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The Creative Artists Support Group: A Therapeutic Environment to Promote Creativity and Mental Health

By Elliot Benjamin

Abstract- In a study with N = 204 participants, artists (painters) demonstrated significantly higher levels of the trait of Engagement with Beauty than non-artists (medium effect size). Artists also showed significantly higher levels of trait Happiness than non-artists (small effect size). There appear to be no published studies comparing artists' and non-artists' levels of the trait of Engagement with Beauty nor trait Happiness. There was no difference in levels of engaging with moral beauty between artists and non-artists; but artists scored significantly higher on engagement with natural beauty (medium effect size), and engagement with artistic beauty (large effect size). The correlations between Engagement with Beauty and trait Happiness, and with Openness, were both positive and significant. However, artists showed no relationship between Openness and Happiness, whereas nonartists did; and the correlation between Engagement with Beauty and Happiness remained significant when controlling
for Openness.

Keywords: creative artists support group, person-centered psychotherapy, group facilitation, auto ethnographic research.

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The Creative Artists Support Group: A Therapeutic Environment to Promote Creativity and Mental Health

Elliot Benjamin

Abstract- In this article, a variety of what the author refers to as creative artists support groups are described. The descriptions illustrate a great deal of divergence in terms of structure and range of group leadership or facilitation, ranging from virtually leaderless groups modeled along the lines of the structure of 12-step support groups, to groups led by a trained psychotherapist who directs the group with a series of structured therapeutic techniques, to a Rogerian person-centered facilitator who gently guides the group with little or no structure whatsoever. Furthermore, person-centered group facilitators of creative artists support groups may adhere to the basic ingredients of Rogerian person-centered psychotherapy by relating to the essence of the person, but may do so in a flexible way that allows for occasional active interventions. Utilizing auto ethnographic research, inclusive of a description of the author's motivation in writing this article, illustrations are given of some therapeutic interactions from the author's own creative artists support group to demonstrate this kind of flexibility in the facilitation of a person-centered creative artists support group. It is concluded that a common foundational ingredient in all the creative artists support groups described in this article is the dual focus on creativity and mental health.

Keywords: creative artists support group, person-centered psychotherapy, group facilitation, auto ethnographic research.

Personal Motivation for Writing this Article

What does it mean to be a successful creative artist? In my previous work I have defined the "successful creative artist" in a twofold manner as follows:

> A person who has received the respect and acknowledgment of his or work by a community of his or her peers or society-at-large and also who is considered both psychologically and ethical to be a "well adjusted" member of his or her society and the greater world. (Benjamin, 2008, p. 64).

Working with my definition of the successful creative artist and using humanistic psychology co-founder Abraham Maslow's (1962) ideas about self-actualization as the creative fulfillment of a human being's deepest life aspirations, I formulated what I referred to as The Artistic Theory of Psychology, with the following three basic components:

1. The successful creative resonates with the highest levels of Maslow's hierarchy of human potential.
2. There are some people labeled as mentally ill who have the potential of becoming successful creative artists.
3. A sensitive, understanding, and supportive educational environment may be conducive to enabling a mentally disturbed person with creative artistic potential to significantly develop and actualize this potential in life. (Benjamin, 2008, p. 66)

It is the third component in my Artistic Theory of Psychology, which revolves around a "sensitive, understanding, and supportive educational environment," that is the basic motivation that led me to periodically offer creative artists support groups in my rural Maine community for a number of years.

However, my creative artists support groups were open to any person interested in the creative arts, regardless of how mentally disturbed or healthy they may have been. And I perceived myself as both a facilitator and a participant in my groups, as I have been on a life-long quest to become a successful creative artist (in my above definition), which has also been true for my son Jeremy (Benjamin, 2013).

For virtually my whole life I have been immersed in three creative artistic disciplines: mathematics, music, and philosophy/psychology, and for the past decade my son Jeremy has been immersed in his creative artistic disciplines of acting and writing. I described how both myself and Jeremy have experienced being creative artists, in my semi-autobiographical book *The Creative Artist, Mental Disturbance, and Mental Health*, as follows:

> For many years, functioning in day-to-day reality was a severe test and trial for me. My values interests, and needs were very often remote from those around me. I required myself to learn new things every day, and to make this a priority in my life, and this is still true for me today. My ability to learn in this way is at its peak in the early morning hours, which for a number of years put me in severe confrontation with our society's most common form of work: the 9 to 5 job. . . . And my son Jeremy, who is now 35 years old, after graduating college 12 years ago initially faced this very same kind of conflict that I faced when I was his age. . . . I have always known that my son

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> Jeremy had a similar kind of artistic personality in his deepest core to the kind of artistic personality that I have, which was always especially evident from his self-immersion in writing, and Jeremy's captivating ongoing struggling actor story of keeping his creative artistic dreams alive is vividly described through his journal writings in Part 4. Why has it always been so very difficult for me to compromise myself—and why has this same difficulty reappeared in my son?. But what was this combined beauty and beast in me that defied my own practical welfare in pursuit of a few kernels of wisdom? And what is it in my son Jeremy that has propelled him into all the unbelievable drama, antics, and continuous turmoil and ups and down of his current life as an aspiring and struggling actor? I contend that for both me and Jeremy, it was—and is—our "artistic natures," artistic natures that were always very much there, but ones that have finally emerged into our society—for both of us." (Benjamin, 2013, 30-32)

Thus my own lifelong experiences as an aspiring creative artist, accentuated by the related experiences of my son the past decade, is the basic motivation that has kept me persistently dedicated to offer creative artists support groups to my local Belfast, Maine community. I have previously described my concerns about the lack of support for creative artists in our society, as well as the benefits of a supportive educational environment to aspiring creative artists, as follows:

If our educational system were more humanistic ally oriented, I believe there would be tremendously more creative artists practicing their art successfully in my full definition of the successful creative artist. It appears that the personal sensitivity and understanding available in a supportive educational environment toward a person who is artistically inclined can have a significant effect upon a person developing her or his artistic potential in life. . . . Creative artists know their mission in life; it is to be who they truly are in the depths of their deepest being, and to express their natural creativity through their chosen artistic mediums. Hopefully creative artists will receive enough nurturing support from people to help get them through their necessary battle with society and "Reality"—the forces of our mundane everyday life, and to emerge with a creative product valued by others, and a relatively healthy and balanced personality that satisfies the "well adjusted" part of my definition of the successful creative artist and mental health. (Benjamin, 2013, p. 37)

I. Introduction

Creative artists support groups arise in various contexts and circumstances, with various names and modes of facilitation of the groups, ranging from leaderless groups modeled after the format of 12-Step self-help groups, to groups facilitated by licensed psychotherapists. However, the underlying common theme of what I will refer to as creative artists support groups is the promotion of both creativity and mental health, which is very much at the core of the creative artists support group that I have facilitated in my local Maine community for the past 4 years (Benjamin, 2014a, 2015a).

Eric Maisel gave an illustrative description of the need for what he refers to as an artist support group:

> Even though artists need their solitude and tend to think of themselves as introverts, they also crave the community of other artists, want interactions with like-minded souls, and need a "place to go" that functions as a cross between a salon and a support group. Yet such places have historically rarely existed and continue to only rarely exist. . . . Artist support groups are very much needed. They can help with isolation and loneliness and can serve as a place, maybe the only place in an artist's life, where everyday challenges like marketplace difficulties, creative blocks and problems with mood can get aired. (Maisel, 2012, p. 1)

Rivkah Lapidus also described the problem of the isolation of artists and their feeling a lack of connection to a community, and described commonly brought-up issues in support groups for artists as including "mental blocks to starting, or completing, an artwork, anxiety about exhibition, making time to make art and seeing themselves as artists in a positive light" (Grant, 2011, p. 1).

A somewhat different perspective on the plight of the creative artist can be seen from licensed social worker Lou Storey in his description of what he refers to as an art expression group:

> Not all that long ago in our culture, creative pursuits were more commonplace. People kept personal journals, painted watercolor studies of their gardens, sketched while on vacation, and repurposed [*sic*] objects like spools and used bottles into toys or functional items. Social gatherings could include playing musical instruments or singing around a piano with friends and family. These self-generated arts, often born of necessity and limited access to more formal or professional products, was part of our cultural fabric. Today, what was formerly self-generated is now experienced as highly accessible commodities—consumer goods, packaged and highly processed for our passive consumption, but not our active participation. As we begin to compare our efforts to these polished products, we may feel that we come up short. But is this evaluation fair, or is it one-dimensional, focusing on the final product alone while ignoring the value of all

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that the journey of creativity can offer? (Storey, 2014, p. 2)

And yet another perspective of the most important aspect of a support group for creative artists was given by David Burkus:

> Amidst the flywheel of being always "on" and thus always a target for criticism, it can be really tempting to shut down and shut up entirely. But withdrawing from displaying your work isn't what the world needs. We need your contribution, but you might need a little support. You might need a "Creatives Anonymous" of sorts. While we may or may not require a twelve-step program, almost any creative can benefit from a support group. We need to interact with draw support with others working in our field. We need a place where we can show our work in progress, but in a way where it's generally accepted that whatever we show isn't a finished product and our worth to clients shouldn't be measured by it. . . . Instead of building a platform and showing something off to the whole world at the click of a mouse, many of us need to rebuild a safe place where we can display our work to a small group of trusted colleagues, get feedback, and refine. or abandon as needed. (Burkus, 2016, pp. 1-2).

Chris Lapin succintly summed up the combined creative artist and personal adjustment goals of his creative artists therapy group as follows:

> A group for creative artists offers unique opportunities to process and work on new ideas while learning about your own creative practice. The sharing of personal, lived experiences often helps to enhance vitality and reduce the isolation that is particularly common to those working in creative fields (Lapin, 2016, p. 1)

And finally, the description that I have given of my own creative artists support group reinforces the above combined creative artist and personal adjustment goals:

> The value of the group for its members ranges from support and feedback of members' creative artistic products to sharing stories and conflicts about being successful in one's chosen creative art to listening with caring to a member's frustration and discouragement about not being appreciated for his [or her] art. This creative artists support group continues to serve a function as a safe environment where creative artists can "drop in" to gain support in various ways and continues to be free of charge. (Benjamin, 2015a, p. 3).

II. To Lead or Not To Lead

In 1980 I made the attempt to form a community mental health center, with the focus of combining mental health with the creative arts (Benjamin, 2013). I was working with ex-patients who had recently been released from a mental hospital, and a number of them had been involved with a leaderless mental health group for ex-patients called "On Our Own" (Benjamin, 2013). The idea of a leaderless support group had much appeal to me, but at the same time I resonated with and felt inspired by Carl Rogers' person-centered approach to psychotherapy, which in group settings involved the supportive gentle nourishing role of the group facilitator (Rogers, 1961, 1965, 1973). My internal conflicts between leaderless groups and person-centered facilitated groups came to a head in my confrontation with one prominent and highly eccentric member of On Our Own, which I illustratively described as follows (using the pseudonym Patrick O'Brian):

> But then I made the cardinal sin. I involved my guide and hero of psychology at that time, Carl Rogers. . . to explain how one could be a leader through being a "facilitator." Well, I never would have believed that such a good, innocent word could evoke the storm that it did, for Patrick O'Brian revealed to me all his inner turmoil and fury. All of a sudden I heard the screams and shouts of a wild maniac; I saw the deep green eyes of an ageless, long-haired, bearded man who had gone wild—peeing face-to-face into my own eyes. "Facilitator!" he screamed at me. "You dare to use this word that has destroyed so much in this world. All that has been done to me in the name of 'facilitator' and you say this word to me!". . . . Patrick continued his mounting monologue: "I ate shit in the hospital! Do you hear that—I ate shit! And you dare to tell me you are a facilitator! Well fuck you, man. You're like all the rest of them—and I'll have nothing to do with you or your fucking program." (Benjamin, 2008, pp. 82-83).

However, as it turned out, this dramatic little episode had a happy ending:

> I communicated with Patrick; I reached him. I calmly acknowledged the piercing sorrow of his experiences with psychologists who called themselves facilitators, and I apologized for using a term that upset him so much. Finally, to my utter relief and thankfulness, Patrick seemed to back down from me. He asked someone else to read something, and we all listened to some poetry from another member of the group. . . . As it turned out, there was a satisfying end to my initial encounter with Patrick O'Brian, which occurred five months later, during which time I had no contact with him. One day, out of the clear blue sky, Patrick popped into my office—bare-chested with a flower in his mouth and a book of poetry. I was working with a math student at the time, and Patrick sincerely asked me to continue doing what I was doing,

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politely asking me if it would be alright if he played the piano. This did not seem like the same Patrick O'Brian I had devastatingly remembered; he seemed much calmer and more respectful of my position. I felt both comfortable and excited by his presence, and I sincerely appreciated his invitation to me to just be myself. . . . After my math client left, I braced myself for anything, and Patrick and I rapped as he told me how he had been in a very intensive place five months ago when he erupted about the word "facilitator," and I told him that he had made me think a lot about my ideas. (Benjamin, 2013, pp. 83-85).

Now, 36 years later, I do not have any more internal conflicts about being a group facilitator, at least not in my group facilitation of a creative artists support group for the past 4 years (Benjamin, 2014a, 2015a). Furthermore, it appears that the presence of a group facilitator in creative artists support groups, as opposed to leaderless groups modeled after 12-Step support groups, is an important inclusion that could make the difference between a group effectively thriving and a group that is short-lived and fails to accomplish what it set out to do:

> Some leaderless groups, like writing critique groups and *Artist Way* study groups, [see Cameron, 1992] work well, though even there one person usually does the organizing, serves as the driving force and operates as the de facto leader. Occasionally leaderless support groups modeled on the 12-Step program and going by the name of Artists Anonymous. are formed, but these are hard to find and usually vanish quickly. As a rule, leaderless support groups are unlikely to create themselves out of thin air and unlikely to survive if they do come into existence. Groups of this sort tend to need a trained facilitator. (Maisel, 2012, p. 1).

The role of a trained group facilitator of a creative artists support group can be crucial when psychological issues develop in group members, which may frequently occur:

> Groups that are led are safer, more focused, get to the issues and translate the underlying issues more clearly than groups that are leaderless. Some members worry about revealing personal details—that individuals may go off on tangents that are extraneous to the group and that hostility may arise within the group dynamic. I try to monitor the safety of the group and keep people focused on why we all came together in the first placeOr they think, "I didn't do anything important this week," and they don't show up, but that's when they really should show up. (Grant, 2011, pp. 3-4).

However, there are a number of required skills needed to effectively facilitate a creative artists support group that includes personal therapeutic sharing:

> A support group is like a small ideal community, growing and nurturing individuals and the common good. Using creative forms of inquiry and expression in a support group facilitates personal and collective growth and development by mirroring the integrative engagement people have in day to day living. We explore our world using touch, hearing, visual cues, taking time to consider and rearrange, noticing how situations and others influence our thoughts and how we perceive and experience our place in that world. The intricate ways we communicate and navigate are in fact our natural tendency. The use of creative arts as a form of exploration and inquiry in a facilitated support group is making our usual everyday processes more overt and considered in group process. (Bradborn, 2010, p. 5)

It also is the case that the degree of facilitation vs active leadership can be quite variable in a creative artists support group, as can be seen from the following description of an art expression group led by a licensed social worker:

> After many years of responding individually to the insecurities involved in art making, I began to see a repeating pattern to these behaviors and some consistent themes emerging, as well, in my response. Examining this pattern revealed a set of underlying principles from which I drew up a simple list of statements that addressed those areas of uncertainty and self-doubt. I call that list the "Creativity Pledge." At the introductory group session, I will ask the new members, "What are your feeling about making art?" This immediately elicits an enthusiastic response of negative self-deprecating statements. These declarations are so predictable that I have with me a pre-prepared set of file cards, and as each statement is made, I hold up the corresponding card, the text of which is a perfect match to what was just said. The group responds with delight, as if I am a magician doing a fancy card trick. There is no magic to my act, but rather, recognition of the degree to which the general population has been disenfranchised from their own artistic creativity. I then distribute a one-page handout of the Creativity Pledge. . . . As we begin to read the Creativity Pledge, I raise my hand, as is done when making a pledge, and ask the members to do so as well. This elicits some chuckles. Anything that lightens the mood is welcome in the group. The pledge offers each group member license to abandon the self-defeating, apologetic, and judgmental dialogue-tapes and instead focus on simply enjoying the opportunity to exercise some creative energy, play with color and materials, and explore possibilities. (Storey, 2012, pp. 2-3).

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As can be seen from the above sample descriptions, creative artists support groups have a wide range of leader/facilitator/leaderless options in forming the group. From my own experience, I am most comfortable with the person-centered (Rogers, 1961, 1965, 1973) group facilitator way of formulating and developing a creative artists support group (Benjamin, 2014a, 2015a). A number of years ago I tried out having creative artists support group participants, including myself, read inspirational passages from Julia Cameron's (1992) book *The Artist's Way*, as well as inspirational passages from some other books. However, although this was certainly a stimulating structure and helped generate interesting personal discussions about the participants' creative artistic processes, this was not the way that resonated most deeply with how I wanted to be working. In my present creative artists support group, the only materials that I, or anyone else in the group, have brought in to share are our own artistic creations (Benjamin, 2014a, 2015a). I facilitate the group sharing, making sure that each person (including myself) describes what we have been working on—or not working on—in our creative artistic pursuits since our last meeting. Frequently the creative/artistic sharing of the group participants enters personal territory, and I am well aware of how important it is that I have had 11) training and some experience in counseling when this occurs.

In my previous creative artists support groups, it was always important to me to feel like I was earning some money facilitating my groups, and consequently I charged a small fee to attend my group meetings, virtually all of which went to pay for the space I was renting, in addition to the cost of printing up flyers. However, even when I reduced my fee from $10 to $5 for a group session, this became an issue and at one point the group decided to try out making the group "leaderless" and hold it in different locations. And as some of the above descriptions have conveyed, this leaderless group did not work, as no one was willing to take charge of all the logistics and arrangements necessary to continue the group—involving things like printing out and putting up flyers, putting in newspaper advertisements for the group meetings, arranging for where the groups will be held, communicating logistics to the group members before each group meeting, etc. In short, it takes a bona fide long-lasting commitment to develop and maintain a successful creative artists support group. As I have described in the first section, I have this commitment,[1] and I have come to terms with not charging any fee to attend my group, as I now consider this to be my own little hobby and I am willing to put in a bit of my own money and time, printing up my flyers and doing the above necessary logistics that is required to keep my group running[2]. Although my group is small and presently meets just one evening for an hour and a half every month, my group is solid as there is a core of members who continue to attend, two of whom have been regularly attending the group since its beginning formation 4 years ago.

In the following section I will describe some of the actual workings that take place in a creative artists support group, with a focus on what participants (including myself) have experienced in my own group.

III. What Goes on in a Creative Artists Support Group

In a similar way to the variety of forms of leadership, or lack of leadership, described above, there is a wide range of activities that take place in a creative artists support group. The following description gives an idea of this wide range of activities:

> At the beginning of every meeting of the Women Artists Support Group, members engage in improvisational theater games, with the remainder of the meetings devoted to writing and sharing what they have written on the subject of isolation, creative blocks or other specific issues. The creativity support group run by. . . begins most sessions with visual relaxation exercises (based on Jungian principles), moving on to round-table discussions of members' "goals in their work and in their process of art making" and occasionally, presentations by individual members of their work that are followed by "feedback loops, which allow the person to articulate and others to make meaning," rather than critiques, "which cause fear.". . . . On the other hand, sit in a circle and talk about the artwork individual members are pursuing (or want to create) and the struggles they have in accomplishing their artistic goals. At Artists' Anonymous. . . there are weekly meetings following a regular pattern that is adapted for artists from the 12-step model of Alcoholics Anonymous and focusing on "gaining control of the creative process." For the first week of the month, members may bring in artwork in progress and receive feedback if they wish. On the second week, members discuss the 12 steps of the program. . . . On subsequent weeks, individual members will describe what has been taking place in their lives creatively, or there may be a topic in which everyone may participate. (Grant, 2011, p. 2).

In the art expression group facilitated by a social worker that was described above (Storey, 2014), the goal is "not to make art, but rather to explore the many facets of how we experience life" (p. 3). In particular, there is a cohesive structure of activities used in this group:

> Art making, art history, group discussions, and contribution are the tools that we use for this exploration. Each week introduces a new theme

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> referencing a recognizable element of art and linking it to aspects of life. The first group begins with the creation of a personal mandala. The Sanskrit word "mandala" translates to "circle" and represents wholeness and connectedness in life, ranging from the micro-sized spinning of atoms and cells to the macro-sized ringing rotations of planets and galaxies. As a group, we examine how our lives navigate within circles of friends, family, and community. A personal mandala can reflect upon and give insight into the many meaningful ways we are connected to our world and offers a compelling first art expression group experience. Other weekly thematic units of the art expression group, linking art to experience, include: Personal World—Personal Boundaries explores landscape painting, examining how artists through the centuries have been creating landscapes that speak to their own personal vision of "a place.". . . . Group members are invited to imagine their own personal place, and to consider how we each art the creators of our own world. (Storey, 2014, p. 3).

In my own creative artists support group (Benjamin, 2014a, 2015a), the structure of my group begins with me facilitating each participant sharing briefly (though sometimes not so briefly) what has transpired for her or him since our last group meeting. This frequently leads our group into stimulating and interesting discussions related to what a particular group member may have expressed. I also leave time for group members to share any creative artistic products they have brought to the group, which has included paintings, photographs, writings, music, and images of a sculpture. In one meeting of my creative artists support group, it was particularly meaningful to me to read an excerpt from an article I was working on related to a talk I was soon giving on humanistic antidotes to social media/ cell phone addiction in the college classroom at an upcoming conference in New York City (Benjamin, 2016).[3] I subsequently incorporated into my article my beneficial experience of reading this excerpt to my creative artists support group, as follows:

> It's just about midnight as I am staying over in Sturbridge, Massachusetts on my way to New York. Last night I read the first few pages of this article, which was my initial 6/21 entry, to my creative artists support group. I received a round of applause, and my reading stimulated some lively discussion about social media addiction. My creative artists support group was very supportive to me, and this helped to boost both my confidence and enthusiasm about giving my conference talk. (Benjamin, 2016, p. 20).

There have been other times that I have read excepts from my writings to my creative artists support group, and it has always been helpful to me, boosting my confidence as a result of the interest and support that I was receiving. Sharing my writings always stimulated animated group discussion of interesting and complicated topics, such as the ethics of revealing or not revealing your writings to who you are writing about, the exploration of the possibility of life after death, and the idea of the "successful" creative artist representing the highest level of human functioning[4]. Some descriptions of how other participants have taken part in my creative artists support group are as follows:[5]

> Linda is a woman in her early 80s, and she has been immersed in various crafts, painting, and photography creative art projects throughout her life. She frequently brings in exhibits of her work to show the group, and she loves to talk about herself, her life, her musician son who is in his early 60s, and to hear about what is going on for everyone else in the group, including myself. (Benjamin, 2014a, p. 144)
>
> At our last few meetings Linda has been particularly taken up with her experiences of synaesthesia, where one sort of sensation, such as hearing sound, produces another sort of sensation such as seeing color. It has been very beneficial to Linda to receive positive feedback from the group about her experiences of synaesthesia, to help her assimilate her experiences in a healthy way and not feel like she is "crazy." She felt motivated to bring in an impressive painting she did many years ago, which she said was a representation of how she experienced synaesthesia. (Benjamin, 2015a, p. 2)

At our first meeting, Mikayla tenuously shared how she virtually never was creative but that she always "knew" that music and poetry were deep inside of her, and that now with her deteriorating illness she was determined to actualize this potential before she becomes completely incapacitated, in whatever time she has left in life. . . . When she did return to the group a few months later, Mikayla was "transformed." She was full of life with a sparkle in her eyes and an energy and excitement that I would not have believed if I had not seen it for myself. Mikayla described how she sang at a friend's wedding, read her poetry at an open mic evening, and submitted her poetry to a poetry contest. This metamorphosis in Mikalya continued to shine during the third group meeting she attended, and it was amazing and inspiring to myself and the other members of our group. It appears that her brief participation in our creative artists support group perhaps served as some kind of catalyst to Mikayla to "self-actualize" herself in an incredible "against all odds" demonstration of human will to overcome adversity. (Benjamin, 2014a, p. 144)[6] .

> I referred to Gordon, without name, as the photographer who answered my question about why he continues his art with the statement "Doing my art is like breathing for me.". . . . He complains that nowadays everyone is a "photographer" with

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their cell phones, and that his work is no longer appreciated. He is trying to get his work shown in more galleries, and was particularly discouraged at a meeting he attended a few months ago, as he had recently experienced the non-appreciative response he received from the judges at an event that he attended. Gordon is in his 60's and feels that he is up against a brick wall, confiding in us that he has been finding excuses to spend less time taking his photographs. . . . How is my creative artists support group being helpful to Gordon?. It is a place where he can vent his feelings and frustrations and disappointment, and feel that he is accepted, understood, and valued. Our group serves as a buffer to the harsh world that Gordon continuously experiences. (Benjamin, 2015a, p. 1).

Steve has long hair and a muscular, youthful appearance and is in his late 40's or early 50's, although he looks at least 10 years younger than he is. He has had a career marketing other people's music, as well as successfully marketing his own commercial rock & roll music, singing and playing guitar, and has written poetry and published some of his poems. But Steve now wants no part of commercial success, and has been immersed in writing what he refers to as a science fiction rock opera for the past 6 years, doing all the voice and instrumentation by himself. He very much appreciates being part of a creative artists support group, and gives valuable feedback to everyone in the group. At our last group meeting Steve played some of his music for the group and I suggested he bring in more of his music for our next meeting, and I believe he will do so. (Benjamin, 2015a, p. 2).

Eleanor is a woman who appears to be in her mid-50s and who published a novel and a few poems about 20 years ago. . . . She says that she values hearing about the experiences of other creative artists and having the opportunity to talk about her own challenges in becoming a successful writer. Eleanor is putting the finishing touches on her novel, which she read excerpts from at one of our meetings. She has sent out inquires to a half-dozen agents, most of whom have ignored her and one of whom has rejected her. But Eleanor continues to be an active and dedicated participant in our creative artists support group, as she always enthusiastically enjoys hearing about and responding to what other people in the group, including myself, share about our experiences in the creative artist realm. To answer my own question about what motivates Eleanor to be as committed to keeping our creative artists support group going as she is, I would say that our group enables Eleanor to keep her creative artist "spark." It enable her to keep her dreams alive, to "percolate" inside of her while her more pragmatic day-to-day life continues on. And I believe that this is a significant part of Eleanor's feeling of well-being and satisfaction with life. (Benjamin, 2014a, p. 143).

And the following is a description that I have given of my own experience of being a participant in my creative artists support group:

For me, I continue to find value from our group as I am embarking on trying to promote my books and articles through my website, as I am now working with a marketing consultant and have initiated my social media periodic presence on facebook. . . . This is no small step for me, and talking in my creative artists support group about my conflicts about being a philosopher and marketing my philosophy is valuable to me, as I feel that the other members of my group very much can relate to this conflict. . . . We had a very dynamic and interesting meeting, which included my sharing about my concerns and conflicts regarding my son's continuing struggling saga and dire financial circumstances as he continues to try to become a successful Hollywood actor being in Hollywood for nearly three and a half years. (Benjamin, 2015a, p. 3).

IV. The Creative Artists Support Group and the Person-Centered Approach to Psychotherapy

As I have described above, the way in which I facilitate my creative artists support group is based upon Carl Rogers' (1961, 1965, 1973) person-centered approach to psychotherapy, which is at the cornerstone of humanistic psychology (Schneider, Pierson, & Bugental (2015). However, there are currently various interpretations of what the essential ingredients of Rogers' person-centered approach to therapy truly are. At the 2016 World Association of Person-centered & Experiential Psychotherapy and Counseling (WAPCEPC) conference that I attended and gave a talk at,[3] this became evident with the prominent inclusion of a keynote address given by Motivational Interviewing founder William Miller, as well as workshops by two other Motivational Interviewing authors: Chris Wagner and Alan Zuckoff (Miller & Rollnick, 2013; Wagner & Ingersoll, 2013; Zuckoff, 2015). In addition, there was a keynote address given by Jobst Finke, who advocated for the inclusion of labeling in accordance with the diagnostic categories of the DSM-V, as an option that could be consistent with person-centered therapy. Thus there was a strong current at this internationally attended person-centered conference to significantly extend the meaning of Rogers' person-centered therapy to allow for a more concrete, structured, active therapist approach that is evident in Motivational Interviewing (Miller & Rollnick, 2013), as well as for an acceptance of the labeling diagnostic categories of the DSM V, which has in many ways been considered the antithesis of

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humanistic psychology (Schneider, Pierson, & Bugental (2015).

Thus it is important to focus upon what are the essential ingredients of Rogers' person-centered approach to therapy, and how these essential ingredients relate to what goes on in a creative artists support group. If we go back to the essence of what Rogers was talking about, clearly the person-centered approach to therapy revolves around the concentration on and respect for the unique individual person, in a genuine, caring, relationship with the therapist that is noted for the therapist showing "unconditional positive regard" for the client (Rogers, 1961, 1965). As I learned about Motivational Interviewing, and the extension of diagnostic labels to person-centered therapy as described by Finke at the 2016 WAPCEPC conference, I understood that these basic Rogerian ingredients of person-centered therapy could remain intact with these modifications. What changed was the completely "non-directive" approach that Rogers (1956, 1961) is noted for, as well as the common understanding in humanistic psychology that diagnostic labels and the DSM-V are antithetical to the respect and dignity of the individual person (Schneider, Pierson, & Bugental (2015). Much care was taken in the presentations given to justify these modifications to demonstrate that the basic premises of person-centered therapy did not have to be violated by these changes, at least not in the humanistic way described by these presenters. Rather, it was argued that allowing for more flexibility in Rogers' initial conceptualization of person-centered therapy was a way that had the potential to preserve the essence of what Rogers advocated for, in our society's current managed care, short-term therapy dominant focus.

In regard to applying this more extended model of person-centered therapy to the creative artists support group, I believe that the evaluation of how much the essence of person-centered therapy is made use of in the facilitation of the group (assuming there is a group facilitator) is not necessarily a reflection of how non-directive the group facilitator is, but rather a reflection of the facilitator's appreciation and respect for the group participants, and the genuine empathic relationship between the participants and the facilitator. It is very difficult to evaluate the level of inclusion of this more extended model of person-centered therapy to creative artists support groups from external descriptions of the group. However, through a qualitative inquiry auto ethnographic approach to research (Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2009; Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013), one can make use of one's own experiences as a group facilitator of a creative artists support group to give such an account. It is in this context that I will describe interactions that I had with two participants at some of my creative artists support group meetings.

I will refer to one of these participant with the pseudonym of David, who had come to our meeting in July, 2016 for the first time. David proceeded to introduce himself by disclosing that he was "instructed" to come to our meeting by his occupational therapist, who told him that it would be 20) beneficial to him to start working on some kind of structured art project. Apparently David had many projects that he would start, but soon would become scattered and never complete anything that he had begun working on. He had the state of mind, stimulated by what his occupational therapist strongly conveyed to him, that he needed to choose an artistic project and stick with it until he completed it. However, the problem for David was that there was not any artistic project that he felt strongly attracted to, and he conveyed to the group that he thought he just needed to choose something, no matter what it was, for the purpose of sticking to it.

As David was talking, I knew that I felt disturbed by his perspective of how to choose an artistic project to work on. I thought about Julia Cameron's (1992) perspective of creative art related to spirituality, of Gordon's statement that "doing my art is like breathing for me," of Eleanor's dedication to continuing to try to get her novel published, of Steve working on his rock opera for 6 years, of my son Jeremy's quest to become a successful actor and writer,[7] and of my own lifelong pursuit of being an "artistic philosopher" (Benjamin, 2013). I knew that I needed to introduce my own perspective on what David was saying, and that this would not be a traditional Rogerian "non-directive" way of facilitating my group. But I listened to my deeper voice and conveyed to David, as gently as I was able to, my perspective about creative art being a reflection of the "deep self" aspirations of the creative artist, and was related to a sense of spirituality. I suggested to him that he not pressure himself to choose an artistic project just for the sake of completing something that he started working on, but rather that he spend some slow time with himself, such as in meditation, and try to get in touch with what speaks to him in a deep self kind of way.

As it turned out, I made a strong impression on David, and he thanked me and said that I gave him something different to consider in a way that he had not thought of before. It was soon after this in our meeting that I read my article excerpt that I described above, which helped prepare me for my talk on humanistic antidotes to social media/cell phone addiction at the July, 2016 WAPCEPC conference.[3] 21).

My whole group, and especially David, enthusiastically appreciated my reading, and I think this cemented the impression that I had made on him about the importance of choosing an artistic activity to work on that speaks to one's deep self. Thus I believe that I very much related to David's "real" self in a way that is consistent with the essence of Rogers' (1961, 1965) person-centered therapy, and this became more evident to me as I learned about some of the current

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modifications of person-centered therapy at the WAPCEPC conference, as I have described above.

At a subsequent creative artists support group meeting, the interaction I will describe was between myself and the photographer Gordon. Gordon gave his initial sharing of what had been happening for him by conveying that he had been depressed, and had done very little photography the past few months. He proceeded to describe his dark outlook on life, how he would sleep late in the mornings and have difficulty doing anything or going anywhere, how he would drive up and down one of the local routes just to have something to occupy himself with, how he takes anti-depressants to get through the day, and how all his money is going into repairing his car and he has no money left over for his needed photography supplies. When our discussion turned into spirituality and the possibility of life after death, Gordon in no uncertain terms described his somber atheist beliefs and "humorously" conveyed how his daughter told him that he would die in his car and that she would "square" him or "cube" him.

To put Gordon's bleak sharing in some perspective, this came about right after Linda had shared that she had lost her motivation to do any more creative artwork the past few months, was having a hard time being part of a group for seniors near where she lived that dwelled on the depressing practical aspects of dying, and I noticed that she had not brought in any creative artist projects that she was working on, which was very unusual for her. The regular group members Eleanor and Steve were not there, and there was only one other person in the group, aside from myself, and this other person was new to the group. To make matters worse, my 12-year-old cat who I had a strong bond with for many years, had died that morning, and it was all I could do just to bring myself to the group, as I was trying to fight off my own depression. I was very much missing Steve not being there, as he always had an upbeat stimulating effect on the group, which I felt was very much needed at this time.

But as Gordon continued to talk about how depressed he was and how meaningless life was, and I could feel the somber atmosphere that was overtaking the whole group, including myself, something started to snap inside of me. I remembered back to how enthusiastically Gordon used to talk about his old-fashioned way of doing photography, and how he would occasionally bring in his photographs to share with the group. I found myself becoming quite active in conveying to him how he used to be in a much better state of mind when he was doing his photography, and I asked him to try to find creative ways to get back to doing this. This had the effect of transforming our discussion into practical ways of going about this for Gordon, which resulted in Gordon explaining to us why these ways would not work. He could try to make his kitchen into a darkroom but there was very little space there, it would take him a very long time to do this, he would feel like it was the end of the world if he made a mistake and ruined his photographs, he did not have the equipment or the money to buy what he needs to develop his films, photography galleries are not interested in his nude photographs, which is what he most wants to be doing, etc.

Finally the new person in the group made the constructive suggestion that Gordon could put his nude photographs together into a book, and I could see that this had some kind of a stimulating effect on him. Gordon acknowledged that he could do this but said that he did not know anything about how to self-publish books. At this point I conveyed to Gordon that if he were to do this then other people in the group, such as Steve, would likely be able to give him constructive advice about how to publish his book, and I asked if he would be willing to bring in some of his photographs to our next meeting. Then I asked Linda to do the same, as well as the new person, which they both agreed to, and I conveyed that I would bring in more of my writings and would be willing to get back to trying to arrange our group to meet monthly, as I told them that the group has gradually been meeting less frequently, mostly every other month, and it has been 3 months since our last meeting. The group ended in a much more positive atmosphere and on a much more positive note, and I realized that the essential therapeutic ingredient of my creative artists support group was for us to continue to work on and share our creative artist projects with each other. Without this, all the Rogerian non-directive listening in the world would not lift Gordon out of his depression.

However, at our next creative artists support group meeting, I was disappointed to see that Gordon appeared to be in even worse spirits, as his depression had increased, in spite of the large amount of medication he was taking to combat it, and it was all he could do to even get himself out of bed, much less do any more of his photography. The advice being given to him took the form of going to social events at senior citizen centers, and I felt like I needed to intervene and change the course of what was being suggested to Gordon. I did my best to bring the discussion back to suggestions for ways that Gordon could get back to his photography, as I reminded him and everyone else how this was so fundamental to Gordon's mental health. A very practical suggestion was given to Gordon by one of the group participants to contact a specific person who had a darkroom that perhaps Gordon could make arrangements with to gain the use of the darkroom. We left the group on a rather precarious note, and I was troubled and concerned about Gordon, and wondered if I was qualified to be facilitating my group with the extent of Gordon's psychological problems.

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But as it turned out, I was amazed to see Gordon in totally transformed spirits at our next meeting, as he did contact the person with the darkroom and was able to make arrangements to use the darkroom and get back to his photography. His depression had largely lifted, in spite of various practical challenges he was facing with his photography, and the whole atmosphere of our group was completely changed form the previous meeting. Linda brought in some of her artwork again; someone attended our group for the second time, who had been there 9 months earlier, and brought in his miniature paintings that stimulated much discussion; and Steve brought in more of his music for us to listen to, and we had a very stimulating upbeat group meeting.

In retrospect, this flexibility of sometimes choosing to be a more active group facilitator in my creative artists support group, depending upon what is transpiring with an individual group participant, is a way that I have not infrequently chosen in some of my creative artists support group meetings, both in my current group and in previous groups that I have facilitated. However, I always felt that the essence of my approach was based upon the core ingredients of Rogers' person-centered therapy, and therefore it was especially gratifying to me to learn that my own flexibility was very much in alignment with current trends in extending Rogerian person-centered therapy.

V. Conclusion

From the above descriptions of the varieties of groups that I have referred to as creative artists support groups, it can be seen that there are striking differences in regard to the extent of group leadership or facilitation, as well as the amount of structure in the group. Creative artists support groups may be virtually leaderless and resemble the structure of 12-step support groups, may be led by a trained psychotherapist who directs the group with a series of structured therapeutic techniques, or may be guided by a person-centered Rogerian facilitator who gently guides the group with very little or no structure whatsoever. Furthermore, as I have illustrated with some descriptions of my therapeutic interactions in my own creative artists support group, a person-centered group facilitator may gently guide the group along the lines formulated by Carl Rogers in terms of relating to the essence of the person, but may do so in a flexible way that allows for occasional direct active interventions. This kind of flexibility in person-centered psychotherapy is consistent with the current trends in the field, as can be seen from some of the keynote talks at the recent World Association of Person-Centered and Experiential Psychotherapy and Counseling conference.

However, a common foundational ingredient in all the creative artists support groups described in this article is the dual focus on enhancing creativity while supporting mental health. This dual focus is directly related to my twofold definition of the "successful creative artist," as well as being directly related to the third component of my Artistic Theory of Psychology, as I described in the first section of this article. This combined creativity/mental health focus in a supportive therapeutic environment appears to be highly beneficial to creative artists, and I believe warrants more extensive research into what actually transpires in the varieties of groups that I refer to as creative artists support groups.

Notes

1) For more information about my own creative artist background experiences, see the personal descriptions of my creative artistic lifelong passions in Benjamin, 2013.
2) I have been fortunate to be able to use a conference room free of charge in my local library to hold my creative artists support group meetings, as part of my non-profit corporation Natural Dimension Learning Center.
3) The conference referred to is the July, 2016 World Association of Person-Centered and Experiential Psychotherapy and Counseling (WAPCEPC) conference; see www.pce-world.org
4) See Ellis, 2007, and Benjamin, 2008, 2013, 2014b, 2015b.
5) The names given for the participants in my creative artists support group are the pseudonyms used in Benjamin, 2014a, 2015a.
6) See Abraham Maslow's formulation of self-actualization in Maslow, 1962
7) See illustrative accounts of my son Jeremy's quest to become a successful actor and writer in Benjamin, 2013, 2014c.

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