had increased self-worth, better coping skills and increased social skills and leaderships abilities. Many of these studies involved those that have been incarcerated, gang members, victims of violence and those that have experienced other traumas. All of these studies showed the benefits of an arts-based approach to increase self-efficacy and decrease the symptoms of trauma.

Methods

In the heart of Los Angeles is a large grey building that is the home of one of the most successful gang rehabilitation programs in the country. Next door, a café, is run by the same organization. The smell of fresh bread and coffee waft down the street as you pass by, but what you might notice the most is the group of men and women that congregate outside the building. Mostly people of color, some covered in tattoos and piercings, many of them in LA Dodger gear. What you might not know by looking at this group of people is that many of them have been incarcerated, most of them have been part of gang life, and all of them are on a road to recovery. This group of people is the focus of this thesis.

This organization offers an eighteen-month recovery program for gang members who are interested in rehabilitating and re-entering society. Besides employment after incarceration, one of the main focuses of this organization is to increase self-worth and self-efficacy among these young men and women. Their approach is based on the belief that if a person has self-worth they are less likely to re-offend and/or engage in dangerous behaviors.

In addition to regular mental health counseling, clients are offered a wide range of classes as part of their rehabilitation process. Some of those classes include Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Parenting classes, money management classes and more. On the mental health side, the organization also offers a range of arts-based classes. For the purpose of this thesis the researcher participated in the program named Act It Out: Anger Management, Music Heals and Art Heals. A qualified instructor led each of these classes. A registered Art Therapist led Art Heals. The classes were not mandatory, although clients must participate in a certain number of hours of class work each week. Class sizes ranged from 10-30 participants.

Act It Out: Anger Management was led by a woman who is the founder and executive director of a grassroots non-profit organization that works with incarcerated youth while they are in the probation lock-up facilities, and continues with them upon release. This class at Homeboy encourages its participants to talk about frustrations or life issues, then act out scenarios with other participants. The instructor encouraged group engagement, she utilized active listening, exploratory questions and validation techniques. The participants appeared to be in good moods, and were engaged, as evidence by eye contact and facial affect. The session began with an acting intervention to facilitate positive thoughts and increase coping.

Cultural humility is a big part of the process, especially when a white instructor leads a class, primarily made up of people of color. The group leader was aware of these cultural sensitivities and discussed them in length with the author. During the session, information was collected for this thesis project by observing and sometimes participating in the conversation. After engaging with the community in this anger management class, the author was able to make connections between other resources in the literature review.

Music Heals was another session in which the author participated. This foundation welcomes these men and women into their studios each Friday when three van-loads of people are brought to a music studio in the area. The class begins by having a large drum circle. Participants are invited to work together as a group and keep a rhythm going. The author participated in this drum circle. Most weeks a special guest is invited to play for the participants. One week they welcomed a talented performer and artist. He is an advocate for the role of the arts to heal, inspire, provoke change, and foster social connection. He is the founder and Artistic Director of a non-profit organization providing musical engagement, dialogue and teaching

artistry for homeless and incarcerated communities in Los Angeles. He spent ten minutes playing the violin for the guests, then facilitating a conversation about feelings and emotions.

The second part of music heals is an opportunity for participants to learn a new instrument. Different teachers offer piano, drums, guitar, and digital music editing classes. The author co-led a guitar class. In the end the group came together again to play what they learned. This environment offered a place to explore feelings and be validated. Most of the participants were actively engaged and able to share thoughts and feelings with the group.

Art Heals is the one arts-based program that is led by a registered Art Therapist. The art therapist, leads a community based art therapy group. The structure is less traditional to group and closer to a shelter's drop-in model. Attendance varies week to week and there is no obligation to remain the group. The author participated in art-making in order to build rapport. The art therapist, highlighted participant's strengths and positive characteristics. At the end of the group, participants were allowed to share their artwork and engaged in conversation with their peers. The author spent time after the class taking notes, asking questions and utilizing active listening with the instructor.

Results

Each arts-based session offered a different view and different experiences for the researcher. The goal for the author with each class was to assess the benefits of using expressive arts as a tool for healing for individuals who were previously experienced gang life and related violence. The facilitator used dialogue and group engagement to allow participants to feel validated in their struggles with managing their anger. One participant discussed the trouble he has with visitation of his daughter that he shares custody of with his ex-partner. His complaint was that his ex-partner doesn't respect the timetable that they agreed upon. This angers him and

he is trying to find new ways to cope. The instructor discussed the three F's. A Fact, a Feeling and a Fair request. She encouraged "I" statements. She explained that stating a fact, for example "I am always waiting a long time for you to drop our daughter off for my visitation." You follow this fact with a feeling "I feel hurt that I don't get to spend all my time with our daughter." And you end with a fair request "I would like you to be on time next time." The instructor explained to the group that this offers three things, with a fact, you are not placing blame on anyone but stating the facts of the situation, with a feeling you are being vulnerable to that person, and with a fair request you are suggesting a solution that is fair. After explaining all of this she gave that participant an opportunity to act out the situation with another participant who would play the part of his ex-partner. This class allowed participants to act out scenarios relevant to their current issues. Participants were receptive to the invitation to role play and use expressive methods that provided them encouragement and normalized their feelings.

Music heals offered a different type of healing process. The class began by engaging the group in a large drum circle. This offered an opportunity for the participants to get lost in their own rhythm. It also gave them the opportunity to listen to one another and work together at times. It appeared to strengthen the communities bond and increase healing. When the guest musician played a piece of classical music by Bach for the group, there was a calmness among the crowd. Some members closed their eyes and listened. After the musician finished playing he asked the participants what feelings were invoked in them while listening. One participant expressed the sadness he felt by listening to the music. The musician then explained that the piece he was playing had been written by J.S. Bach right after being released from prison. Bach also grew up in a violent school environment, where there were rivalries between gangs and other brutal students. He fathered twenty children with two different women. He struggled to

make money and support his children. And suddenly the men and women in this group felt a connection to the white man who had created this beautiful piece that left them feeling sad. Suddenly the connection between their experiences, hundreds of years apart, was apparent in that music room filled with rehabilitating gang members. Validation filled the room and connections abound.

A notable experience occurred for the author in music heals. As I took the opportunity to participate and help lead the guitar course I found myself sitting next to a woman I had never met. She was covered in tattoos and dressed in a high fashion jogging suit. She sported a homeboy hat. She was not someone with whom the author would normally interact. This was two women from two different worlds. We sat together as the instructor taught us some guitar chords. I asked her questions and utilized active listening in order to build rapport. I helped her with the chords when she had trouble. Suddenly we were both playing the same song. This music connected two people who may never have been able to make connections or share a perspective. The experience served as an example of how the arts and music build a connection and provide the space for us to communicate, to relate to each other and to interact in that way. We had a healing experience together. A few weeks later I saw this same woman in an art heals class, and she came over, smiled, and said hello to me.

Art Heals offered a different way for the arts to become a tool in the healing process. The author participated in an experiential with the group. Each member was given a piece of paper with a heart on it, however the heart was made up of puzzle pieces. They were offered supplies and an opportunity to use the heart as the basis of their artwork. During the art-making portion the therapist played calming music. At the end of the class people were offered the opportunity to share their work. One woman had colored the whole heart pink with the

exception of two pieces. One piece she had colored in completely black, and the other she had outlined in black. She presented her piece to the group. She explained that the black outlined puzzle piece represented her children, who she currently does not have custody of. The black puzzle piece represented her time spent in prison. After she shared the art she began a dialogue with other participants about their experiences in prison. The therapist facilitated the group, but the participants led their own discussion about shared experiences.

After the class the author had a conversation with the therapist about how the sessions usually go. She shared her experience of not bringing up prison or gang experiences, but allowing their art to evoke those feelings and conversations among them. She shared that the arts seemed to be so beneficial to this group because it offered a tool for expression and an opportunity for validation from others who have had similar experiences.

Discussion

The author completed a literature review in preparation for her community engagement in a gang rehabilitation and reintegration program. There were many similarities between the literature review and the personal experiences of the author during their community engagement. The benefits of arts-based programs for those who are incarcerated was clear from the literature review. The author observed the positive response to arts-based therapies for rehabilitating gang members. The author was able to identify positive outcomes of a group dynamic. Many of the participants found ways to connect using the arts, and then sharing their own personal experiences of gang life and/or imprisonment. The arts were a tool for the majority of the participants to explore their experiences and share them in a safe environment.

The author noted that additional research should be conducted for this group. It seems that it would be important to move forward with the following considerations, this community of

people does not want to be studied, future author must be respectful of their process and their community. Rehabilitating gang members are a wonderful group of people who have experienced significant trauma. As an author, it was important be respectful and collect data in a culturally sensitive way. It was clear that this was not a group of people that cared to be studied in any way. Considering the importance of music and art within the gang community, many of these participants come from a place where they are comfortable with the arts and further research can continue to support the need for the use of expressive arts for healing purposes.

The job of an Expressive Arts Therapist is to create a safe space where clients feel trust and connection for these participants to explore their own feelings through the arts. The author explored the benefits of expressive arts therapy when working with traumatized rehabilitating gang members. The literature showed many examples of the power of the arts for those who are incarcerated, and those who have dealt with trauma. Through community engagement with a gang rehabilitation center, the author was able to see first-hand the benefits of using the arts for healing within this community.

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