



Effectiveness of Creative Writing on Psychological Well Being In Prison

Ashley K. Norwood, Barry R. Burkhart, Kyes Stevens, and Patrick K. Cook

Auburn University, Department of Psychology



Abstract

Art therapy is used as a widespread means in the correctional system as rehabilitation. Along with creative writing, it has served as a form of therapy in prison environments, and has been shown to increase the willingness of participants to be more open about certain emotional issues (Gussak 1997). The use of educational programs in prison settings allows for a positive counter balance from the environment that an incarcerated lifestyle tends to foster. Empirical evidence has also shown that art therapy is beneficial in decreasing depressive symptoms (Diamond, Wang, & Giles 1996). Using multiple measures and a Solomon four group design combined with a wait list control, we compared pre and post test data from the PILL (Pennebaker Inventory of Limbic Languidness), the BSI (Brief Symptom Inventory) and the PANAS-X (Positive and Negative Affect Schedule Expanded) to determine the effectiveness of a creative writing class at a correctional facility. Throughout the twelve week study, psychological state, mood, and behavior were measured for 45 male inmates. Results concluded significant difference in experimental post tests and decreases in behavior infractions.

Goals

- To examine the effectiveness of creative writing and art rehabilitation on the behavioral problems and mood level of incarcerated individuals at Draper Correctional Facility.
- To assess the pre and post BSI and PANAS-X data as related to class participation to demonstrate a decrease in self-reported depressive symptoms.
- To contribute to the limited literature regarding psychology and rehabilitation a related to the criminal justice system and its effects on the human nature.

Method

Participants

- Adult males incarcerated at Draper Correctional Facility in Elmore, Alabama.
- N= 45, Mean Age = 29.58 years old (SD = 8.69 years).
- Participants for the class were strictly volunteer, serving time for various crimes and many were repeat offenders of violent crimes.
- Demographic Breakdown: African-American (77.8%), Caucasian (20.0%), and "Other" (2.2%).

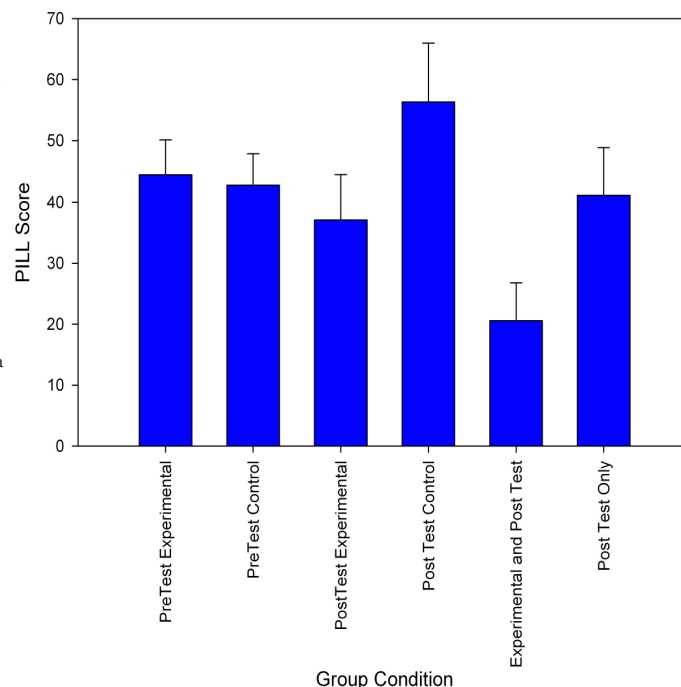
Instruments

- *Brief Symptom Inventory* (BSI; Derogatis 1975).
- The BSI is a 53-item, self-report inventory specifically targeted to assess psychological symptoms in adolescents and adults.
- The BSI covers nine symptom dimensions: Somatization, Obsession-Compulsion, Interpersonal Sensitivity, Depression, Anxiety, Hostility, Phobic anxiety, Paranoid ideation and Psychoticism, and three global indices of distress.

Instruments (contd.)

- *Positive and Negative Affect Schedule Expanded* (PANAS-X; Watson & Clark, 1994).
- Self-rated affect diagnostic tool consisting of 60 items designed to assess the valence of the mood descriptors and also the specific content of each criteria.
- In addition to the two higher order scales, PANAS-X measures 11 specific affects: Fear, Sadness, Guilt, Hostility, Shyness, Fatigue, Surprise, Joviality, Self-Assurance, Attentiveness, and Serenity.
- *Pennebaker Inventory of Limbic Languidness* (PILL; Pennebaker, 1982).
- This instrument consists of 54 self-report items measuring the tendency to notice a broad array of physical symptoms and sensations.

Figure 1. PILL Score by Group Condition.



Sample of Selected PILL Items:

- Hands tremble or shake
- Racing heart
- Insomnia or difficulty sleeping
- Dizziness
- Tightness in chest
- Headaches

Procedures

- Participants completed the BSI, PILL, and PANAS-X utilizing a Solomon four group design to control for testing bias.
- Post test assessments were administered to each group three months to date from the conclusion of the creative writing class. Assessment provided a report of behavior infractions as recorded by Draper Correctional Facility.
- PILL and PANAS-X items were scored via computer scoring software and entered into a database for analysis. BSI items were hand scored and entered into a database for analysis.

Results

- Results revealed a significant mean difference between the pre and post experimental PILL measures (23.929, $p=.036$).
- A mean difference of (35.762 $p=.003$) also resulted from the control group PILL post test and the experimental post test.
- Behavior infractions, as reported by the Draper Correctional Facility Staff, for each group were 0 for all participants who completed the course.

Discussion

- The study investigated the relationship between exposure to creative writing as intervention and the correlation to decreased depressive affect, elevated mood, and decreased behavior problems with 45 incarcerated males at Draper Correctional Facility.
- The PILL was the only measure to show a significant difference in pre and post test data based on analyses.
- These results suggest that physical symptoms could be easier to express and record a change in response to, rather than psychological or emotional changes for the population being studied.
- We can conclude from the zero rate of behavior infractions for the three month period following the conclusion of the class that the class was successful for decreasing behavior infractions within the population.

Future Directions:

- Examine the effectiveness of other rehabilitative areas such as poetry, art, music, etc. using such measures as the BSI, PANAS-X, and PILL.
- Examine larger class sizes to observe changes, if any, in outcomes with regards to behavior infraction increase, mood level increase, and depressive symptom decrease.
- Continue to add to the limited data regarding psychology and rehabilitation in the criminal justice system.

Contact Ashley Norwood with any questions at norwoak@auburn.edu or visit the Alabama Prison Arts + Education website through Auburn University's Department of Psychology by selecting Programs, to learn more about prison outreach and research.