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The Creative Arts Personal Growth Group (CAPG): Transforming Fear and Shame

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ABSTRACT

Literature highlights the long-term effects of bullying and interpersonal cruelty, including symptoms of trauma and shame. Although scholars have encouraged the development of trauma-informed group interventions for adults with a history of bullying, they have yet to be developed. This article introduces The Creative Arts Personal Growth Group: Transforming Fear and Shame with Compassion, Courage, and Community (CAPG) and presents findings from a phenomenological pilot study exploring participants' experiences. Themes of containment, creativity, and community promoted regulation of symptoms and self-identity within the context of a safe, inclusive, and affirming group experience. Implications and recommendations are provided.

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Bullying; trauma; shame; group counseling; the creative arts personal growth group

Emerging conceptual and empirical scholarship highlights the epidemic problem of bullying, harassment, marginalization, and interpersonal violence, henceforth called bullying to avoid repetition, and the need to consider trauma-informed approaches when developing interventions (Arttime et al., 2019; Blitz & Lee, 2015; Fortuna & Vallejo, 2015; Idsoe et al., 2012; Lloyd-Hazlett et al., 2016). The research presents a vast range of bullying prevalence in schools from 13% to 98% (Modecki et al., 2014; Swearer et al., 2010). However, researchers agree bullying causes lasting physical, emotional, and interpersonal harm and must be prevented (Gladden et al., 2014; Modecki et al., 2014). Studies indicate the prevalence of bullying throughout childhood, adolescence, and adulthood (Arttime et al., 2019; Rospenda et al., 2013), with incidences of bullying frequently occurring in the workplace and other adult settings (Brendgen et al., 2019). Copious research reflects the deleterious effects of bullying (Bauman et al., 2013; Carney et al., 2019; Hase et al., 2015; Marshall et al., 2015), including an enduring sense of shame and intense fear about the self and exposing the self to others (Crosby et al., 2010; Litman et al., 2015; Olatunji & Fan, 2015; Ossa et al., 2019; Plexousakis et al., 2019; Vidourek et al., 2016). Thus, interventions for adults that focus on strengthening the self, acceptance and inclusion, and understanding and overcoming bullying-induced fear and shame are warranted.

Scholars considering how to promote recovery from bullying stress the importance of targeting self-perception, emotion regulation, and interpersonal relationships (Lloyd-Hazlett et al., 2016). Due to the social nature of bullying (Cannon et al., 2012), groupwork interventions are especially promising (Bauman, 2010; Brown, 2006; Singh, 2013). Studies of counseling groups offered in clinical settings and schools reveal group work's overall

effectiveness (Bowers et al., 2015; Gerrity & DeLucia-Waack, 2007; Vassilopoulos et al., 2013; Wisner & Norton, 2013). Groupwork provides opportunities for members to experience feelings of empowerment and shared humanity, which can counteract feelings of shame and increase positive self-perception (Foster & DeCamp, 2019). Groups for bullied children and adolescents (Cannon et al., 2012; Craig et al., 2014; Kvarme et al., 2013; Singh, 2013), and to a lesser extent college students (Vespe, 2016), exist in the literature; however groups for bullied adults that target shame and trauma have yet to be developed.

In response to the paucity of interventions addressing shame and trauma related to bullying, Sosin and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2016) developed the Creative Exposure Intervention (CEI). The CEI combined evidenced-based works from trauma-informed psychoeducation, cognitive-behavioral treatments, mindfulness training, and creative and expressive arts into a family intervention for adolescents with trauma symptoms resulting from bullying. The CEI is open to adult applications and is expandable to provide a foundation for a group work curriculum (Arttime et al., 2019; Bauman, 2010; Serpell et al., 2019). However, up until now no such adaptations have been developed or tested. This article presents a group adaptation of the CEI for adults called *The Creative Arts Personal Growth Group: Transforming Fear and Shame* (hereafter referred to as CAPG), and a pilot study conducted with CAPG members. The process and content of CAPG are grounded in theory and evidence-based clinical treatments.

The CAPG Theoretical Framework

Recently, Guth et al. (2018) encouraged group workers to develop interventions that “intentionally use group work to transform hate, facilitate courageous conversations, and enhance community building” (p. 3). As one such intervention, CAPG targets fear and shame, which often permeate the self in the wake of bullying. The underlying theoretical frameworks guiding CAPG are Shame Resiliency Theory (SRT) (Brown, 2006) and the personal growth group model developed by Jacobs et al. (2016).

Shame Resiliency Theory (SRT), the result of grounded theory research (Brown, 2006), stresses the importance of forming groups that focus on recovery from shame. The basic tenets of SRT are that as persons develop awareness of shame triggers, learn skills to manage shame activation, and share shame stories in a safe, diversity affirming, and inclusive community, “shame resiliency” develops. According to Brown (2006), shame resiliency promotes power and freedom through empathic connection with self and others. The empathic exchange that occurs in such groups builds the courage members need to live authentically in a marginalizing and socially unjust society (Brown, 2019). SRT is applied to CAPG as members experience a compassionate community, learn about the bio-psycho-social-multicultural identity impact of fear and shame inducing interpersonal experiences, develop skills to monitor and modify shame triggers, reconnect with and strengthen their identities, and share their history of shaming with each other. To accomplish these goals, CAPG is structured according to the personal growth group model for trauma developed by Jacobs and colleagues.

Jacobs et al. (2016) theorized that short-term growth groups for trauma need to maintain a safe container for members. As leaders preserve the group’s focus on recovery, facilitate the interpersonal nature of group interactions, promote inclusivity, use creativity to facilitate connection with self and others, attend to multiculturally diverse members’ needs, and

direct group interactions to keep all members emotionally safe, participants develop connection and skills to manage symptoms in a short period of time. Like the SRT, Jacob et al.'s model appealed to us because it stresses values, principles, and practices congruent with foundational group work scholarship. Groupwork scholars recognize the value of groups in empowering diverse persons in a multicultural society where those who are "different" are often marginalized and oppressed (i.e., Guth et al., 2018; Ratts et al., 2010; Singh et al., 2012).

The Creative-Arts Personal Growth Group (CAPG)

The planning, performing, and processing phases of CAPG each contribute to the impact of this intervention (Thomas & Pender, 2008). This section describes these phases, after briefly presenting CAPG's purpose, goals, and evidence base. Although space prohibits a complete explanation of CAPG, *The CAPG Leader Manual* (Sosin and Noble, 2020) provides a comprehensive explanation of the treatment.

CAPG Purpose, Goals, and Techniques

The purpose of CAPG is to provide an affirming and inclusive community for adults recovering from bullying. The goals of CAPG are to help group members compassionately connect with themselves and one another while learning creative and expressive tools to develop shame resiliency (Brown, 2012). CAPG techniques are trauma-informed, research-based, and primarily drawn from cognitive-behavioral (CBT), mindfulness, and creative-expressive arts therapy traditions.

CBT approaches, such as psychoeducation and imagery re-scripting, wherein clients learn to identify, challenge, and modify trauma-inducing scripts and images, are employed to help members understand and reduce the impact of bullying (Heyes et al., 2013). Meta-analyses of group treatments that integrate the CBT techniques used in CAPG highlight their overall effectiveness (Harris, 2014; Schwartze et al., 2019). Mindfulness and creative and expressive arts approaches, individually and in conjunction with CBT, also effectively treat trauma (Fortuna & Vallejo, 2015; C. A. Malchiodi, 2020). Mindfulness promotes increased cognitive flexibility and emotional and physiological regulation in response to trauma activation (Goodman & Calderon, 2012), and creative and expressive arts techniques facilitate understanding and expression of implicit aspects of trauma memories that are challenging to tolerate and put into words (Bayne & Thompson, 2018; C. Malchiodi, 2011). The Performing section, below, describes the specific CBT, mindfulness, and creative-expressive arts techniques used in CAPG.

Planning for CAPG includes leadership training, obtaining supplies needed for creative-expressive arts, and member screening. The purpose of screening is for potential members to meaningfully connect with the leader, understand CAPG purposes, goals, and guidelines, collaboratively determine appropriateness and readiness for the group, and participate in informed consent (Jacobs et al., 2016).

The performing phase of CAPG includes six or more sessions lasting 90 to 120-minutes each. Each session follows the same structure: open art, group processing (GP), psychoeducation, GP, creative-expressive arts activities related to the psychoeducation, GP, and closing. Throughout CAPG, creative and expressive arts activities allow for expression using

art, poetry, music, dance, movement, narrative writing, or drama (Gladding, 2016). Session one focuses on the impact of bullying on identity and personhood. Members learn and practice mindfulness activities that promote emotion regulation and shame resilience. In session two, the group explores identity with the goals of increasing awareness, acceptance, and strengthening of the authentic, multi-faceted self. In session three, members gain knowledge and skills needed to transform fear and shame symptoms into compassionate connection with self and others. In session four, members learn and practice additional skills to help them track fear and shame activation and modify disturbing thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations. Session five aims at increasing understanding of the pervasive impact bullying had on members' sense of self. Each participant shares their personal shame narrative and members grieve together about the extensive impact bullying had on them. These stories then expand to include the rest of their story (Meichenbaum, 2007; ie., their strengths, multicultural uniqueness, shared humanity, courage, and resilience). In session six, members collaboratively review each session's psychoeducation and creative-expressive arts activities. Members process their overall experience of CAPG and creatively co-develop after-care plans to help them continue to grow in their identity, recovery, and ability to connect authentically with others.

Group processing occurs after each session component to promote meaningful connection between group members. Due to the crucial role processing plays in accomplishing CAPG's purpose and goals, leaders are careful to ensure enough time for members' dynamic process, all have a chance to share, depth occurs within time constraints, and the focus of sessions is not curtailed (Champe & Rubel, 2012; Jacobs et al., 2016).

Pilot Study

This initial study aimed to understand participants' experience of CAPG. The research question was "How do CAPG members describe their experience of CAPG?" Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological method was effective for exploring group members' lived, perceived, and personal experiences. Moustakas' approach unearths rich, nuanced data and fits researchers who have a personal commitment and deep interest in understanding persons' perceptions of their experience (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Such studies employ small samples, require prolonged engagement with the phenomenon, and entail intense data analysis (McLeod, 2011). In keeping with Moustakas' view of research participants as members of the research team and our desire to privilege the personhood and voices of the participants, we used Moustakas' term "coresearchers" to refer to the participants throughout the findings and discussion sections of this manuscript (Moustakas, 1990, p. 9). This section outlines the research procedures, including information about the research team, recruitment, data, and data analysis.

The research team consisted of ten coresearchers and the authors. The first author recruited coresearchers, ran the CAPG groups, and identified as a White woman, LPC, and professor of counselor education. The second and third authors, a Persian woman and an Asian man, are LPCs who were doctoral students in counselor education at the time of the study. The first three authors collaborated on data analysis and writing the manuscript. The fourth author, a White woman, an LMFT, and an associate professor of counselor education, was not a part of the study but contributed to manuscript writing. As a whole, the authors believe in the value of studying clients' perceptions of counseling and concur with

Sackett and Lawson (2016) that “counselors can provide more effective counseling by using coresearchers’ experiences as a guide. If counselors and researchers hear from clients about their experience, they can better understand the process” (p. 62).

After obtaining IRB approval, coresearchers were recruited throughout one university campus located in the Southern United States. Recruitment entailed using advertising posters, a splash page on the university website, student counseling services social media, and word of mouth to adults outside of the campus. Outside recruitment was necessary to obtain a diverse age range of adult coresearchers. The coresearchers consisted of ten people enrolled in two separate offerings of CAPG, one in 2017 and one in 2019. Coresearcher demographics included eight in the 18–27 age range and two coresearchers between the ages of 35–40. Three identified as male, six identified as female, and one reported unspecified gender. Coresearchers identified as Caucasian ($n = 5$), African American ($n = 2$), Asian ($n = 1$), and Hispanic ($n = 2$). Eight reported sexual orientation as heterosexual and two reported as part of LGBTQ+ communities. One participant reported as disabled.

CAPG groups were conducted at the university counseling center. Interested coresearchers contacted the center to schedule a screening interview. Data collected during the study included weekly session surveys, a post-CAPG survey, and field notes taken by the first author during and after each session. The two surveys contained open-ended questions. The first survey was emailed after each CAPG session and returned to the first author via e-mail prior to the next session. It had the following questions: “What impact, if any, did the opening sharing portion of the session have on you today?” (followed by the same question for the psychoeducation, creative art activity, and group processing portions of the session). “How safe did you feel sharing with our group today?” “How accepted by and connected with the group members and leaders did you feel today?” “Is there anything you need to feel safer or more supported in this group?” “What was most challenging about this session?” and “Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience in CAPG this week?” After the last session, they received two surveys, the weekly session survey just described and the second survey, a post-intervention survey. The post group survey consisted of the following questions: “Please consider each aspect of your experience in the CAPG and provide your feedback: Screening Process, Leader’s Style and Personhood, Group Members, Group Process, Group Structure and Guidelines, Session by Session Education and Activities” (divided by session with each listed) “What, if anything, was helpful to you about this session and why?” “How can you continue to apply this information?” “What is the most important thing you learned from being in this group and how will you hold on to this?” “What was most challenging about this group?” “What changes would you suggest for this group?” and “Other Comments/ Feedback.”

Triangulating the survey data were individual, audio-taped and transcribed interviews (20–45 minutes in length) with four of the ten coresearchers (members of the 2017 group) and one focus group with five members of the 2019 group (20 minutes). The interviews took place within one week of the last CAPG session, while the focus group occurred immediately following the final CAPG session. Both interviews entailed asking members what impacted them most about CAPG and what helped them reach the group’s goals. Interviews were in person in the group room where CAPG sessions took place. The third author and a counseling graduate student conducted the individual interviews, and the first author the focus group.

Phenomenological data analysis followed procedures outlined by Moustakas (1994). The first and third authors engaged in initial coding and thematic analysis. The second author used the thematic findings from the first and third authors to triangulate the data for trustworthiness. The analysis procedure included the phenomenological reduction stages of horizontalization, reduction and elimination, and theme clustering (Moustakas, 1994). Horizontalization entailed prolonged immersion in the data, reading and rereading all aspects of the data, and then listing verbatim quotes reflecting the coresearchers' experiences. Reduction and elimination involved removing repetitive and irrelevant content from the horizontalized data. Clustering enabled the researchers to compose a detailed account of coresearchers' perceptions of their experiences, each with substantive verbatim data to support them. Over time, several iterations of this process led to a saturation of themes (the emergence of no new themes or insights). When all the authors agreed to the final template (themes and corresponding data), an extant reviewer analyzed and provided feedback about the findings' accuracy and coherence. As is the case with all qualitative research, results were constructed and intuited by the research team, including the coresearchers (Moustakas, 1990, 1994). To increase the rigor and quality of the findings, the researchers employed several trustworthiness measures.

Trustworthiness

Drawing on recommendations from Brod et al. (2009), Creswell and Creswell (2018), McLeod (2011), and Moustakas (1994), the research team incorporated the following rigor measures: (1) Before data analysis and throughout the research process, the researchers differentiated subjective biases, desires, and expectations via journaling, peer debriefing, and group processing (bracketing). (2) The researchers kept an audit trail by documenting the analysis process. (3) The researchers employed triangulation by comparing and contrasting multiple forms of data to confirm interpretations and conclusions. (4) The coresearchers conducted member checks by establishing that survey and interview data were correct via e-mail confirmation. (5) An external auditor, an LPC and counselor educator experienced with trauma, group interventions, and phenomenological research, checked the researchers' interpretations and conclusions. (6) The researchers were transparent in the manuscript, providing clear statements about themselves and the research process. (7) Collaborative coding and analysis allowed many perspectives to inform the conclusions. (8) The researchers conducted prolonged engagement with the phenomenon over an extended period. (9) Researchers remained immersed in the data analysis process until all data were accounted for and no new findings emerged (saturation). (10) All conclusions had robust support from the data. (11) Conclusions are supported with rich, contextualized, and verbatim data from the coresearchers.

Results

This section presents the findings. Three primary themes emerged from the data analysis: *Containment*, *Creativity*, and *Community*. Pseudonyms replace actual names of the coresearchers.

Containment: Leading with Compassion, Commitment, and Consistent Session Structure

Coresearchers reported that the leaders' qualities and the relationship they facilitated between group members were critical to the effectiveness of CAPG. For Robbie, the leaders promoted openness and inclusivity in the group. He shared, "the style and personhood of the leaders was wonderful; they facilitated a peaceful, affirming, validating, open atmosphere." Likewise, Cereta wrote, "The leaders listened, were intentional, warm, and understanding." The coresearchers also appreciated how leaders adjusted the session structure to align with group member needs. Elsa wrote, "Their flexibility allowed the group to choose the direction and the flow [of the processing] during sessions."

In addition to the leaders' personhood, coresearchers believed that the consistent group structure created a comforting rhythm for each week's focus and activities. Coresearchers expressed that the consistency, organization, and sequencing of CAPG components promoted connection, understanding, and skill competency. Sam wrote, "I enjoyed the opening of each session because it was used to talk about my week and to tune into one another." Mary and Paula shared, "The psychoeducation was very in-depth and thorough" (Mary). "The teaching allowed for positive understanding of coping mechanisms and utilizing creative methods to respond [to fear and shame] in healthy ways" (Paula). Coresearchers reported that weekly anchoring activities and self-compassion themes, part of each session, supported emotion regulation. Tressa and Alex shared, "The progressive muscle relaxation was very impactful. I realized I hadn't spent time noticing my body that way in a while" (Tressa). "The positive affirmations touched me deeply. I really appreciated them and needed to hear them" (Alex).

Coresearchers noted that the counselor's personhood and the group structure worked synergistically to increase openness to one another and receptivity to the content focused on in the sessions. According to Bella, "Because the leaders were warm, welcoming, accepting, and loving, it helped me to receive details on what the group experience would be like, which helped me feel more comfortable and excited for the group." Likewise, Sam shared, "The group leader created such a safe place and gave everyone permission to feel their trauma with nonjudgement." Coresearchers reported that they appreciated the emphasis on safety, acceptance, and unity. They also valued the small number of members. Elsa reflected, "The small group size was welcomed; it created a nonjudgmental space resulting in communal safety that fostered a sense of acceptance and promoted healing from past wounds."

Creativity: Healing of Fear and Shame Narratives through Self-Exploration and Sharing

As a whole, coresearchers indicated that the creative and expressive arts activities helped them to connect with and value themselves and one another and express complex internal experiences and memories with greater ease. They also perceived that these activities provided a means of feeling, describing, and integrating painful emotions of fear and shame they had never processed. After creatively depicting and then sharing his bullying narrative, Alex wrote, "I enjoyed the creative arts activity, and thinking about my life in terms of a timeline or bubbles to connect different thought patterns that have become associated with different life events was extremely helpful." Similarly, Cereta wrote,

“Imagining and drawing a [safe] space was very emotional but also very helpful. Once I got into it, I noticed my mind craving more safety and not wanting to stop.” Coresearchers found that the art activities provided an effective way to observe fear and shame and their impact and led to meaningful processing. Ari wrote, “I wanted each session to continue [so I could keep on] engaging in art and learning to process my shame.”

Coresearchers reported that tracking triggers of fear and shame using art enabled them to observe and change fear and shame-based thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations. They also believed that these activities helped them reconnect with and value their unique personhood. Ari wrote, “Sharing about the shame triggering moments was emotional and difficult, but really helpful and pointed to my need for acceptance.” For Robbie, “focusing on the safe space [while also exploring the painful thoughts and feelings] was helpful and calming; from there I could see that the maladaptive coping mechanisms were a distortion of my healthy self.” Paula noted that she had never linked her current symptoms to past bullying; she only felt deeply shameful and different. She stated that depicting her bullying history helped her see that her present symptoms made sense in light of her history of bullying and marginalization. Tressa wrote, “It was powerful for me to retrace the roots of shame because I think I fall asleep and minimize these things that happened to me.”

The creative and expressive arts activities gave members insight into current coping behaviors and validated their sense of self. Bella reflected, “The tools allowed us to think about how we carried the values and personalities of others and neglected self. I didn’t feel shame or flaws when drawing but felt compassion and understanding, a boost of confidence to live truly.” Ari discovered how much sense her over-exercising made when she linked it to triggered shame and fear. She wrote, “I’ve always seen engaging in these things [restrictive eating/over exercise] as crazy/the main problem, but viewing them as the reaction to a deeper longing really changed my perspective.” Similarly, Robbie said, “It was helpful to learn that there is always a reason behind my shame. The ‘core-self’ activity and, specifically, how to get back into the ‘zone of tolerance’ helped tie a lot of concepts together.” Overall, participant surveys indicated that the CAPG protocol was effective in reducing symptoms of shame and trauma. Bella reflected the overall feedback when she shared that in CAPG “I was able to develop a sense of empowerment to cultivate my own peace in very new ways. Because of CAPG, I was eventually able to ignore the critical voices.”

Some coresearchers found developing a kinder, more compassionate relationship with themselves, a goal of CAPG, challenging at times. They shared that cultivating compassion toward the self while practicing mindfulness skills, processing the psychoeducation and activities, and sharing memories of being bullied difficult. Anticipating challenges, the leader allotted fifteen minutes to remain after each session to ensure that all members left feeling grounded. However, group members did not need to remain for support after any of the sessions. Members reported feeling secure and peaceful at the end of each session. Although aspects of CAPG were challenging, coresearchers reported that these components were still valuable to them. Cereta shared, “It was hard to express this week, but writing and putting language to past events was still helpful. It was difficult to go back to those moments, but I felt safe and very supported through the process.” Similarly, after the session exploring identity, Paula shared,

I enjoyed this activity, although it was hard for me to express my identity in pictures. Finally, I used words to do it. Then I could see that I actually *do* have an understanding of who I am. This gave me a boost of confidence to live that [self] out.

The coresearchers perceived that the creative activities were helpful and meaningful. They believed that the creative activities provided practical tools for monitoring and modifying fear and shame, developing a more secure sense of self, and recovering from the traumatizing effects of bullying. However, for the coresearchers unanimously, these components were most meaningful because of their context in the CAPG community.

Community: Processing Bullying Induced Trauma in a Shame Free Group

Study coresearchers highly valued processing their experiences with the group at the beginning, after the psychoeducation and creative arts activities, and at the end of each session. They reported that processing resulted in feeling “truly connected with the group,” “safe,” “normal,” and “empowered.” Coresearchers expressed believing that processing was central to their recovery from bullying. In particular, they reported that through processing, they connected in profound and meaningful ways with others and felt accepted, valued, and “normal.” Elsa said that “Others’ courage and honesty allowed my own feelings to feel validated.” Likewise, Ari wrote,

I was grateful to have heard what others were sharing. I felt heard. I felt like part of a connected group that is struggling but really brave and willing to acknowledge their pain. The sharing was a really important part to me. It helped me feel not alone, and it seems like a good way to honor others by hearing their stories.

For Cereta, sharing about features of her identity and her bullying narrative was transformative. She wrote, “I feel safe enough again to relate to others. This experience normalized all of our painful experiences.” Robbie made this point as well: “Sharing something that you both feel and have expressed with art is a very intimate process, and I felt both accepted and at peace about it.” Perhaps because CAPG leaders communicate and cultivate inclusivity and safety from the start of the group, including during recruitment and screening, members may have felt safe sharing openly reasonably quickly, which is vital to the success of a short-term group. Ari said,

Sharing this very personal aspect of my life with people I met just five weeks ago was really scary but also really necessary. I have kept these events private for so long but felt that simply sharing them released some power they held over me. [I am so] thankful I felt safe enough to share.

Coresearchers identified group processing as what knit the group together. Although some of them perceived that the group processing was painful and humbling at times, all highlighted that when members participated with their authentic selves, they grew closer and individually freer. As Bella concluded,

Processing allowed me to see others’ desire, willingness, and investment in being part of the group. It taught me how to process shame and work towards safety and peace in ways I will take with me for the rest of my life.

Discussion and Implications

This pilot study provides preliminary support for CAPG as an intervention for bullied adults. In line with the outcomes highlighted in the literature, the coresearchers reported severe, multi-faceted, pervasive, and long-term emotional and identity disturbances after being bullied (Arttime et al., 2019; Ossa et al., 2019; Plexousakis et al., 2019). The pilot study also provides an initial response to recommendations in the literature for interventions for bullied adults that strengthen the self, promote mutual acceptance and inclusion, and provide skills for overcoming fear and shame (Bauman, 2010; Litman et al., 2015; Olatunji & Fan, 2015; Ossa et al., 2019; Plexousakis et al., 2019; Serpell et al., 2019; Vidourek et al., 2016). Coresearchers reported stronger identity, a sense of shared humanity and belonging (i.e., universality, normalization, acceptance of uniqueness, emotional safety, and encouragement; Jacobs et al., 2016; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005), and knowledge and skills needed to regulate shame after participating in CAPG. This pilot study also highlights the value of Shame Resiliency Theory (SRT) (Brown, 2006, 2010, 2019) in designing interventions for bullied adults.

SRT emphasizes the value of compassionate, mutual, vulnerable, and authentic communities in overcoming shame. Coresearchers in this study expressed that the openness and vulnerability of the leader and members of CAPG were key to feeling safe enough to share and work through bullying induced fear and shame. Cereta summed this up when she said, “I feel safe enough again to relate to others. This experience normalized all of our painful experiences.” These findings echo those of Hernandez and Mendoza (2011), who applied SRT in a group work intervention called Connections. Their study participants reported similar outcomes, including significant decreases in internalized shame.

Specific to the thematic finding of *Containment*, the coresearchers reported that trust in the group emerged quickly and organically. They attributed this to perceptions of the leader’s character and actions, specifically to their compassion and consistency. This feedback corroborates with group work scholarship emphasizing the role of the leader in successful groups (i.e., Jacobs et al., 2016; Rubel & Kline, 2008; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Coresearchers described the leading as “gentle,” “patient,” “loving,” “accepting,” “humble,” “real,” “knowledgable,” and “consistent.” They explained the sense of safety as “calming,” “peaceful,” “expansive,” and “protective.” Moreover, they communicated that not only the leader, but the entire group provided this sense of containment. Surrounded by empathic faces, with countenances so different from those that had shamed them, they reported feeling able to trust themselves to the CAPG relational process.

Within the *Creativity* theme, coresearchers shared that self-expression through creative and expressive arts fostered increased awareness and valuing of their authentic, multi-faceted identity. Coresearchers perceived that the arts-based mindfulness activities promoted a sense of reembodiment, the capacity to experience the world from one’s own perceptions again, instead of through the eyes of those who had shamed them. This phenomenological shift was described by Merleau-Ponty (1945) as the ability to feel oneself in and for oneself instead of through and for others. Coresearchers believed that reembodiment enabled them to access, represent through the arts, and finally process painful thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations related to bullying. This feedback reflects previous scholarship linking the resolution of traumatic memories to reembodiment and representational (narrative) processing (Siegel, 2010; Van der Kolk, 2015). Coresearcher reflections

echo conclusions made by Bowman and Boone (1998) that creativity in group work “facilitates the development of self and community” (p. 388). Gladding (2016), Goodman and Calderon (2012), and, specific to trauma, C. A. Malchiodi (2020) also clarify the benefits of the creative and expressive arts in counseling. Our coresearchers perceived that the arts based activities introduced in CAPG were fundamental to their developing emotion regulation skills that enabled them to monitor and modify intolerable feelings of fear and shame. Their feedback about the value of arts integration in trauma work aligns with conclusions drawn by Artime et al. (2019), Bauman et al. (2013), and Serpell et al. (2019). Bella captured the essence of the coresearchers’ expressions regarding the arts in CAPG: “The tools allowed us to think about how we carried the values and personalities of others and neglected self. I didn’t feel shame or flaws when drawing but felt compassion and understanding, a boost of confidence to live truly.”

Finally, coresearchers reported the salience of the CAPG *Community* in normalizing feelings of fear and shame and overcoming them (Brown, 2006; Jacobs et al., 2016). As they worked together to reclaim disowned aspects of their identities and learn techniques to regulate fear and shame, they perceived that the effects of bullying diminished. Emerging feelings of anger and grief gave way to self compassion and increased courage and strength to live more authentically. Coresearchers reported that CAPG was rehumanizing. While hostile and interpersonal experiences were disaffirming, CAPG was a corrective emotional experience (Alexander & French, 1946) that was affirming, diversity celebrating, and interpersonally protective.

Implications for Research, Practice, and Training

Additional research opportunities related to developing the empirical basis of CAPG are limitless. Future studies should explore the impact of CAPG with more extensive and diverse samples and with alternative qualitative and quantitative methods. Studies exploring specific group leader qualities, potential ways to increase containment, the impact of additional techniques for processing and recovering from fear and shame, and ways of broadening the impact of the CAPG community in advocating for dehumanized persons are just some ideas. Of critical interest to the research team is ensuring maintenance of gains made in treatment.

This pilot study’s findings provide implications for group workers and group work educators and scholars. First, in keeping with the problem addressed in the study, group workers and educators should be aware of the epidemic problem of bullying and its pervasively dehumanizing impact on persons. Group workers should be equipped to effectively assess, conceptualize, and treat fear and trauma sequelae resulting from such experiences. Second, group workers should be prepared to address this problem by offering groups that focus on the impact of interpersonal cruelty and developing shame resilience.

Particular to the thematic findings of *Containment*, *Creativity*, and *Community*, group workers might benefit from groupwork training that promotes the ability to develop or run groups such as CAPG. Training should focus on providing containment, ethically and effectively applying creative and expressive arts in group work, and developing an inclusive, empathic, and rehumanizing community. Group workers and group work educators might also consider participating in CAPG themselves, as a member or coleader, to have first hand knowledge of the intervention or to work on their own fear

and shame. Intense and intolerable feelings of fear and shame can cause therapists to avoid versus steer into the fear and shame of group members (Siegel, 2010). Working on their own fear and shame may make them more able to support others in facing theirs. Finally, group workers might consider offering course work related to promoting the capacities needed to run CAPG or other similar groups once they feel equipped themselves.

Expanding on the thematic findings to the specific CAPG psychoeducation and creative and expressive components, counselor education programs might consider training future counselors to integrate these or other creative techniques during group, trauma-specific, practicum, and internship courses (Litman et al., 2015; Ossa et al., 2019; Vidourek et al., 2016). Using the CAPG with emerging counselors and counselor educators may also raise awareness of possible blindspots, and/or expose areas appropriate for personal counseling. Emerging counselors and counselor educators who participate in CAPG may enrich their learning experience by increasing their felt safety in the classroom and facilitating intrapersonal growth. Attending may also model personal growth group leadership skills and communicate the importance of creating social justice promoting communities (Guth et al., 2018).

Limitations

Although several procedures ensured rigor, trustworthiness, and meaningfulness of the findings, this pilot study has several limitations. First, the study combined data from two CAPG groups from two different years, which may be considered a limiting factor. Moreover, the CAPG manual evolved from 2017 to 2019. The manual for the 2017 group used the terms anxiety and social anxiety, while the manual for the 2019 group replaced these with the terms fear and shame. Although both groups covered the same psychoeducation and creative activities, the 2019 group included two additional creative arts activities. The differences in terms and activities may be a limitation of this study. Likewise, due to the subjective nature of phenomenological inquiry and the limited sample, the findings are not easily transferable. Finally, the researchers' inability to completely avoid bias and bracket their perspectives may have also impacted the data analysis and conclusions. Although these limitations, as well as possible others are important to note, they do not diminish the value of this research in giving voice to coresearchers' experience and the perceived benefits they communicated during our rich experience together.

Conclusion

The CAPG shows promise as a brief group counseling intervention for bullying-induced trauma and shame. Coresearchers in this pilot study reported benefits from CAPG. First, they perceived the benefits of the leader in providing safety for all members and skill in facilitating the group (*Containment*). Second, they reported that the creative-expressive arts activities helped them regulate fear and shame, connect with and value their authentic self and that of others, and process disturbing memories (*Creativity*). Finally, they believed that the group processing component promoted a rich and meaningful connection between members, mutual empathy, and the experience of being part of a shared, inclusive, diversity-affirming, and rehumanizing community (*Community*).

Coresearchers in this study found that in the context of CAPG they, like Angelou, “rose” from the traumatizing impact of bullying, and became more shame resilient in the process.

*You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise (Angelou, 1997)*

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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