

Original Paper

Can Creative Art Activities Contribute to Social Emotional Communication in Online Groups during the COVID 19 Pandemic?

Steve Harvey^{1*}, E. C. Kelly² & Kassidee Cruz³

¹ University of Guam, Department of Psychology, Mangilao, Guam

² University of Auckland, Department of Creative Arts and Industries, Auckland, New Zealand

³ University of Guam, Micronesian Studies Program, Mangilao, Guam

* Steve Harvey, University of Guam, Department of Psychology, Mangilao, Guam

Received: June 16, 2022

Accepted: July 14, 2022

Online Published: July 17, 2022

doi:10.22158/wjeh.v4n3p35

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/wjeh.v4n3p35>

Abstract

In this paper, the authors review a single session in which a small group of participants from different countries within the Asian Pacific region used creative arts improvisation to develop collaborative expression of their subjective experiences during the COVID health crisis. During this review, the authors consider if meaningful communication could develop among the participants and how such exchanges might be expanded to contribute to communities and within an international context. The group was conducted online, and the members were from Guam, China and another woman from India currently studying in New Zealand. The improvisational expressions consisted of dance, vocal music, art, poetry, and fairy tale making followed by discussion. The general themes from this collection of images that emerged from the improvisations ranged from disconnection to positive connection towards each other and a renewal of hope. These developments occurred online and among people from different countries. Some of these participants did not know each other prior to the meeting and others did not share a primary language. The authors use this review to suggest some potential guidelines that might apply to other projects that address community responses to the current pandemic and possible cross-cultural connections during times of crisis.

Keywords:

resilience, creative arts, online groups, COVID 19, cross cultural collaboration

1. Introduction

In this paper, the authors review arts based metaphors that emerged during an online meeting in which participants from Guam, China, and New Zealand used creative arts improvisations collaboratively to express their personal experiences with each other during the COVID-19 health crisis. The current global pandemic has become a unique period impacting most areas of life in many countries. Typical social and emotional interactions have dramatically changed during the last two years and have become significantly limited due to restrictions to mitigate very real and severe health concerns. As individuals restrict personal and social contact with fewer avenues for interpersonal communication, emotional isolation and distress can emerge. The authors use this group experience to explore the potential contribution online creative expression of personal experiences may have in the development of social and emotional communication, what value such exchanges can offer, and if such communication might extend among diverse countries and cultures during this historic global event.

2. The Creative Dialogue Project

When the health crisis initially presented in China in Jan 2020, two of the authors (SH & ECK) began using creative arts improvisations online to communicate personal experiences of the pandemic using dance, art, music, poetry, and storytelling online with others interested in the creative arts to investigate if arts based interaction was possible in this format. The initial meeting included participants from Guam, USA, and China. As the crisis spread, this project expanded to include other participants from across Europe, North America, Australia, Vietnam, and Guam. During these expanded series of meetings, a singer joined the project and began to contribute vocal improvisation. At times, the groups did not share a common primary language (Harvey et al., 2020; Harvey, Jennings, & Kelly, 2020).

The creative improvisations used in this project are not considered to be therapy. Rather these forms of expression are used as explorations of how collaborative arts based improvisations can become avenues for the communication of experiences that are difficult to express verbally. When we began we had no predetermined purpose other than to see if improvised arts based metaphor making online could occur and be of value among people from diverse countries who were also experiencing the pandemic.

Previously arts improvisation has been used to develop metaphorical communication of complex stressful experiences in single communities using in-person formats. These events included personal reactions to the mass shooting in Christchurch, New Zealand (Harvey & Kelly, 2020a) and the threat of missile attacks on Guam from North Korea (Harvey & Kelly, 2000b). These forms of in-person improvisational expression have also been extended to develop understandings among people whose countries are experiencing a rising of political tension (Harvey et al., 2018). The intent of these group events was to help develop intimate communication that has the potential to facilitate personal relationships during moments of high community or international related distress. During the Creative Collaborations project, a similar style of arts communication was expanded to be online and develop connections across several cultures and countries during the world wide health crisis.

The authors found that the metaphors that have been created during these groups can express nonverbal subjective personal experiences that are not available in the usual verbal or social commentary and discussion (Harvey et al., 2020). These groups explore the possibility of creating metaphors online using the more nonverbal and nonlinear art forms of improvisational dance, musical/vocal improvisations, art, and fairy-tale making with people from other countries and cultures that are being impacted in similar ways by the pandemic. This project is ongoing and has continued to follow the spread and evolving aspects of this crisis throughout the years of 2020-2021 and into 2022.

2.1 Physical Storytelling (PS)

The basic approach to the improvisations at the core of the Creative Dialogues project is built on the practice of PS (Kelly, 2006, Harvey & Kelly, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2020a, 2020b). PS is a multimodal creative improvisation practice. In this practice, a conductor, or group leader, facilitates a participant to tell a personally relevant life story. Dancer/s are then selected to create a movement improvisation using the physical impulses they are experiencing in the present moment rather than try to develop a mime or even a pantomime of the concrete story or reproduce the verbal narrative directly. The intent of the resulting movement episode is to have the physical expression become an abstract moving metaphor of the initial story.

Throughout PS, the group watching is asked to express their own experiences of the dance using imagination that encourages personalized imagery, awareness of their own physical sensations, and creative thought by using spontaneous art, poetry, and discussion in response to the initial movement. The use of group active imagination and creative expression by the watchers engages an audience into a more active part of the creative process than is the case in more typical performances. The assumption is that all responses of those involved are included and are important to develop an overall metaphor. The improvisational dance followed by arts and poetry responses of the individuals within the group expands the metaphor to include a larger set of subjective experience expressions to develop and enrich the resulting metaphors collaboratively. At times, these responses can appear to be tangential or even competing when understood in typical verbal conversation. However, these differences can become part of an overall expression in a larger metaphorical context. Often these responses are unexpected, unplanned for, and surprising.

In PS, the conductor draws on several improvisational structures to facilitate developing a dance metaphor to the initial narrative of the teller's story. When the Creative Dialogues project initially moved online, the solo score (Harvey & Kelly, 2020a) was used as the main activity to help develop communication among groups with diverse backgrounds. During this solo structure, the conductor or leader of the online session asks a participant from one country to tell a personal story from their experience during COVID and then to select a person from another country to develop a dance improvisation in response. In the initial online session of the Creative Collaborations project, the participants from China, Guam, and the USA found this form to help develop an empathic response to each even though they did not share the same primary language (Harvey et al., 2020).

As the project evolved, additional approaches were added to structure the improvisations and online practices to fit the internet format. Often after the group has discussed the current personal experiences of the pandemic in their part of the world, the conductor created a simple structure or “starting place” to begin the multimodal improvisation to help focus on these initial concerns without using a specific verbal story to begin the creative process. An example of a beginning structure is the use of three dancers to create an improvisation one after another using the movement of the other dancers to influence them. For example, as the virus was spreading from country to country, this trio was called the “spread of the virus” to represent the experiences with COVID more globally rather than being used to express a specific narrative. We found this trio structure helped to express a more general nonverbal climate of the moment (Harvey, Jennings, & Kelly, 2020).

In the Creative Dialogues project, sessions conclude with the structure of the Fairy-tale (Harvey & Kelly, 2018). In this form a small number of dancers develop improvised movement in collaboration and in response to other group members improvising a fairy-tale while they watch the emerging movement and vocalization. This structure of a dance/music/improvised story in concert with the audience’s active imagination is used to help develop a metaphorical summary of the imagery and themes of the central emotional experiences that emerge during the session in creative and imaginary ways. As the project has developed, different languages have been incorporated (English and Mandarin for example) within the fairy tale. After each episode of improvisation, the group is invited to discuss their experiences.

2.2 Use of Improvised Vocal Music

Early in the Creative Dialogues project, a vocal musician joined the improvisation as an equal creative partner. This addition added a unique feature to the improvisation. During movement portions, the dancer/s and musician respond to each other’s expressions in the moment with full improvisation. Neither person knows how their joint expressions will be structured or end. They both follow a collaborative dynamic with the goal of developing an attunement of rhythms, tension flow, and emotional expression spontaneously. As both expressions are nonverbal and essentially nonlinear, their improvisation becomes uncoupled from typical verbal description and presents unique aspects of the story especially when those watching add imaginative art and poetry as collaborative responses. During the discussions that follow these movement/vocal episodes, group members report they have experienced nonverbal and emotional aspects of the stories or images in ways they were not aware of in the initial narrative presentation.

3. The Session

The session reviewed in this paper was held in mid-May 2021 with nine participants in a Zoom meeting room. This group included the authors, two other participants from Guam, three creative art therapists from China, and a graduate student from New Zealand whose home country is India. Several of the participants were not known to each other at the start of this meeting. We have chosen to review this group as the members come from and/or currently live in the Asia-Pacific region of the world and this

reflection might offer a potential contribution to this part of the world.

Two of the Chinese women spoke English as well as Mandarin though English was not their primary language. Two of the women from China were in the same room and could be on the same screen. Two participants from Guam are married and were also able to attend together, using an individual screen. The others in the group attended using their own single screen. The dancer/s were highlighted during each improvisation using the spotlight feature on Zoom that enlarged their screen/s so that they were the only viewable participants. This added a performance element. All the participants were aware that their comments and arts-based expression could be used in future reviews. All had signed permission for this to occur. All participated voluntarily and expressed their intent to participate to see what they might create together collaboratively.

Members of the group reported they had followed the safety restrictions mandated in their respective countries. All followed the general rules around wearing masks, maintaining a “bubble” with close family members only or had been living in an isolated manner. Each member had been practicing social distance when around others, had significantly limited all travel, and had been COVID-19 tested when necessary. Members reported personally knowing someone who had become ill with COVID-19 though none of the group reported being aware of having contracted COVID at the time of this group. Education and work were taking place online for most members or was being conducted with major changes in their work and learning practice when done in person. All informal, normal in-person social gatherings such as meetings with friends or larger extended family gatherings even for events such as funerals were severely limited.

The meeting was structured in a similar way as other meetings in the Creative Dialogues project. The group initially introduced themselves and then described their current personal situations related to the pandemic. Despite the easing of some of the more stressful restrictions from earlier months with the increase in vaccines, each participant reported aspects of ongoing distressful impacts related to the health crisis. Group members described the difficulties traveling due to the COVID related restrictions. One woman reported she had been unable to visit her father at the time of his death during the past winter and later found it difficult to make travel arrangements to attend his memorial service. Another woman had been unable to contact her family and a close friend during the latest tragic surge in her home country and described how frightening this uncertainty was for her. Other residents from Guam described the continued difficulties of visiting with friends and extended family despite the easing of some restrictions. The women from China reported that despite longer periods of more normal social life, they all had been impacted by sudden, unpredictable, and very restrictive shutdowns due to the rise in COVID cases in cities near them. All reported spending long periods of time being relatively isolated from their pre-pandemic communities. The group agreed that they were experiencing the stress of an unknown future including the experiences with strong emotional events such as mourning and fear of their family’s safety in addition to having their normal social life being significantly disrupted. Some members reported emotional difficulties related to an increase of social and political conflict within their local communities

around the health restrictions.

3.1 The First Improvisation

The conductor structured an initial improvisation in which the two pairs who were sharing their screens would do simultaneous duets while the singer joined with improvised vocalization. The other group members responded with art and poetry. The group followed with a discussion of their experiences. The intent of this beginning structure was to offer movement/vocal images that might provide expression of visual, physical, and emotional experiences related to their distress in the improvised interaction to help further the themes that were verbalized during the initial discussion. The use of two screens was intended to provide visual images of the separation from others and personal or social barriers.

A sample of the art, poetry, and reflective responses are presented below to provide an illustration of extended metaphor making from this initial episode (Figures 1, 2, 3, 4). The central theme that emerged from these expressions was based around the subjective experience of a complex disconnection from the world while having the distress and pressure of being with others. Some of the poetic responses include images of tension around a desire to be free of the situation in some way while also experiencing inner conflict.



Figure 1. Art and Poetry Response to the Initial Improvisation from One Dancer

I experienced being blind and not able to see the others. Disconnection-a world cut in half-I cannot see or feel what is going on. Are they feeling the same way?

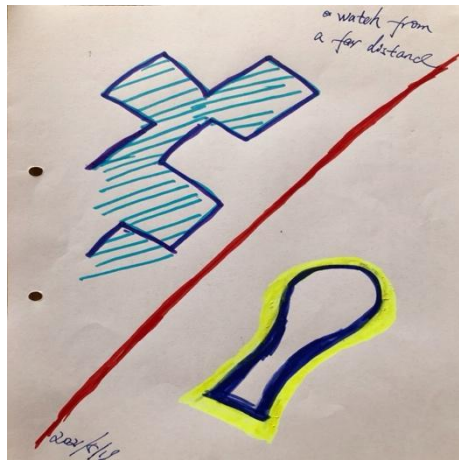


Figure 2. Art and Verbal Comments from another Dance Participant

“I had a sense of disconnection. I could not see all of you. I realized I had to watch from a distance to see you all.”



Figure 3. An Audience Participant's Art and Verbal Response to the Initial Duets

“For both dances it looked like there was one trying to get away. I kept saying “let me go”. I couldn’t tell where one person began and the other ended.”

The woman, who created the last image (see Figure 4) after having danced, wrote about a sense of freedom that was misplaced. She explained she used the blue colour to represent the ocean as well as an everyday mask day that keeps us from having “free air.”



Figure 4. Another Dancer's Art and Poetry Response

The sailors cannot live inside of the ocean

But should live on the ocean

Those who live on the shore should have free air.

3.2 An Audience Participant's Poetry Response:

Caught in a spoke of a wheel-how do I get through?

Push and pull/push and pull. In a moment of weakness I ease my way through I slither my way to freedom. Overjoyed

Wait- this is not the freedom I remember.

The art, poetry, and discussion of what the audience witnessed during the improvisation changed the movement and vocalization into a metaphor with several emotional aspects and creative reflections that likely had been underlying the initial discussions about current experiences with the health crisis. This discussion coupled with the presentation of the dance/vocal, art and poetry was qualitatively different from the initial conversations offering more introspective and personalized expression.

These themes presented after the improvisations were gathered from the unspoken emotional tone and may have even been unknown or not considered prior to the improvisation during the initial conversations. The metaphors helped collect several aspects of this experience together. These expressions also began to develop a group focus on the larger topic of their subjective inner responses to the crisis that were complex and hard to verbalize. This improvisation opened an avenue for the group to continue to co-create metaphorical expressions of their private subjective experiences together.

3.3 The Second Improvisation

After the discussion that followed the initial improvisation, the conductor asked a woman if she would like to talk about a personal experience during the COVID shutdown. She presented a story of an accident she had during the early part of the health crisis in her community. She told about a time when she had wounded her hand quite badly while she was cutting an avocado with a knife as she prepared a meal for her family. Her mother had taken her to an emergency clinic but was unable to accompany her when she was being seen due to COVID restrictions. She was alone in the clinic for a long time. While

the wound had healed somewhat with time, she had ongoing numbness in her hand where the wound had been. This episode employed the structure of the solo score described above. This teller was from Guam. She selected a woman from China to create a solo dance from her story. The singer from Guam created improvised vocalization. The dancer was highlighted and enlarged on the shared screen online. Her dance solo was the only image visible to the group during the dance. The matching vocal improvisation was a part of this performance and was heard by the group during the solo movement.

The dance/voice improvisation developed in three parts. During the initial section, the dancer began by moving with slow smooth movement using an effort of flow until she interrupted this by moving with a few several sharp sudden quick movements into her torso and her entire body responded in ways that were quite surprising. During a second part, the dancer sat in a balanced position while moving both her arms and legs in a slow, sustained, ongoing motion that appeared to have a timeless suspended quality. In the last part of the improvisation, the dancer slowed her movements to stillness while covering her mouth initially and then placing her hand over her heart while looking directly into the camera. The singer matched each movement quality and direction simultaneously. The last view on the screen created a dramatic image.

During the discussion following the improvisation, the group members acknowledged the complex emotions that were part of the subjective experience of the teller. Several mentioned the traumatic nature and distress of the event and others commented on the experience of vulnerability of having to go through the treatment in the clinic alone without family support while also having to be guided by the medical restrictions to prevent any spread of COVID.

Several of the group members reported that they also had similar inner experiences while going through the crisis. The central theme of these comments included the recognition of the woman's strong emotional experience in addition to being alone. Another surprising theme emerged as each group member reported feeling more connected to the others after the viewing of the dance and vocal enactment of the initial story.

The dancer's comments reviewed both the feeling of having survived the experience and the contribution of the emotional attunement from others in close relationship with her.

3.4 The Dancer's and Singer's Comments:

"...at the end of the dance I put my hand on my chest and I could feel my heart beating faster than normal. I had the feeling 'I am alive' because I could feel my heart. "

"... (To the singer) your voice was my breathing. I became aware that I was not breathing fully during the dance. At the end I heard my breath and then followed your voice. You were breathing for me."

The singer mentioned the quality of the movement and her vocalization for one part of the dance.

"...the story spoke of before and after the accident as a period without time. During that time, it was hard to even know what day it was. There was a floating to that time. I was adding breath to my singing then to help create that feeling."

3.5 Group Members' Comments

Some group members mentioned how specific gestures the dancer made took on a significant meaning and how the movement/vocal improvisation became a metaphor that expressed several aspects of subjective experiences related to living through the health crisis.

“...at the end, your hands were close to your body with self-care. (To the dancer)”

“When your hand went over your mouth, I thought of how protective masks are. But then I thought of how the wound would open me up to the virus (even metaphorically) as a way for the virus to get in and I felt the vulnerability.”

“The dance made me feel stress and then I thought of how I have become numb as a way of coping. We all have ways of coping with this time.”

“She went through a traumatic experience and couldn't tell anyone. I felt the vulnerability of being alone going through such an intense experience. But I thought that we can heal. The body can protect itself.”

“I was really touched by the story. After all we have gone through this year it seems that this crisis is being forgotten. But the dance, the singing, and story and all the strong emotions it has brings it back to me that we have all gone through such a big experience.”

3.6 The Storyteller's Reflective Comments

Post-session, the woman who had initially shared her story about her injury during the pandemic reflected on her experience of seeing the dance and vocal interpretations:

“In this group I was able to see my experience come to life. I was able to experience the trauma of the situation visually and aurally through others' interpretations and that was extremely validating for me. Watching the dancer's movements become more piercing as she clutched her hand and as the singer's voice intensified with a pain you could feel if you heard it, I acknowledged the lingering numbness in my palm, as the story behind it had just come to life. Through this experience I was helped to realize that scars are proof that the worst wounds close and heal and though things may never be the exact same as they were before the point of impact, they can be normal-adjacent.”

There was resonance in the group with the idea of a deep and open wound as a metaphor for the pandemic, with the fear, inconvenience, and slow recovery that accompanies either. The connections made with the metaphor pointed to a shared human experience among the participants. With each person's tendency to minimize their personal struggle, the story being opened and dissected with dance and song demonstrated instead what giving struggle its own body and voice can achieve for self-understanding and the emotions and experiences that are often misjudged as small and insignificant.

The improvisation facilitated an empathy and attunement for the unspoken feelings of distress and abandonment the teller experienced during this event. As the group discussed their personal experiences while they witnessed and engaged in active imagination, the dance/vocalization became a metaphor of common subjective experiences that we all have had during the crisis. The experience of co-creating this metaphor contributed to a sense of connection as well. As this expression was created through improvisation, the theme and outcomes were not known prior to performance and were a surprise.

3.7 Final Improvisation

After the group completed the discussion of improvisation about the accident, we created a fairy-tale as a potential summary of all the imagery created during the session. In this improvisation, there were two people in the role of storytellers (one from Guam and one from China), three dancers who moved after one another in a series of three consecutive solos that were influenced by each other's movement, and the singer added vocalization. The audience was encouraged to use their creativity in witnessing the episode and add their imagery at the conclusion. The entire piece was a collaborative improvisation among all participants. At one point the Chinese storyteller told part of her tale in Mandarin.

3.8 The Fairy Tale

As the night came in-the stars came out-high in the sky-lighting the entire sky as if it were on fire. A fire that is so bright-that every star in the whole universe is so light that I can see through the darkness.

The stars began to look into the darkness for what was still alive-who was still alive-penetrating with the light- penetrating through the trees.

Where are the people? Where are the animals? Where are the trees?

We were asleep-we were waiting in stillness for a long time-we were waiting until we were surprised

Until the moss hanging from the trees-the ferns rushing across the ground- began to move- Steadily at first steady in the light.

(Translated from Mandarin) There were things among the trees that were waiting in the darkness. They had been waiting for a long time. They could move and begin all their magic.

The light became sound- the sound became echoes which went down the big valleys and became stronger.

Light-the sound- the speed

Explodes in my breath

I can tell I am alive

Each dancer introduced a different dynamic. The first dance began by slow stretches that rapidly increased in tempo to become long reaches around her body. This dancer reported that she felt surprised by the energy burst she experienced. The second dancer began with a long stillness following the initial solo in a dramatic and diverse shift. She then began to move slowly from this stillness. The third dancer introduced more expansive movements using gestures moving away from her body into the full space of the room. The singer added vocalization that matched each new movement and dancer

In the follow up discussions, the group noted the diversity of expression during the improvisation. They also noted the change in the feeling of connection to each other and of how positive feeling had developed.

3.90 Comments from Group Members

"It was a pleasure to give voice to the movement. I felt connected to all of you."

"I felt something coming to life."

"I felt like soaring, the imagery was so powerful. It was an escape from the stress of my day. A story in

flight.”

“...There is a magic of story, there is richness of imagery. It can lead us on the way out.”

The conductor summarized the session:

“We began today with discussions of feeling disconnected from our separate worlds, with off putting irregular schedules, border restrictions and closings, separations, inadequate and incomplete mourning, and not really knowing what will happen to us and those close to us. Then the imagery moved on to the powerful emotions from the story of trauma and being alone. Then the improvisation we created connected us. This helped move us from this COVID wasteland to something that is felt and known to each other openly. “

4. Discussion

Reviews of single events can clarify and help develop concepts from unique situations. In the review of this session we addressed personal communication during the extraordinary circumstances of the COVID through arts based co-created metaphor making online. This international health crisis has changed life in communities across the world in every way from the smaller practical details of travel and social restrictions to the larger issues of the emotional climate and extreme tragedy and death. The scope of this event has become very large as much of the world has become engaged. The international as well as national political tensions have added another potential for misunderstanding and conflict among countries and communities creating further barriers to personal coping with others. While news coverage and public health agencies have dominated much of the public conversations about this crisis, there have been few avenues to address and communicate personal emotional experiences of this time with each other.

While we may now discuss some of the health-related data and what our political or other social leaders are considering there has been little understanding among each other about our personal experiences in response to the larger crisis. In this session, such things as the expanded use of the internet, the inclusion of people from quite different countries and cultures in such an immediate and intimate way, and the expression of highly personal and dramatic emotional experiences using metaphors with other people with whom we would usually not interact offered a way to communicate and reflect on personal experience and what improvisational arts-based expression can offer using Zoom.

This session began with online discussion of the current concerns related to the crisis from different parts of the world. Nonverbal expressive improvisations were developed that began to place subjective experiences of our group within metaphorical communication. In this session, the initial improvisation introduced the theme of disconnection and the accompanying complex emotional desire for freedom in a time of high uncertainty. In the next episode, the theme of high distress coupled with abandonment and isolation developed. The expression of such strong feelings had the effect of creating an experience of connection through a group creative engagement with each other. The final joint improvisation expressed a sense of positive emotions and a renewing of hope. During the session, the expression and comments all

pointed to a significant change of feeling tone from initial distress and estrangement toward a sharing of hope and attunement with each other. This sense of hope developed spontaneously and was collaborative.

4.1 Developing Metaphors from Online Personal Communication

During the initial part of the group, each person discussed their unique situation with the health crisis. The conversations indicated that an empathic communication and rapport were beginning to develop. Members reported on such important emotional issues such as difficulties mourning a family member, fears of close relatives and friends becoming lost or ill with COVID, and the distress of the social disruptions due to health restrictions. Then during the multi-modal improvisations, this conversation became part of collaborative metaphor making. In the discussions that followed the improvisation, the art, poetry, and thoughts expanded the earlier verbal communications such that more complex subjective experiences became a part of these expressions. Members began to talk with each other more fully about their experiences, and they could also add references to a wide variety of complex subjective themes around the crisis using the metaphors they developed.

The art and poetry from one member expressed the distress of feeling she was isolated in a divided world without being able to witness others. Another expressed her feeling a need to distance herself because of the confusion inherent in becoming too close to interactions near her. Another group member added that she also was witnessing the distress of experiencing being too close, and another expressed the distress from questions about change in her situation. Finally, another group member provided an image of the distress that comes from a lack of freedom with feeling displaced. These discussions developed an exchange that was made from both empathic communications to others as well as metaphorical conversation that included complex meanings of living through the distress of this part of the health crisis.

During the next story, these conversations became a part of collaborative metaphor making around the strong emotional experiences of one person's story. These metaphors expressed an emotional aspect of this personal event that included significant distress while being alone. The episode also simultaneously communicated a sense of connection and community that related to the sharing of this experience through the improvisations. Additionally, the multi-modal improvisations added expressions of how these themes relate to a larger community.

During the final improvisation, the group was able to develop a story metaphor that expressed a general theme of positive feeling and hope. This collective positive feeling appeared to develop from the shared creativity, collaborative development, and use of metaphor making experienced during the session. It is important to note that this upsurge in positivity developed from the initial phase at the beginning of the group in which the group shared and developed images of distress related to disconnection. Meaningful social emotional communication did develop. In this session, the creative activities do appear to offer a viable way to communicate personal social and emotional experiences online and among people with diverse backgrounds.

4.2 How Arts-Based Communication Might Contribute a Response to the Crisis

The central theme from this session is related to the change from expressions of distress and disconnection to a shared feeling of hope and regeneration. Some of the initial images include art showing separate spaces, the possibility of being engulfed by others, and the lack of freedom that comes with being in a displaced world. The tone of these images changed to include reference to “things who were waiting in the darkness” to begin to move and spread their magic and light exploring in breath and “I can tell I am alive.” This change is quite dramatic especially given the overall emotional context of the current crisis.

This major change of the expression of the participants’ subjective experiences suggests that this session generated a sense of resilience among the group. The American Psychological Association (2014) has discussed resilience as being the process of adapting well in the face of adversity and trauma, threats, and significant sources of stress. It can involve personal growth. Resilience has been mistaken for an individual trait. However, it is best understood as a process in which people interact with their environment in a way that changes distressful patterns into ongoing coping with overwhelming events (Zauta, Hall, & Murray, 2010). These coping mechanisms include communication (APA, 2014), and the emergence of positive emotions (Ong, Bigeman, Bisconty, & Wallace, 2006). Panter-Brick, Grimon, and Eggerman (2014) report that after reviewing many interviews with families in Afghanistan, the central themes from their reports of resilience center on the sense of hope and meaning making. Masten (2014) points out that social interaction, including interactions within communities, are important influences on resilience. One important part of achieving a resilient response is developing empathic connection within a community to counter feelings of isolation that accompany disasters and can become part of the traumatic reactions to a disaster.

Each of these aspects of resilience underlies the personal experiences expressed through the discussion, themes, and arts based images of this online session. Communication developed around emotional experiences that were important for our group members. A sense of empathic connection emerged. Importantly, the group was able to generate a strong positive emotional tone with each other as they used creative collaborations. The imagery changed dramatically from expressing a sense of division between people to a shared experience of creatures who were ready to “use all their magic.” The images created throughout the session culminating with the fairy tale point to a coherence and meaning around themes of hope and possibility. This feeling tone contributed to a sense of a possible future despite the initial disconnection.

4.3 Potential Cross-Cultural Consideration for the Asian Pacific Islands (API)

The way emotion is expressed and processed among API populations is rooted in each group’s collectivism. Collectivist cultures value placing the wellbeing of the group before the individual so that the group itself may prosper in harmony. Relating to mental health, this leads to the internalization of difficult emotions and the stigmatization of mental illness for its poor reflection on the group (Office of the Surgeon General (US); Center for Mental Health Services (US); National Institute of Mental Health

(US), 2001). In Asian cultures, where emphasis is placed on the unity of the mind and body, suppressed emotions manifest through physical reactions—somatization (Lin, Cheung, 1999).

The connection between body and mind and the common practice of somatizing mental health issues among API peoples is where the work of the creative dialogues group shows potential. Displays of resilience and complex interpretations of in-pandemic experiences were found in the participants' reactions to working together through multiple creative outlets in a space where open expression was invited. For the API individuals involved in the group, the dynamic of the space may have allowed them to exercise an alternative form of expression that is collaborative, vulnerable, motivated by empathy, and unfiltered.

An opportunity to engage with emotionality rather than stifling it is essential during the current global pandemic. In places like Guam where collectivism dominates, mandated distance heightens the impact of COVID prescribed loneliness. High rates of non-communicable diseases in Guam like diabetes and heart disease (Ichiho, Gillan, & Aitaoto, 2013) put much of Guam's population in the high-risk category for COVID-19, which includes the elderly population who are largely valued by the local community and culture. With this, a complicated paradox is at play in which a community that values and finds comfort in closeness can no longer be close, especially to those whom they hold in the highest regard. At a time marked by death and illness, normal grieving processes usually defined by large gatherings are disrupted; and people, during their worst to final hours, have to cope essentially alone. In that paradox there is potential for guilt, anger, and *minahalang*, which the Chamorro-English Dictionary (Note 1) directly translates to "lonely," but can be further described as a profound sense of longing—a feeling not encompassed by a single English word.

Undoubtedly, there are powerful emotions being stirred by the pandemic in various realms of loss and loneliness that are left untended to in more widely accepted and/or practiced traditions of coping. Creative arts communication has the potential to bridge gaps widened by these trying times through which individuals can engage in meaningful introspection with themselves all while being exposed to multiple perspectives of their experiences in metaphor. The dialogue that occurs in groups like this can become a source of validation and social support that may otherwise be out of reach.

4.4 The Interactions among Participants from Our Island Countries and China

The opportunity for participants from Guam and New Zealand/India to join with people from China offered a unique and stimulating opportunity. From the discussions, it was clear that our Chinese colleagues had experienced a range of similar distressing events during the past year and could offer empathy to the subjective life of those of us in Guam and for the woman from New Zealand/India. With translation from Mandarin to English, the Chinese participants were fully collaborative in all the discussion and arts improvisation in a manner that was equal to and complemented the other group members. All the metaphorical conversations were created using everyone's contributions jointly. The emotional shift that emerged during the session was spontaneously created and felt by all group members together suggesting that the resilience that developed in the session was shared among a diverse group.

In our session, the experience of connection was genuine, occurred using the internet, and led to collaborative meaning making. The reflections from our group suggest that the creative arts may well contribute to others in the Asian Pacific region if not with other international areas to communicate with each using arts based expression.

5. Final Thoughts

This online session included participants from different countries and was designed to use collaborative metaphor making to express and communicate the subjective and emotional experiences during the COVID pandemic. The observations suggest that collaborative metaphor making can lead to an empathic connection and the development of shared resilience among diverse group members. In this case, the connection did occur between participants from China, New Zealand/India, and Guam easily even in an online format. This observation is important as collaborative arts based-improvisation online may have the potential to help overcome social-emotional isolation that accompanies tragedies of this scale especially when experiences are hard to verbalize. The implication is that the use of creative arts expression of personal experience with metaphors might be applied more widely and even internationally through the use of the internet to facilitate resilience within communities impacted by large-scale tragedy.

This session was made of a unique collection of people with some previous experiences with creative arts improvisations who chose to participate in the group dialogue. What occurred in this group may not be directly and immediately applicable to others without additional planning and preparations. In this session, the improvisations were somewhat unstructured and were developed using the relatively abstract forms of dance, vocalization, spontaneous art, poetry, and spontaneous story making. More structured approaches with participants who do not have backgrounds and comfort in these forms of expression will need to be developed.

Future online groups could employ some of the basic ideas utilized in this session as a general outline with a goal of creating online metaphorical communication collaboratively. Some forms could include, 1) having a group leader help participants present personal experiences followed by group members responding using arts-based expression, 2) encouraging the use of different art modalities to expand initial stories, 3) using collaborative spontaneous improvisation and imagination to develop expressions of narrative material, 4) including members in the group with some experience in the arts or play based improvisations to help model, coach and structure spontaneous expressions, 5) keeping the groups relatively small so that more intimate communication can occur, 6) encouraging all group members to join with creative responses even as members of an audience, and 7) using online avenues to engage participants from other communities or countries that have also been impacted by the crisis.

At present, the development of the basic forms of these sessions into more specific protocols goes beyond the scope of this present article and could be the topic of further projects that address using creative arts online in community and school settings during times of crisis. Consideration of the makeup of people to

be included in such groups is important. Such groups may require the structure of a series of steps that initially teach the use of basic arts-based expressions and then ask participants to use these expressive forms to develop metaphors on a small and more concrete scale at least initially. Other expressive play modalities such as the use of puppets and sand tray might be useful. Future adaptations for children, adolescents, and families could also be considered and encouraged. For example, the movement aspect might be accomplished by having participants make a shape with their body as a sculpture in response to initial stories and/or in trios rather than create longer dance improvisation. Art responses could include scribbling using color to express emotional tones rather than a more freely or fully developed art. Single word images could be used to introduce verbal reaction rather than more complete poems. Stories and fairy tales might be co-created using animals as the central characters and be developed in a series of two or three short scenes. Music might be added using single basic instruments such as drums or bells. Participants in our group were from different countries and were able to use the arts in collaborations with each other easily. This suggests that the art based metaphor making may have a potential contribution in the social emotional communication among people from diverse countries and cultures. The internet does now allow for the inclusion of people from other parts of the world in group meetings. The observations from our group suggest that such participation using arts based metaphors has the potential to add a valuable part in future projects.

References

- American Psychological Association. (2014). The Road to Resilience. *American Psychological Association*. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/road-resilience.aspx>
- Harvey, S. A., & Kelly, E. C. (2016). Arts based enquiry: Integrating narrative within movement. *DTAA Journal, Moving on*, 13(3&4), Dance Therapy Association of Australasia, 2-9.
- Harvey, S. A., & Kelly. (2018). Investigating the fairytale score in physical storytelling. *DTAA Journal, Moving on*, 13(1 &2), Dance Therapy Association of Australasia, 2-12.
- Harvey, S. A., & Kelly, S.A., (2020a) Investigating the solo score used in physical storytelling. *DTAA Journal, Moving on*, 17(1&2), Dance Therapy Association of Australasia, 32-40.
- Harvey, S. A., & Kelly, E. C. (2020b) Physical storytelling as a modern ritual for political uncertainty: Investigating contemporary emotional climate in Guam. 17, 1 & 2, 2020 *DTAA journal, Moving on*. 17, 1 & 2, 42-50.
- Harvey, S. A., Kelly, E. C. & Jennings, C. (2020) Creative Dialogues across Countries: Towards Modern Performance Online during the Global Health Crisis Related to COVID 19. *Drama Therapy Review*, 6(2), 1-6. https://doi.org/10.1386/dtr_00055_1
- Harvey, S. A., Zhou, T., Kelly, E. C., & Wittig, J. (2018). Physical conversations between the east and west: An arts-based inquiry into the cross-cultural emotional climate during a time of political tensions. *Creative Arts in Education and Therapy*, 4(1), 38-57. <https://doi.org/10.15212/CAET/2018/4/5>

- Harvey, S. A., Wang, S., Kelly, E. C., Wittig, J., Bardello, A., Li, X., Peng, X., & Tingting, S. (2020). *Creative dialogues across countries and culture during COVID 19. Creative Arts in Education and Therapy*, 6(1). Inspirees International, 72-84. <https://doi.org/10.15212/CAET/2020/6/13>
- Ichiho, H. M., Gillan, J. W., & Aitaoto, N. (2013). An assessment of non-communicable diseases, diabetes, and related risk factors in the Territory of Guam: a systems perspective. *Hawai'i journal of medicine & public health: A Journal of Asia Pacific Medicine & Public Health*, 72(5 Suppl 1), 68-76.
- Kelly, E. C. (2006). Physical Storytelling. *DTAA Quarterly*, 5(1). Melbourne, Dance Therapy Association of Australia, 3-8.
- Lin, K., & Cheung, F. (1999). *Mental health issues for Asian Americans. Psychiatric Services*, 50(6), 774-780. <https://doi.org/10.1176/ps.50.6.774>
- Masten, A. S. (2014). *Ordinary magic: Resilience in development*. Guilford Press. Office of the Surgeon General (US), Center for Mental Health Services (US), National Institute of Mental Health (US). (2001, August). Mental health: culture, race, and ethnicity: A supplement to mental health: *A report of the Surgeon General. Rockville (MD): Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (US); Chapter 5 Mental Health Care for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders*. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK44245/>
- Ong, A. D., Bergeman, C.S., Bisconti, T. L., & Wallace, K. D. (2006). Psychological resilience, positive emotions, and social adaptation to stress in later life. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 91(4), 730-749. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.91.4.730>
- Panter-Brick, C., Grimon, M.-P., & Eggerman, M. (2014). Caregiver child mental health: A prospective study in conflict and refugee settings. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 55(4), 313-337. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.12167>
- Southwick, S. M., Bonanno, G. A., Masten, A. S., Panter-Brick, C., & Yehuda, R. (2014). Resilience definitions, theory, and challenges: Interdisciplinary perspectives. *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 5(1), 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.3402/ejpt.v5.25338>
- Zautra, A. J., Hall, J. S., & Murray, T. I. (2010). Resilience: A new definition of health and communities. In J. Reich, A. J. Zautra, & J. S. Hall (Eds.), *Handbook of adult resilience* (pp. 3-30). Guilford.

Note

Note 1. Chamorro is the native language of Guam.