

## **SPECIAL FEATURE: REFLECTIONS ON THE UTILIZATION OF CREATIVE MODALITIES AS AN ALTERNATIVE SOCIAL WORK INTERVENTION**

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### **Introduction**

Creative Modalities have been utilized since the beginning of time to express one's culture, beliefs, history and other pertinent information that had been handed down from generation to generation. In social work, many practitioners have used various forms of expressive arts in working with their clients. However, as these are often left undocumented, there is scarcity of evidence that would have provided illustration of the impact of a non-traditional methodology such as the utilization of creative modalities in data gathering, assessment and even treatment. One of my previous jobs as a social worker in the field of Child Protection abroad involved many challenges. Finding myself in a foreign land dealing cultures different from my own, I needed to find a universal way to work with children and their families as an alternative mode. Thus began my passion for creative arts as a medium of working with my clients. Currently as an educator, I find it helpful in teaching students to grasp various theories and complex concepts with the infusion of arts as a medium of teaching

Looking at the multitude of challenges we face today, dealing with various forms and degrees of disasters, as well as existing social, political, spiritual and economic realities, there is a need for a enrich traditional modes of humanitarian assistance such as provision of basic needs like food, shelter and immediate health treatment, to introduce engaging and innovative approaches which could facilitate the healing and recovery process of the target beneficiaries. There are circumstances in which humanitarian services are needed yet also subject humanitarian

workers to constant exposure to threat and trauma. An example of this is humanitarian work in armed conflict areas which are usually also in the most neglected, remote and critical places in the country. The processing of feelings attached to such stressful incidents needs to be provided creatively and positively. It is noteworthy to mention the works of Lazarus and Folkman (1984), both known to be stress researchers, who explained that stress only commences once the person is able to appraise the situation, ascertain if it is safe or threatening. The danger can be either perceived or actually present, after which the person then identifies what resources can be mobilized to cope with the stressful situation.

### Theoretical bases

Two theoretical frameworks have been helpful in the integration of creative arts in my social work practice. First, that of Dr. Peter Levine, Director of the Somatic Experiencing Trauma Institute who states, "*Trauma need not be a life sentence. Of all the maladies that attack the human organism, trauma may ultimately be one that is recognized as beneficial. I say this because, in the healing of trauma, a transformation takes place - one that can improve the quality of life.*" (1997) Dr. Levine's approach is based on a phylogenetic model, emphasizing that trauma symptoms arise from a frozen residue of energy that is trapped in the body after traumatic circumstances that requires paying attention to how the body responds, as manifested in body sensations. Concentration on the physical manifestations caused by critical events/stressors enables the identification of triggers prior to the onset of any reaction or effects (Levine, 1997).

This leads to the paramount role played by the second concept, the utilization of creative modalities as means to express energies in a productive and positive manner. This means steering away from negative, and sometimes destructive, patterns of self-expression. However, this does not minimize the importance of the release of unnerving energy through crying, shaking, and other physical manifestations. Creative modalities simply provide alternative options for people who would want to deal with stress more creatively. The book entitled *Expressive Therapies*, edited by Cathy A. Maichiodi (2005) has been instructive in this regard. The expression modes of each individual are unique to them. There are those who are inclined to be more verbal, while others are more tactile, visual and express themselves in other forms. Thus as a social worker, I need to consider that providing our clients an opportunity to express

themselves is one thing, but offering various expression modalities is another. In social work case management, there are instances wherein we work with clients unable to express themselves either verbally or in written form. This should not be a barrier in our efforts to seek the pertinent information necessary to assess our client's situation. I believe that it is not about having insufficient information but being creative in the process of data gathering. This is based on the premise that the first step towards healing is expression, allowing the client to express through various creative forms provides immediate form of de-stressing. Simply put, I believe expression itself should not be limiting, rather it should be free flowing.

Working with our clients in a non-traditional approach creates a relaxed working atmosphere that involves veering away from traditional ways of processing insights into various creative modalities. There are instances wherein lectures can be replaced or substituted with games to provide an experiential mode for everyone to elicit insights and learning. Instead of talking about the importance of having a focused mind, these games are designed to provide experiential opportunities in recognizing the critical importance of focusing and stabilizing physical symptoms such as nervousness and anxiety by controlled breathing exercises. Art expression provides a sense of confidentiality for the participants as they creatively express themselves while keeping their privacy at the same time, sharing only what they are comfortable to do so. The use of body movements and controlled breathing exercises, while listening to music depicting nature's sounds – like the cascading of water or birds chirping – allows the mind to focus and relax. The use of sketch pads, molding clays and various art materials enables the clients to create visual images reflecting insights and learning, and provides various tactile experiences stimulating one's sense of touch. Utilization of other craft materials such as colored sand and glue provides another dimension. The participants enjoy the variety of colors and the tactile experience while creating sand art.

The combination of games and creative works allows the participants to enjoy and process their insights productively and in an innovative manner. Visual outputs prompt participants to add information to what they previously shared. The utilization of visual arts as a by product serves to guide participants in presenting thoughts in a logical and coherent manner. Drawings about their families, clear white clouds, trees and other images provide a means of visualizing ideas in their minds that made focusing easier for participants who are introverts. Games and body movements give the participants opportunities to be attuned with the self.

## Application

Creative modalities can and have been used to address certain concerns in the dimensions of staff wellbeing, efficiency of delivery of functions and duties in relation to healing and recovery. Integrated into the system of work organization, creative modalities can help maintain the balance between work-related productivity and personal wellness. When this balance is achieved the high turnover of personnel often observed in humanitarian agencies may be prevented.

I was able to work with a group of humanitarian workers who came back from their workplace after a life-threatening situation. Shaken and stressed, the team needed a venue to allow the members to relieve their stress by expression. The use of creative modalities was feasible because there was limited time to process experiences and reflections of the staff. The session design was informed by two objectives: to identify physical manifestations of trauma and stress, and second, to deal with its physical triggers through the use of creative modalities. The team members were mostly interested in learning mental relaxation exercises and positive modalities to deal with their stressors especially while on fieldwork. Immediate issues regarding personal and organizational concerns were discussed, specifically security issues, and a recommended plan for the pre-, during, and post-deployment phases was drafted for approval.

The activities in the session include a focusing exercise and art expression (drawing). In the first activity, the participants were seated in a circle and instructed to remain silent for five minutes. They failed at first attempt as they claimed there were too many distractions. During the second and third tries, however, the group managed to sit quietly for longer periods by focusing on their breathing. When asked what the difference was between the first and succeeding exercises, the participants agreed that controlled breathing and focusing prevented them from losing control, that is, breaking their silence. They found the activity both fun and educational; it is something that they apply as a form of 'health break' when they are on fieldwork.

The art expression activity gave the participants got a glimpse of the others' thought processes and how each one sees things in visual form. One noticeable observation was the way the participants took a longer time describing the details of their artworks as the exercises were repeatedly done. In another activity, the main task is for the identification of a representation of their personal strength, which were described

and explained. Subsequently, the participants displayed enthusiasm by showing their initiative to share in making parallelism of their drawings and narrating the significant relationship of their personal strengths. The participants were also asked to describe their creative works in one word. For some, it was easy to identify words for the artworks. They were noticeably relaxed as evident in their tone of voice, comfort with pause while sharing, smiling and using humor to elaborate their sharing. Next was to utilize the individual artwork and create a group collage making a unifying symbol and theme of unity and cooperation. Each participant studied the artworks as they posted them on the wall and connected each piece to another creating a whole art representation. What was interesting was that since their ideas were represented by their symbols it became the guide in trying to make a sense of unity out of the independent thoughts creating a harmonious expression how the participants visualized each other's strength and how it has been helping the team survive even through their worst situations on the field.

As they explained the significance and meaning of the lines and structures, a sense of purposeful expression was manifested in their tone of voice and in the focusing of their stories. Their drawing of 'calmness', expressed in the form of the ocean or any body of water, helped them remain calm and collected. This highlighted the point that the emotional stability specifically during stressful or critical circumstances affect a person's objective perception and analysis that is paramount during moments which could mean survival or not.

Visual creative modalities also facilitate recall of the person's experiences and thoughts and especially their strengths by the group.

The participants had positive things to say about their experience of the session: "The activity was relaxing by itself...", "More activities like this...*ipagpapatuloy ko ito ...*", "Acquired a new way to manage stress through art...", "More time and more activity like this....", and "Did not realize art can be relaxing."

### **Way Forward: Creativity in Teaching and Practice**

In the practice of social work, we often hear that it is a profession that is both a science and an art. Creative arts have been utilized from the beginning of time not just as a form of artistic expression or entertainment, but as a window to the soul of the artist, sharing to the world in whatever shades and forms aspired for. To provide both an opportunity to express

one's thoughts and feelings in a creative manner that is less threatening, more relaxing and energizing. It is recognizing that expressions are different as people are different from each other as to our learned expression. Application of an eclectic and unstructured form for self-expression releases the energy of people to do so in a less threatening manner. The concept of acceptance provides a valuable principle in allowing our clients start from their own beginning and understanding of self and the freedom and confidence to express it in a manner that they feel most comfortable.

In one of my classes, I had my students use creative works in submitting their integrative paper in one of my classes. Similar to integrative papers, the aim of the students' creative work is to highlight the essence of their learning about the social work profession for the whole semester. I must admit that I was as excited to see their creative work, as students were to present them. The creative works included an original song composition, a short cartoon clip with voice-over narration, action songs, short video presentations and the like. Each presentation shared salient and original insights on what they learned from class. When asked about their insights, the class unanimously agreed that, while the integrative project was a serious requirement, it was made fun as they were given the opportunity to be creative in their manner of expression.

The creative arts, or what others call expressive arts, have been used as an alternative modality in working with various client systems is essentially nothing new. In social work, the potential of the utilization of creative modalities is limitless. This is especially true in dealing with cases of child abuse, violence trauma, even death and the grieving process – stress-filled situations in which people find it difficult to talk about their experiences. Other forms of expressive arts, such as play and music therapy, are useful in dealing with the issues at hand and finding ways for people to express themselves. Such approaches can be easily introduced into the Bachelor of Science in Social Work (BSSW) curriculum as tools and interventions in working with various client systems. Further research on the different creative modalities applicable in different regions in the country can likewise be endeavored: how can creative arts unite families, and create an atmosphere of unity, cooperation and healing of communities? Furthermore, a study on the diverse forms of folklores, myths, culture and traditions of the various regions in the Philippines, and the creative modalities utilized to illuminate them, may also deepen understanding and facilitate innovation in social work.. This is a rich field not yet fully explored toward indigenizing social work in the Philippines.

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