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Understanding Black Experiences and Access Barriers in the Expressive Arts Activities and Therapies

Jadea (Jaey) Harris '21 (Faculty Advisor: Ana Kamille Marcelo, PhD)

Introduction

* Black identifying Americans typically do not participate in mental health treatment because of mistrust, stigma, misdiagnosis, little understanding about mental illness, and feeling culturally misunderstood (Nami, 2004). Ethnic-racial minorities may especially benefit from expressive, creative approaches (Molina, Brigman, & Rhone, 2003).

* Black Americans created a variety of art forms across categories that led to “unprecedented creative freedom and control in the creation of popular music” in the second half of the 20th century in America (Ongiri, 2010). Art creates a mirror and resting place from media exposure to violence on young Black boys and Black girls (Sherald, 2019).

* A social justice approach within expressive arts interventions shows recognition of sociopolitical context and collective experiences of oppression (Hocoy, 2005). Treatment needs to reactivate the capacity to safely mirror, and be mirrored, by others, but also to resist being hijacked by others’ negative emotions” (p. 59). (Karacher, 2017).

* Therapists of color can deliver expressive art activities for self-expression, self-confidence, emotional regulation, communication skills, enhancement of resilience, and a sense of community (J. Goicoechea et al, 2014).

Goal: Explore the Black experiences in expressive and creative arts related activities, understand these alternative coping strategies that are outside of clinical settings for the Black community that may suffer from mental disorders or issues, and discover what might be preventing participants from accessing expressive arts activities and therapies.

Participants and Procedures

* Participants were recruited through online resources from virtual recruitment flyers. All participants agreed to interview over Zoom.

* A total of 10 Black individuals participated in this study: 70% identified as African American, 10% as Afro-Caribbean, and 20% as Mixed Ethnicity or Race. All participants’ ages were college aged. Thirty percent of the sample were male, sixty percent of the sample were female, and 10% of the sample were genderfluid. Most participants’ had a college degree or higher education (60%). Other participants had a two-year degree, attended a college or technical school, or a postgraduate degree (40%). Primary occupations varied: a literary intern, an entrepreneur, a cellist musician, four students, an administrative intern, a writer and educator and, and one unemployed. Eight out of ten participants had some version of health insurance.

Qualitative Results – Thematic Analysis

Theme 1: Expressive Arts used as a coping mechanism

- *“So, it was like finding peace and being able to create or being able to have art surrounding me definitely was something that kept me sane. Because not only was the pandemic happening, but I was helping take care of my grandfather. Then, I was home with my whole entire family, and I’m the oldest of five... this whole word was happening around me, but I was like, ‘Okay. I still have my art. I can still do what I do’, which grounded me” (J.B)*
- *“I used to write these short little love letters to this girl I liked, and...crazily enough, that same girl passed away, back in 2019...To cope with her death, I wrote a poem, and it was to cope with her death and the death of other people I had lost in the last couple of years. Her family enjoyed it, and a few of my friends enjoyed it, and they asked me to continue writing.” (N.)*

Theme 2: Barriers in Accessing Expressive Arts and Therapies

- *“...competitiveness, envy, just elitism, racism. A lot of that, especially against black people. Especially against black people.” (K.)*
- *“...limited amount of BIPOC students that we have in our school... even though theater is supposed to be this inclusive thing, but it has never been this inclusive thing. It’s been inclusive things for white people and white passing people, but never for BIPOC. Unless your director is black, unless the show is predominantly black, or one of the producers is BIPOC. That’s the only way” (J.E.)*
- *“‘T., you should not audition here. You are black.’” (K.)*
- *Biggest barrier with therapy usually is money... it can be so expensive.”(AR)*
- *“One of my biggest barriers is probably just not knowing how to find one. I just literally didn’t even know that was a thing or an option.” – (L.O.)*
- *“And then you have the whole black men complex where you don’t want to be seen as therapy is “something that’s...in tune with your emotions. (C.)*

Theme 3: “Black Artivism”

- *“I think Black people, we’ve always expressed ourselves. And particularly with writing, I don’t think that’s something that’s foreign. You know, there are all types of great Black writers, everywhere. And even when you think about the number of hip hop artists we have. Hip hop, rap, is literally poetry. It’s rhythm and poetry. That’s what rap means. So I think it’s something that we’ve always done.” (A.R)*
- *“every day, we wake up in the studio, and we go to a protest, come back home to the studio and make music about what we just saw, or about what just happened.” (N.)*

Quantitative Results - Brief Symptom Inventory

All participants’ calculated T scores for categories: somatization, obsessive-compulsive, interpersonal sensitivity, depression, anxiety, hostility, phobic anxiety, paranoid ideation, psychoticism, global severity index, and positive symptom were above the T60-T65 non patient norms for each scale dimension. These results indicate that participants show considerable rates of distress especially for a community sample.

Discussion

Interview data shows that expressive arts activities serve as an effective way for Black individuals to cope with their raw emotions, difficult and traumatic experiences, and a variety of stressors. External barriers consisted of lack of resources, social pressures, social and political unrest, racism, and time constraints. “Blark Artivism” enhanced feelings of confidence and self-efficacy amidst white-centered societal norms. Black artists created and promoted Black community, Black identity, and Black pride within and outside their expressive talents despite pressures to not do this. Interview data shows a trend in artists experiencing feelings of ethnic self-esteem, comfort in their ethnic identity, and positive values of being African American all while promoting this experience for other African American and Black identifying individuals in their own pro-black efforts to support their communities.

Limitations & Future Directions

* Mental health providers need to provide expressive arts therapies that are low pressure and feel natural to Black identifying clients in using familiar approaches on how to cope with stressful topics. Clinicians can be more aware of who they are serving and how to serve them, in understanding creative and expressive perspectives of Black individuals.

* Future studies should include Black identifying individuals who use general coping mechanisms to see if expressive arts arises from data without expressive arts focus for recruitment, and Black identifying clinical sample recruitment for perspectives on expressive arts therapy barriers they overcame.