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Spring 2020

# Understanding the Role of Art Programming in Mitigating Social Exclusion as Experienced by People Experiencing Poverty

Emmalee Harper

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UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF ART PROGRAMMING  
IN MITIGATING SOCIAL EXCLUSION AS EXPERIENCED BY PEOPLE  
EXPERIENCING POVERTY

**A thesis submitted to  
Regis University  
Honors Program  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for Graduation with Honors  
by  
Emmalee Harper**

May 2020

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Director, University Honors Program

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## **Introduction**

Picture a photograph: a man and his dog. Some of the dominant colors are green and yellow, which are flecked throughout the photograph. The lighting is bright and airy, as the photo was taken under fluorescent lighting, and the background is a tad busy. The subject shines. Every ounce of his character is captivating, and your eye is drawn to the subject's hat featuring a cannabis leaf, down through his warm eyes and scruffy beard, and to a small dog he proudly holds in his hands. The dog has his tongue slightly out, in a dopey expression. Like the palette of the photo, the man and the dog radiate warmth.

I met this man when my friend and I went to a homeless shelter over two years ago when my friend and I were working on a project where we took portraits of people experiencing homelessness. My friend and I spoke with many people throughout the course of the project, learning little bits about their lives and their struggles. When speaking with the man before taking his portrait, he told us that he calls his dog – the one with the dopey expression - his “second chance” dog. This is because he considered his dog to be the very thing that kept him once from committing suicide. I often think about this man, and his candidness with his struggles, and his love for his dog. He likely does not know this, but he had a profound impact on me, and I am so extraordinarily grateful that I got to meet him.

I'll admit, I chose the topic of this thesis rather selfishly. Ever since the project that my friend and I embarked on over two years ago, I have been captivated by the concept of art potentially being a tool to aid in mitigating the effects of marginality, especially when it comes to social exclusion and social isolation. However, my intrigue with art did not begin with this man and his dog. I have always loved visual arts and being an artist has helped to define me as a

person. Another defining characteristic of me is that I care deeply about issues of marginalization in our society, and I am especially passionate about the topic of poverty. My friend's and my portraiture project sparked my curiosity, and I began to wonder, "Are there meaningful ways that the topics of art and marginalization intersect? If so, how do we understand what occurs?"

In my search for an answer, I connected with an organization called The Gathering Place (TGP) in Denver, Colorado. TGP is a day shelter that provides services for women, transgender individuals, and children who experience poverty and homelessness ("If You Need Help", n.d.). Among the services offered are art programs, in which members<sup>1</sup> of TGP can take art classes or spend their time creating ("If You Need Help", n.d.)

Many nonprofit aid models have traditionally relied on frameworks like Maslow's hierarchy of needs to decide how to spend limited resources. Accordingly, services that cater to the physiological and safety needs of people are prioritized (Maslow, 1943). Certainly, art programs are not the most traditional, "high-leverage" use of TGP's resources, like some of the other services they provide (e.g. screenings for medical conditions, providing meals). Further, people in American society tend to place a moral and cultural importance on paid work, so programs that get people into job placement would be a more obvious use of resources than art programs (Thompson & Dahling, 2019). This being said, these art programs at TGP intrigued me, and the more time I spent at them, the more I felt I was getting to witness something remarkable. It seemed to me that the members who attend the art programs really value them, and, for me, it was worth investigating why members valued these programs, and what, if anything, art programming has to offer to the efforts of poverty alleviation. For instance, specific

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<sup>1</sup> The term "members" refers to people that TGP serves. No fees are charged for people to receive services.

art programs offer opportunities for participants to earn extra money, and there is a social enterprise that runs in alignment with these programs that reproduce certain artworks, so artists can make extra money with no extra investment in time. The success of these art programs challenges the emphasis of poverty alleviation services on providing primarily for basic needs and job training. While not everyone who seeks poverty alleviation services will find value in art programming, I believe it is nevertheless important to try to understand the role it plays in the lives of people who do seek it out.

In the next sections, I will explore the impacts of the art programs in TGP. In doing so, I will begin broadly, engaging and putting into conversation two conceptual frameworks – Intersectionality and Relational-Cultural Theory – that will help us understand, at a broad level, issues of marginality faced by people at TGP, and help us explore how art programming might offer a way to navigate the specific challenges members face. Highlighted in these sections are the challenges of social exclusion and social isolation, which is not to say that those who experience poverty face only these specific challenges, but these are the topics that provide focus for the purposes of this thesis. Additionally, I will share information about my own research at TGP, including perspectives of TGP members, which I gathered during interviews. From this research, my aim is to draw out meaningful questions that inform future areas of research into art programming.

## Literature Review

### *The Conceptual Frameworks*

As a nonprofit providing services to women, transgender individuals, and children experiencing poverty and homelessness, TGP offers a unique environment within which to learn about art programming. To understand the true importance of art programming as it functions within TGP, it is helpful to also understand the challenges that TGP members face within a broader society. For the purposes of this thesis, I will be highlighting the challenges of social isolation and social exclusion, and I will be engaging two distinct and emerging theories regarding human existence and interaction to evaluate them. The first theory is the sociological perspective of intersectionality, and the second is the psychological model called Relational-Cultural Theory. It should be noted that there is a large body of literature on both of these topics, and I cannot and will not try to represent these theoretical approaches in totality; rather, I will give a basic understanding of these theories and focus on the facets and literature that is most helpful for understanding art programming as I am utilizing it. Dr. Olena Hankivsky offers a useful definition of the complicated nature of intersectionality, writing:

Intersectionality promotes an understanding of human beings as shaped by the interaction of different social locations (e.g., ‘race’/ethnicity, Indigeneity, gender, class, sexuality, geography, age, disability/ability, migration status, religion). These interactions occur within a context of connected systems and structures of power (e.g., laws, policies, state governments and other political and economic unions, religious institutions, media). Through such processes, interdependent forms of privilege and oppression shaped by colonialism, imperialism, racism, homophobia, ableism and patriarchy are created. Put simply: According to an intersectionality perspective, inequities are never the result of

single, distinct factors. Rather, they are the outcome of intersections of different social locations, power relations and experiences. (2014).

In short, Intersectionality's focus on power helps us understand the function of exclusion and isolation in peoples' lives who experience poverty. Relational-Cultural Theory offers a conceptual framework for understanding why and how art programs work, and it provides a framework for navigating intersectional concerns for people existing in power structures that exclude them. The next sections will delve into a deeper discussion as to why these are helpful.

*Discussions on Intersectionality: A Framework to Understand the Function of Isolation, Exclusion, and Marginality*

To begin the process of understanding intersectionality and the function of power structures as they relate to individuals within communities, I would like to discuss the pervasive nature of marginality and the challenges of social exclusion and social invisibility faced by individuals who experience marginalization. Every person is unique in that they carry multiple intersecting identities, some of which may be stigmatized, and this stigmatization can be felt differently depending on the time and location. Because every person has differing experiences of marginality, this thesis does not aim to try to speak to all these experiences. Rather, by framing this thesis in the context of intersectionality and marginality, I aim to help locate the role of art programming as utilized by diverse individuals within communities that are committed to making social change.

*Social Invisibility, Social Exclusion, and Marginality*

To understand marginality, it is helpful to first understand what it means to belong to a stigmatized or oppressed social category. Present literature suggests that individuals' identities stem from group membership, and these identities constitute and reinforce each other, becoming

organizing features of social relationships which exist within a large-scale operation of power relationships among and between social groups (Warner & Shields, 2013). Within this context, a stigmatized group can be construed as an outgroup that is positioned in relation to another group that holds a dominant position in social hierarchy (Crocker & Major, 1989). Because of their relative position with the ingroup and context within a broader society, members of a stigmatized group experience challenges, as they not only are devalued by specific ingroups, but are also devalued by broader society (Crocker & Major, 1989). In short, the word “marginalization” terms the belonging to a stigmatized social category.

Dr. Nicki Ward, a lecturer at the University of Birmingham, offers a valuable and more in-depth approach to understanding marginality as it contributes to stigmatized exclusion in our society. Ward evokes two distinct understandings of social exclusion – socioeconomic exclusion and cultural/symbolic exclusion – to create a cohesive framework through which we can understand marginalization (2009). Socioeconomic exclusion refers to political and economic structures by which members of stigmatized groups are systematically deprived access to goods and resources, which contributes to generally poorer standards of living (Ward, 2009). Cultural/symbolic exclusion refers to a sort of cultural domination in which representation is heavily skewed towards groups with relative positions of power in society, resulting in cultural and communicative erasure (Ward, 2009). Per Ward, socioeconomic exclusion and cultural/symbolic exclusion are not exclusive categories; rather, they interact in a manner that serves to further subjugate members of marginalized populations (2009).

Regarding the interrelated nature of socioeconomic and cultural/symbolic exclusion, Ward writes:

Cultural denigration may contribute to and reinforce socioeconomic or material marginalisation; many of the poor are marginalised not only economically but also by attitudes to poverty which cast them as less deserving, scroungers and ‘ne’er do wells’. For others, they may experience socioeconomic exclusion as a result of processes of cultural symbolic exclusion; the processes originate with socially constructed, devalued and stigmatised identities but the outcomes include socioeconomic marginalisation, as in the case of people with mental health difficulties who find it hard to access work because of discriminatory attitudes and who are therefore forced to live on benefits. Both socioeconomic and cultural symbolic processes of exclusion can lead to inequitable distribution of resources which in turn can contribute to financial and material marginalisation, poor access to services, goods and social networks and further stigmatisation and denigration. (2009).

In short, these societal processes of social exclusion exacerbate each other leading to more unbalanced distribution of resources (contributing to financial marginalization) and increasing barriers to mainstream social networks (contributing to cultural marginalization) (Ward, 2009).

As the result of stigmatization and social exclusion, members of various oppressed groups (i.e. racial minorities, women, people with varying levels of ability, etc.) are disproportionately forced to navigate systems and structures that strive to oppress them, adversely impacting the individual. This is because one of the experiences arising out of social stigmatization and social exclusion, namely cultural exclusion, is the experience of invisibility,

where, according to Dr. Jessica Remedios and Dr. Samantha Snyder of Tufts University, the marginalized person is “ignored, dismissed, and underrepresented” in comparison to other individuals who are not a part of that particular marginalized group (2018). These experiences of marginality and invisibility adversely impact an individual because they can greatly influence one’s worldview, which includes how a person views themselves in relation to social groups, the manners through which a person reacts to different situations, and how a person constructs self-image. (Crocker & Major, 1989).

*Intersectionality: What does it mean to hold Multiple Stigmatized identities?*

What is worth noting here is that individuals do not experience identity marginalization in silos, rather there is an intersectional nature to social identity that influences individuals’ lived experiences differently (Remedios & Snyder, 2018). Since each person exists in multiple social categories, an individual’s experience could be multiply-stigmatized, depending on one’s identities. Psychological experiences and experiences of exclusion that are a part of marginalization are often exacerbated when an individual is multiply-stigmatized (Remedios & Snyder, 2018). For example, the stigmatization that affects a person with a disability could negatively affect how that person is able to navigate poverty.

The framework of intersectionality is especially useful for this project exploring the role art programming plays in the lives of diverse people who experience marginalization, because it acknowledges the complexity of the lives and experiences that these people live, which helps us to get a more holistic, nuanced view of the value of the programs. The concept of intersectionality itself is predicated on the fact that people’s lives are multi-dimensional and complex (Hankivsky, 2014). Intersectionality problematizes our tendencies to otherize and oversimplify another’s experience; rather it provides a richer and more holistic look into the

experience a person has in complex social systems. For example, blackness is often reduced to one experience, when in reality, a transgender black woman experiencing poverty will likely have a much different experience with their blackness as compared with a cisgender black man in the middle-class. What is important to note is that any person's experience is complex, in that no person belongs to completely stigmatized categories, nor do they belong to completely mainstream categories, meaning a person can experience privilege and oppression simultaneously. This means that we cannot assume that any one social category, regardless if the category is one of privilege or oppression, is the most important for understanding a person's needs or experiences (Hankivsky, 2014). We also can't assume that experience is a result of the independent effects of a person's social categories either (Hankivsky, 2014). For example, intersectionality discourages us from looking at a transgender black woman experiencing poverty and assuming that her experience can be summed up with an equation like "the effects of being transgender + the effects of being black + the effects of being a woman + the effects of experiencing poverty". Importantly, with intersectionality, it is understood that the social categories to which a person belongs interact, co-constitute, and naturalize each other (Warner & Shields, 2013). This means that any person has a unique experience that results from their interacting social categories that vary according to time and place.

We must take into account the co-constituting nature of positionalities when regarding another's experiences so as not to reduce their experience to a single social category, or a simplified sum of their categories. This foundational part of intersectionality is important to keep in mind as we delve deeper into the nature of marginalization. Another key part of intersectionality examines power, asserting that power dynamics between social locations & processes (i.e. sexism, racism, ableism etc.) are inextricably linked (Hankivsky, 2014).

Additionally, multi-level analyses of relationships between individual experiences and broader structures are critical in understanding how power relationships occur (Hankivsky, 2014). This means that intersectionality takes a complex and in-depth look at experience and situates it within broader systems of power. In the next section, I will again surface social exclusion as an aspect of marginality and locate it within societal processes and systems of power.

### *Locating Social Exclusion in Society at Large*

When I regard poverty, even I have the inclination to recite the American Dream in which people, with enough determination and effort, can work their way up through social classes. This tendency, I believe, stems from the moral and cultural importance that is placed on paid work in American society (Thompson & Dahling, 2019). When we consider people who face poverty, we tend to meet them with social disapproval and rejection because of their perceived lack of motivation to “work hard enough” to change their social standing (Thompson & Dahling, 2019). Here, we can again see socioeconomic exclusion and cultural/symbolic exclusion are co-constitutive: a person who suffers from an inequitable distribution of resources makes them subject to cultural/symbolic exclusion, as their lack of resources is seen as a personal moral failure. While I don’t want to necessarily take out of the conversation the self-efficacy and personal responsibility of a person who experiences marginalization, I believe that the emphasis on self-efficacy tends to usurp the conversation as a whole. What does it actually mean to face social exclusion when it comes to marginality? What effects does social exclusion have on people?

To understand socioeconomic exclusion, it is helpful to first define some terms: unemployment, underemployment, and non-employment. Since socioeconomic exclusion arises in part due to the moral and cultural importance placed on paid work, these terms help us to

locate the role of work in the lives of people who experience poverty. Unemployment occurs when an individual is able to work and is looking for a job. Underemployment occurs when an individual has access to work, but their work does not provide enough for themselves and their dependents. Non-employment occurs when somebody is out of the labor force, meaning they are not working and they are not actively looking for work (United States Department of Labor, 2015). A portion of these workers are discouraged workers, who are people who have been unemployed for a long period of time and have given up on work, even though they would rather be working.

There are systemic factors that arise against people experiencing poverty that perpetuate chronic unemployment, underemployment, and non-employment. Simply put, we do not have adequate systems in place to help people accumulate wealth and rise out of poverty. There are many ways that systemic pressures manifest in the lives of people who experience poverty that people of wealthier social classes might not think about. For example, if someone is experiencing homelessness, she does not have an address to put on her W-2 employment form, which could create a barrier in getting employment. If a person is experiencing homelessness, they have a limited means to having basic identification, as it is incredibly risky to carry a birth certificate or social security card when you are unsafe on the streets, which are necessary for obtaining identification like a driver's license. If a person is dependent on public transportation, as well as an hourly job for wages, certain problems that come up in their life could take much longer to deal with and could cost them a significant amount of money. For example, if their child becomes sick at school, it will take much longer to pick them up and take them home, costing hours of time in wages. If a person is dependent on the government for basic necessities, just navigating the system could cost them a lot of time. For example, using food stamps makes

grocery shopping a lot longer. These are not the only challenges that people experiencing poverty face, but they give us an idea of the types of systemic challenges that these people face in everyday life that makes it difficult to get ahead.

The systemic factors are situated within the context of rising inequality in the United States. Since the 1970's, the economic gap in the United States has widened significantly, as between 1979 and 2016, the top 1% of society benefitted from income gains of 226%, whereas the bottom quintile of earners saw their income rise by just 85%, but these general numbers tend to hide many important details (Bullock, 2019). With regards to an intersectional framework, people with multiply-stigmatized identities are more likely to experience poverty. If one is a person of color, they are much more likely to experience poverty, as in 2017, 25.4% of Native Americans and Alaska Natives, 21.2% of African Americans, 18.3% of Latinxs, and 10% of Asians experienced poverty compared with 8.7% non-Hispanic Whites (Bullock, 2019). This sort of hardship was exacerbated among women of color, as in 2017, women were 38% more likely to experience poverty than men, with Black, Native American and Alaska Native, and Latinx women experiencing double the rates of poverty as non-Hispanic White women (Bullock, 2019).

Because the rising wealth gap deeply affects people experiencing poverty, it exacerbates the socioeconomic and cultural/symbolic exclusion that a person enduring poverty experiences. The wealth gap worsens socioeconomic exclusion with the rising inequitable distribution of resources, and because a lack of resources is seen as a personal moral failure per the American Dream, that person is further subject to cultural/symbolic exclusion. Here, we see a self-perpetuating cycle of socioeconomic and cultural/symbolic exclusion. Because in American society, when we place a moral and cultural importance on paid work, those who experience extended unemployment or underemployment may encounter social disapproval and rejection

(Thompson & Dahling, 2019). When people are perceived to be lazy and flawed because of their employment and underemployment, they are less likely to find sources of income and paid work. Therefore, cultural/symbolic exclusion reinforces socioeconomic exclusion, contributing to a cycle of poverty is exceedingly difficult to break.

Other intersectional concerns arise when we consider exclusion as faced by individuals experiencing poverty who are seeking paid work. Cultural/symbolic exclusion in the form of employment bias is exacerbated when a person has identities that are multiply stigmatized, which can make it even harder for people to overcome poverty. Namely, women, and people in socially disadvantaged racial, ethnic, nationality, and religious groups face much more discrimination when seeking paid work (Thompson & Dahling, 2019). For instance, in 1978, the phrase “feminization of poverty” was coined by researcher Diana Pearce describing how women are disproportionately affected by poverty (East & Roll, 2015). Furthermore, studies in the United States have found that employers respond more favorably to white candidates than their African American and Latinx counterparts (Thompson & Dahling, 2019). The disparities are exacerbated by applicants having a criminal record, even when the jobs they seek have low wages (Thompson & Dahling, 2019). Additionally, older job seekers, and people with disabilities have much more difficulty seeking reemployment than younger job seekers or people without disabilities (Thompson & Dahling, 2019). Further, if someone is transgender, they are more likely to experience economic hardship, as there is a 29% poverty rate among transgender people, as compared to 14% percent of the whole United States population (Mizock & Hopwood, 2018). Additional studies suggest that unemployment rates among transgender people can be as high as three times the national average (Mizock & Hopwood, 2018).

### *Why Do We Even Care About Social Exclusion?*

I would like to take a moment to interject some perspective into this discussion on intersectionality, marginality, and social exclusion in order to explore the implications of these topics for an individual's life. Sure, we can theoretically conceptualize the big-picture concepts of the systematic deprivation of resources and exclusion from mainstream social networks, but if we cannot ground this discussion in the pains and struggles of people in the margins, a large part of the tragedy of marginalization is lost. To ground this conversation, I will discuss the impacts of social exclusion on an individual who is experiencing it.

We often regard experiences of rejection as “painful”, but we tend to consider this sort of pain as more abstract or metaphorical, separating it from other types of pain (i.e. physical pain) that we experience (Eisenberger, 2013, p. 152). Ample evidence exists, however, to show that social exclusion is incredibly detrimental to the person who is being excluded. The pain arising out of social exclusion is a legitimate type of pain, and it is more similar to physical pain than we once might have thought. Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) tests show that the pain associated with social exclusion and isolation closely resembles physical pain, as the same neural pathways are activated (Eisenberger & Lieberman, 2004; Richman, 2013, p. 47).

Additionally, ostracism has been shown to elicit a stress response in people (e.g. release of cortisol), which over the long term has been linked with elevated blood pressure, compromised immune function, greater risk for hypertension, and other health problems (Richman, 2013, p.47-48; Dickerson & Zoccola, 2013, p. 146) This means that prolonged exclusion can result in high amounts of debilitating pain and long-term health consequences (Eisenberger & Lieberman, 2004). Further, this sort of social exclusion has been linked to failures in self-regulation and self-control, and elevates the chance an individual will engage in risky behaviors (e.g. drug and

alcohol use) (Richman, 2013 p. 48; Stillman & Baumeister, 2013, p. 135). These findings show the damaging effects of exclusion. High amounts of exclusion results in pain and long-term health effects, and the decrease in self-control further exacerbates the likelihood of negative health consequences.

Experiencing poverty has significant negative psychological impacts on individuals as well. For example, according to Dr. Mindi Thompson and Dr. Jason Dahling, people who are chronically unemployed and underemployed experience increased social isolation and stress and decreased social status (2019). Additionally, they tend to experience higher levels of distress, depression, anxiety, as well as lowered levels of subjective well-being and self-esteem (Thompson & Dahling, 2019). Further, by being subjected to poverty, a person is less likely to develop the self-efficacy that would be necessary to change their situation. (Thompson & Dahling, 2019). Social exclusion and poverty produce inherently painful experiences that, given the broader societal systems of power and impacts to the individual experiencing poverty, are difficult to change.

So why should we care about social exclusion as it pertains to marginality? Primarily, we care because exclusion harms people. The pain that exclusion causes is legitimate, and it can have accumulating adverse effects that can affect an individual for a long period of time. Secondly, we care because if we do not take exclusion into account when developing poverty alleviation services, we would be missing part of what makes poverty so painful. When we look at the narrative of the American Dream, suffering in poverty is a precursor to prosperity, and hard work is the bridge between them. The suffering, in this case, is seen as a function of how hard a person works and is understood as a just outcome for laziness; it is not seen as having any long-term effects once a person reaches the sought-after prosperity. But if we introduce social

exclusion into our concepts of poverty, we complicate this narrative. Suffering might not be a just outcome of laziness; it can be an outcome of a society that marginalizes.

So how do we begin to move forward with poverty alleviation services? Given the pervasive nature of marginality, the complications of which may be analyzed through the lens of intersectionality, creating programming for people who experience poverty can seem like a futile task. How do you provide services for people who have different experiences depending on their group identities? This being said, the cost of not creating holistic programming is that real people suffer, and their suffering is exacerbated by other, long-term consequences of the social exclusion that affect both their physical and mental well-being. In the next section, I will outline Relational-Cultural Theory to provide us with a way to understand how to navigate and move forward with intersectional concerns of poverty alleviation services.

#### *Relational-Cultural Theory: A Framework to Move through Exclusion*

We might be tempted to dismiss art programming as being unimportant because it is not the most traditional or pragmatic approach to addressing the problems of poverty. Typically, our efforts to alleviate poverty rise out of models like Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Per Maslow's "A Theory of Human Motivation", physiological (e.g. food, water, warmth, shelter) and safety needs must be satisfied before an individual can seek to satisfy needs of love and belongingness (Maslow, 1943). Accordingly, traditional services that seek to alleviate poverty tend to focus on providing for the physiological needs of people. This focus also extends to services provided to people experiencing homelessness, where, to address needs of safety in Maslow's hierarchy, temporary shelter is provided. If we were to take Maslow's hierarchy as infallible, art programming would be construed as a misappropriation of limited resources because providing

crisis services (e.g. providing food, water and immediate access to shelter) and stabilization services (e.g. job training and placement) would be better activities to help people.

While Maslow's hierarchy has significant value, some contemporary models suggest it does not place enough emphasis on the needs of love and belongingness (Oved, 2017). By over-emphasizing physiological and safety needs, the pain that arises from a social exclusion and isolation (i.e. lack of needs of love and belongingness) is lost from the conversation. Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) offers an alternative approach to understanding how we can address the needs of individuals. Importantly, RCT does not negate Maslow's hierarchy, but it augments the hierarchy, providing us with a more nuanced understanding of human needs. This theory does not deemphasize the physiological needs and needs of safety as posited by Maslow; rather, it holds central the notion that humans need meaningful relationships and community to create wellness in the self.

RCT also problematizes the notion that human development is primarily a function of the self, in which healthy development occurs when a person demonstrates autonomy, independence, invulnerability, and agency (Jordan, 2017). In traditional theories of psychological development, selfish and self-interested forces are the motivations for behavior, and growth and development are a function of who is most effective in acting of their own self-interest (Jordan, 2017). In these traditional theories, we praise independence, autonomy, and extraordinary mental fortitude and courage in the face of obstacles as characteristics that define positive human development (Jordan, 2017). Traditional theories of development discourage human connection, as dependence and reliance on another person inherently decreases the desirable characteristics of independence and autonomy. Further, these theories prop up the idea that those in relative

positions of power secured those position through meritocratic means and those in marginalized positions are inadequate (Jordan, 2017).

Relational-Cultural Theory postulates a radically different understanding of the self: that we only know ourselves by being in relationship with others. Relational-Cultural Theory relies on the notion of basic human interconnectedness and our need to create meaningful relationships in our lives, because we are wired to connect (Jordan, 2017). Our innate need for this connection can be seen when our abilities to connect are stripped away from us through exclusion or isolation. As I mentioned before, there is empirical evidence suggesting exclusion and isolation cause real pain that neurologically mirrors physical pain. The traditional model of healthy development encourages isolation of the self in support of independence and autonomy and the exclusion of others via marginalization under the guise of meritocratic competition. RCT offers an alternative, rather hopeful picture of human nature in which people in relationship are inspired to grow and shine to value their own well-being as interdependent with the value and growth of others (Jordan, 2017). It should be noted that RCT does not value all relationships because not all relationships are healthy or growth-fostering. RCT promotes relationships where people can have positive, authentic experiences that help them and others pursue growth interdependently (Lenz, 2016).

In the pursuit of understanding growth-fostering relationships, Relational-Cultural theorists posit four conceptual dimensions: relational authenticity, mutuality, relational connection, and relational empowerment (Lenz, 2016). These tenets describe key characteristics of healthy relationships. Relational authenticity describes the capacity for individuals to bring their real experience and feelings to a relationship in a manner that is mindful of the impact to the other individuals (Lenz, 2016). With relational authenticity comes the ability to create

meaningful moments with others, which can promote self-awareness, esteem, and healing (Lenz, 2016). Mutuality is a tenant in which trust and respect in relationships is founded, as it emphasizes individual understanding of how a person can impact others. This tenet can promote vulnerability, as well as a sense of mattering and empathy (Lenz, 2016). Moreover, this tenet is particularly important because it emphasizes the mutual investment in the well-being of each other and the relationship. Even though relationships do not necessarily have to be totally symmetrical or equal, one person should not be stuck providing care for the other when it is not reciprocated. Rather, the people in the relationship relish in the positive development of both parties (Jordan, 2017). Relational connection is best described as an interaction between people that is characterized by mutuality, emotional accessibility, and what is called the “five good things” – zest, clarity, worth, productivity, and the desire for more connection (Lenz, 2016). Conversely, disconnection is characterized by disappointment and the sense of being misunderstood. Relational empowerment is characterized by the degree to which individuals trust themselves to be individualistic, while also recognizing the co-constituting nature of relationships that allow them to grow (Lenz, 2016).

Also central to RCT is naming privilege, recognizing bias, and addressing intersectional concerns of power dynamics (Jordan, 2017). Through a re-imagining of a relational self, RCT brings focus to the experience of people who have been marginalized because the myth of human success as a function of autonomy and agency specifically serves to moralize those in relatively privileged positions of society and demoralize those who are not (Jordan, 2017). Because traditional models of psychology lend themselves to a meritocracy, relationships in these models are characterized by the dominant group having “power-over” the other – using the paradigm of relationship to subjugate people experiencing intersectional forms of marginalization. The

interdependence of people, when situated within power structures and disparate relationships, allows for the dominant group to render the marginalized group invisible, thereby serving their positions of dominance (Jordan, 2017). These sorts of relationships are inauthentic, and they lack mutuality or empowerment, which is critical. For example, this sort of subjugation manifests in the relational and cultural trivialization of women, expecting them to be self-sacrificial and silent about their needs in favor of serving the people in relative power (Jordan, 2017). By identifying privilege and how it manifests in relationships, we can better create relationships that are empowering for all parties involved.

We can turn to Relational-Cultural theory to understand the value of art programs, like the program at TGP, within poverty alleviation services. While TGP likely did not create their art program with RCT in mind, RCT still helps us to describe the programming in an authentic and helpful way. TGP serves a diverse population experiencing poverty, and it is difficult to meet the needs of their members considering these members have different experiences of marginalization. Accordingly, RCT offers a way to navigate intersectional concerns of social exclusion as it pertains to poverty (i.e. socioeconomic exclusion, cultural/symbolic exclusion), by offering a way forward through authentic, mutually empowering, and growth-fostering relationships. By offering programs that facilitate the creation of these relationships, places like TGP can address needs of socioeconomic and cultural/symbolic exclusion. As I will argue in the next sections, well-structured art programs can, under a Relational-Cultural framework, navigate concerns of intersectionality and mitigate the negative consequences of marginalization and poverty through the creation of empowering relationships.

*Art Programming Addressing Socioeconomic Exclusion in Aiding with Financial Independence, and an Exploration of Art Programming within a Social Enterprise Model*

Poverty is maintained in part by the socioeconomic exclusion that is experienced by individuals enduring poverty. Again, socioeconomic exclusion refers to political and economic structures by which members of stigmatized groups are systematically deprived access to goods and resources, which contributes to generally poorer standards of living (Ward, 2009). This sort of socioeconomic exclusion can have devastating consequences. There is ample evidence to show that socioeconomic exclusion, as supported by systemic factors and a cultural moral importance placed on paid work, and as exacerbated by rising income inequality, has devastating psychological consequences on individuals experiencing poverty.

Art programming has the potential to mitigate this socioeconomic exclusion. While art programming does not usually provide individuals experiencing poverty with employment opportunities, it can help in two primary ways. First, art programming has the potential to provide artists with supplemental income. Second, art programs can help mitigate the negative psychosocial effects that arise out of poverty, and art programs that result in bettered mental health among participants have been linked to their increased achievement and financial stability. One study looked at how one art program aimed to help the financial situation of people affected by homelessness by selling the artworks produced (Griffith, Seymour, & Goldberg, 2015). In this study, when the members were able to sell their pieces, they, at times, earned an amount in sales comparable to a few days of work at a minimum wage job, while not altering their qualification for social service programs (Griffith et al., 2015). Further, in gaining greater financial success,

the individuals affected by homelessness were more motivated to pursue financial and life goals and were more likely to have higher achievement towards these goals (Griffith et al., 2015).<sup>2</sup>

When considering how to address socioeconomic exclusion in an art program, it is a worthwhile question to ask how the program might be funded or how to best financially support the participants. While there are many viable models for nonprofits focused on alleviating poverty to follow, I will highlight a social enterprise model as one possible avenue for a nonprofit engaging art programming. Situating art programming within a social enterprise model can also serve to further address socioeconomic exclusion by giving people experiencing poverty access to a business with a sustainable economic engine. Social enterprises have a hybrid structure of charity and business enterprise to pursue a mission and purpose around a social need (much like a charity), and they model their business structure around that purpose to drive cash flow, utilizing more traditional business approaches (Fowler, Coffey, & Dixon-Folwer, 2019). Unlike traditional charities, social enterprises do not rely solely on governmental or philanthropic donations to survive. Instead, they create and respond to market demands so the sale of their products and services sustain the business, and money earned can support their mission. In a successful social enterprise with art programming, the business would look for opportunities to sell artistic works to potential customers. In identifying and capitalizing those market opportunities, money earned could support both the artists who experience poverty and the day-to-day functioning of the social enterprise itself.

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<sup>2</sup> Other ways in which present literature has shown art programming to positively impact the mental health of individuals experiencing poverty will be addressed in the “Art Programming and Marginality – Addressing Cultural/symbolic Exclusion with Individual Rehabilitation” section.

Addressing socioeconomic exclusion is only part of the puzzle of adequately addressing the needs of people experiencing isolation and exclusion as a result of poverty. As was mentioned before, socioeconomic and cultural/symbolic exclusion (i.e. communicative and cultural erasure of people experiencing marginalization) exacerbate one another, increasing barriers to mainstream social networks and leading to a more unbalanced distribution of resources (Ward, 2009). So, to adequately address poverty exacerbated by socioeconomic exclusion, there must be considerations for cultural/symbolic exclusion as well. In the next sections, I will further detail how art programming can function as a means for social good in peoples' lives by addressing the cultural/symbolic exclusion that individuals face. Addressing cultural/symbolic exclusion is critically important to be able to effectively help individuals who experience poverty.

#### *Art Programming and Marginality – Addressing Cultural/Symbolic Exclusion with Access to Social Groups*

Per a Relational-Cultural approach, art programming can serve to mitigate the consequences of social invisibility perpetuated by cultural/symbolic social exclusion by providing opportunities for community integration for its participants. Again, cultural/symbolic exclusion refers to a sort of cultural domination in which representation is heavily skewed towards groups with relative positions of power in society, resulting in cultural and communicative erasure (Ward, 2009). This sort of exclusion increases barriers for marginalized people attempting to enter mainstream social networks, which inhibits their ability to access resources to provide for themselves. Art programming can mitigate exclusion from social networks by meaningfully providing people experiencing poverty access to smaller, more intimate social groups. These social groups can be transformational to their overall wellbeing.

An inevitable side-effect of homelessness and poverty is that one's social circle will shrink and be altered dramatically. Relationships with friends, family, and other acquaintances tend to deteriorate, as they generally become increasingly focused on the fact that one person is homeless and impoverished, and new relationships formed are generally with other people experiencing homelessness and poverty (Griffith et al., 2015). However, from an RCT-informed understanding of mutuality, art programming offers opportunities for individuals to create social connections in which all parties contribute to the growth and well-being of the relationships (Prescott, Sekendur, Bailey, & Hoshino, 2008; Jordan, 2017). Meaningful social connection can be paramount in providing lasting psychological and social-emotional relief for a person experiencing poverty.

Importantly, some art programs are structured in a manner such that participants have a means to create strong close-knit community connections. One study found that an art program helped people affected by homelessness to make friends and maintain those relationships, create a sense of belonging to a community, and help people find mentors that are able to provide guidance to them and foster growth (Prescott et al., 2008). Similarly, in a study done on the use of quilting as art programming with older African American women who had experienced homelessness, it was found that the act of making a quilt fostered group development, creating an intentional community among participants (Moxley, Feen-Calligan, Washington, & Garriott, 2011). The quilting community created an empathetic outlet for the participants to share their ongoing experiences of homelessness and to meet in a safe environment of collaboration and support (Moxley et al., 2011). The creation of these sorts of strong "social ties" in these community settings with people that share similar experiences are extremely nurturing (Griffith et al., 2015).

## *Art Programming and Marginality – Addressing Cultural/Symbolic Exclusion with Individual Rehabilitation*

Art can be of great therapeutic value to people who have faced intense psychosocial distress rising out of their marginalization. By providing access to safe spaces and meaningful community, art programming can contribute to an improved self-image among participants, which, in turn, can increase self-determination in participants and willingness to act on their own behalves.

Art programming has the potential of improving the self-image of a person experiencing poverty. This is due in part to art programming being a space in which people engage in the creation of social groups. As mentioned in the previous section, per a Relational-Cultural framework (specifically the principle of mutuality) a meaningful community can help with an individual's overall wellbeing. Further, the creation of safe spaces can be paramount to a person's ability to create a self-image that is not bound to homelessness. Art programming can provide an individual experiencing poverty an intentional, safe, and respectful space (Prescott et al., 2008). The creation of this safe space is critical to an individual's emotional processing and growth (Prescott et al., 2008). In a study conducted regarding art therapy, creativity, and resilience in homeless adolescents, art programming was found to have multiple positive impacts on the physical and mental well-being of the participants (Prescott, et al., 2008). Specifically, art seems to have improved the youths' self-identity (identifying themselves as creative individuals), improved their ability to reflect on their life experiences, and helped provide direction (Prescott et al., 2008). In addition, art programming has been linked with improved self-esteem among individuals experiencing homelessness, as recipients of art programming have described

increased feelings of accomplishment, pride, and self-efficacy in relation to their treatment (Schwan, Fallon, & Milne, 2018).

Art programming can also help people experiencing poverty find skills to cope with trauma, as well as help them begin to act on their own behalves. Art programming has also been linked to helping individuals manage mental health challenges associated with poverty and homelessness, providing a method to help these individuals cope with daily stresses, helping them to invest more in self-care and helping them recover from trauma incurred from their lived experience (Schwan et al., 2018). Participating in artwork programs can also act as a vehicle by which a person residing in a shelter community can gain more of a voice (Braun, 1997). Finding voice is especially important, because this allows people to more extensively work on personal-growth, and begin to participate in leadership activities (East & Roll, 2015). Art programming has been linked with helping participants experiencing homelessness develop self-determination and a willingness to take action on their own behalf (Feen-Calligan, 2016). The quantitative facet of Prescott, Sekendur, Bailey, & Hoshino's study correlated increased attendance among the youth experiencing homelessness to drop-in art center with significantly increased number of "life achievements" that these youth accomplished (2008). Examples of these life achievements include ending drug use, finding employment, improving social skills, getting a GED, completing a vocational training program, gaining access to housing, etc. (Prescott et al., 2008).

#### *Art Programming and Marginality – Addressing Cultural/Symbolic Exclusion by Shaping the Broader Community*

Finally, art programming can be transformational to people experiencing poverty because it not only can provide these individuals a means to access their wider community, but it can potentially provide these individuals a chance to shape their community in tangible and

meaningful ways. In understanding empowerment through a Relational-Cultural framework, people can greatly benefit from advocating for themselves in their communities, assuming more leadership roles and getting involved in community actions (East & Roll, 2015). When artworks are sold or displayed publicly, the artists are generally accepted and wanted by a larger community, thereby reducing the effects of the cultural/social exclusion. These sorts of broader connections can be characterized as “weak ties”, and they can be transformational in mitigating exclusion that bars people from entering mainstream social networks, creating networking opportunities that increase access to resources, housing, jobs and more (Griffith et al., 2015).

Researchers Frances Griffith, Liz Seymour, and Mathew Goldberg write on the subject:

Creating art may seem very far from the hard work of leaving homelessness and, in fact, only a small number of agencies incorporate art into their programs. That is a shame. The healing, therapeutic value of art making is well known, but there is another less recognized benefit: the opportunity to sell art and make “weak ties” within the community. Granovetter (2005) outlined the importance of “weak ties” in building social networks. Strong ties are deep relationships with people who share our experiences and outlook; weak ties are to people with whom we don’t have a shared history or much in common. Our strong ties nurture us, but our weak ties extend our reach into the world—job seekers are more likely to find work through casual acquaintances than through close friends (Granovetter). It is the weak ties that fill the successful networker’s Rolodex. (2015).

In certain art programs, some individuals who were experiencing poverty had the chance to create meaningful change in their community. In an art programming project entitled “The Babushka Project” conducted in 2002, residents of a poverty-stricken community engaged in

creating public art pieces which have been transformational in creating meaningful conversations regarding social justice, identity, freedom and culture (Gray, 2012). This means that these individuals were not only welcomed into the community, but they had a chance to actively change it for the better.

### **Community-Based Qualitative Research Design**

#### *Research Theory*

The data collection portion of this thesis was structured per the recommendations of Laura Ruth Johnson as a community-based qualitative research project. This means that my research did not aim to determine a singular “truth” in which a definitive answer to a research question is posited; rather, it sought to understand the particulars of diverse community perspectives for the purpose of understanding local meanings of a particular phenomenon (Johnson, 2017, p. 3). This means that I am trying to understand how particular participants view art programming at a particular time and location. Per Johnson, this research has been conducted in close relationship with community partners, namely the art programs at The Gathering Place (Johnson, 2017, p.3).

Moreover, I conceptualized this research with respect to the core concepts of community-based qualitative research as posited by Johnson: praxis, communities as intellectual spaces, and engaged learning. With respect to praxis, I aimed with this research to not only identify social problems as they exist, but to also create knowledge to allow the community to speak back to inequity and injustice (Johnson, 2017, p. 21). Additionally, the concept of praxis requires that I, as a researcher, engage in a reflective practice so as to best understand my own experience with

community members and the topic of study (Johnson, 2017, p. 22). With respect to the core concept of communities as intellectual spaces, I designed this research such that diverse community members can engage in critical inquiry regarding the challenges of their community and to provide space for nuanced discussion to create knowledge on how to address these challenges (Johnson, 2017, p. 23). Finally, with respect to the third core concept of engaged learning, I designed this research to engage with participants in their chosen community space, TGP, thus making this research active participation in their ongoing community projects (Johnson, 2017, p. 24).

### *Concerns on Intersectionality that Informed Research Design*

The concept of intersectionality is oriented towards transformational change within communities, in that research garnered from a diversity of perspectives unique to times and locations can be utilized in creating meaningful and lasting relationships that serve to shift debilitating power structures. Historically, research into identity tended to overlook the multiplicity of a participant's identities in favor of studying a singular stigmatized identity because of the belief that to study one identity, the other identities must be held "constant" (Remedios & Snyder, 2018). For example, in a study where the independent variable identity is gender, other identities like race must be controlled. While studies on stigma as a single-identity phenomenon contribute meaningfully to literature and knowledge of marginality, they are severely limited in that they cannot effectively account for the complexity of social interactions experienced by individuals with multiple identities. Conversely, the concept of intersectionality lends itself more to "real" world interactions that are subject to time and space. In fact, inclusive research that recognizes and structures itself to reflect the complexity of identity may produce findings more likely to be repeated with new samples (Remedios & Snyder, 2015).

In this research regarding art programming and its roles for creating social good among people experiencing poverty, the framework of intersectionality is crucial to contextualize the conclusions that are drawn. An area of study that has emerged many times over in present literature is the use of art programming to aid community members who are experiencing poverty. When considering these studies, it is important to recognize that people experiencing poverty who participate in art programming likely have wildly varying life experiences because they do not wholly belong to all of the same social categories at the same times and locations. Evaluating broader understandings of the role art programming plays in the lives of people experiencing poverty does not diminish the influence from the multiplicity of experiences and identities. By surfacing the social category of poverty, this research does not aim to reduce the experiences of people to their experience of poverty, rather the social category of poverty provides an area of focus.

Further, this research also seeks to create knowledge through understanding the particulars of diverse community perspectives that are shaped by complex social categories and their relationships to institutions of power. Intersectionality is imperative to understanding these individualized perspectives because it implores us to consider other identities and experiences that invariably shape those perspectives. With regard to analyzing the intersectional nature of identity as it pertains to broader societal structures, the process of reflexivity is needed. This is to say that when analyzing the nature of power relationships as it pertains to social categories, the analysis is inextricably linked to the experiences and positionality of the researcher. As such, I, as the principal researcher, engaged in the practice of reflexivity, actively reflecting on my social position with an awareness of how this social position may ultimately color my findings

(Hankivsky, 2014). Indeed, this process of reflexivity may further contribute to producing research with a higher likelihood of replicable findings.

### *Role of the Researcher*

Community-based qualitative research is a highly involved process, and it requires that the primary researcher create productive relationships with the various individuals and stakeholders in the community (Johnson, 2017, p. 40). In examining my role as the researcher, I will briefly touch on the considerations that were used in the design of this project. These considerations are acknowledging my privilege and engaging in the practice of reflexivity, being intentional about my demeanor, and holding myself to my ethical duties and responsibilities. Because of the level of interaction from my part that is not necessarily present in traditional positivist research (e.g. needing to build rapport with participants, conducting interviews to elicit the participant's distinct narrative), it is important to recognize my relative positionality and to engage in the practice of reflexivity (Johnson, 2017, p. 42).

I am a relatively able-bodied heterosexual cisgender white woman, who comes from a middle-class family, and I am Christian. I am also fortunate enough to attend university and have a job. In practicing reflexivity throughout this research process, I have reflected on my experiences and how they color my perspective as much as possible so that I can avoid otherizing the community members that I am engaging (Johnson, 2017, p. 43). As for other considerations, I tried to hold a nonjudgemental and humble demeanor when engaging people and to be relatively flexible throughout the process. Finally, in terms of my ethical responsibilities, in disseminating information from the research, I must be acutely aware of how my research may reinforce negative stereotypes of the participants. This means I must diligently

contextualize information gathered so it is used productively to enhance understanding (Johnson, 2017, p. 53).

### *Research Purpose Statement*

The purpose of this study is to examine the role art programming plays in the lives of the women and/or transgender individuals who experience poverty at The Gathering Place in Denver, CO.

### *Research Questions*

1. How do program participants at The Gathering Place who experience poverty view and create art?
2. How do program participants at The Gathering Place experiencing poverty describe their experience with art programming?
3. What do program participants at The Gathering Place perceive is being offered to them with their participation?
4. How does art programming impact social exclusion/social invisibility as felt by program participants at The Gathering Place?

### *Research Design & Methodology*

Because community-based qualitative research hinges on collaboration with community members for the creation and dissemination of knowledge, it is important for me, as a researcher to engage in orienting experiences and developing rapport with the community (Johnson, 2017, p. 66, p. 69). To orient myself with the artistic community within The Gathering Place, I consulted with the TGP volunteer coordinator to discuss expectations, and she took me on a tour to show me the services The Gathering Place offers. To develop rapport within the community, I

volunteered consistently for several months (about once a week) before I began the research process, and I engaged the community members in conversation, helping to break down perceived barriers and open lines of communication. After spending this time, I conducted the research in collaboration with participants at the art programs at TGP was collected and disseminated in three primary ways: observation, interviews, and the examination of physical artifacts, some of which are created by artists and those that are in the community space.

### *Observations*

A facet of this research involves reflective field notes in which I will discuss what I notice about the settings, objects, behaviors, and interactions that are present in The Gathering Place. These observations are reflexive, and they will situate my own experiences with the community (Johnson, 2017, p. 108). For the purposes of this thesis, observations will only be included if they are relevant to the findings, so as not to break confidentiality with participants.

### *Interviews*

The interview portion of this study consists of semistructured interviews (Johnson, 2017, p.82). During this portion, I conducted six face-to-face interviews, averaging twenty-three minutes, with six artists at TGP. In the next section, the people interviewed will be not be identified by their names to protect confidentiality; rather they will be identified through a pseudonym. These artists will be referred to as Frida, Helen, Faith, Georgia, Louise, and Agnes. I recorded these interviews so that answers to the questions could be accurately transcribed, but after transcription, the recordings were deleted to protect confidentiality.

### *Interview Guide*

1. How did you find out about the art programs here at The Gathering Place?

- a. What interested you in the program?
2. Tell me about the art you create.
  - a. Can you tell me about what you are working on right now?
  - b. What is your inspiration?
  - c. What do you like about the art you create?
  - d. What are your challenges?
  - e. What support and/or resources do you receive in creating this art?
3. Has being a part of the art programs at The Gathering Place impacted your art? If so, how?
4. Has being a part of the art programs at The Gathering Place impacted your life? If so, how?
5. What advice would you provide to other artists?
6. What does art mean to you?
7. What are some challenges you face in your experience in the art programs at The Gathering Place?
8. What have you gained/learned from your experience in the art programs at The Gathering Place?
9. How would you describe the art programs at The Gathering Place to a person who has never been here before?
10. What are your strongest memories from The Gathering Place/the art programs here?

### *Artifacts*

As a final aspect of this research, visual artifacts were collected. The visual artifacts collected with this research are used to substantiate the findings generated by interviews and observations (Johnson, 2017, p. 113). Photographs of the art created are used to provide additional insight to what the art and the creation process mean to the individual artists.

### **Knowledge Collection & Dissemination**

In this section, I will structure the information gathered by first describing what art programming means to different individuals who attend these programs at The Gathering Place, and from this, extrapolate common themes among interview answers.

### *Individual Interviews*



*A Flower, by Frida*

The first artist interviewed, Frida, identifies as an Asian/Pacific Islander cisgender woman who is older than 75. Frida also cited having a brain injury that causes difficulty in her everyday life. For Frida, the ability to make money in her artistic pursuits is particularly important. In response to the question that asked her what her

strongest memories were from The Gathering Place, Frida said “The first check. It was only \$7.50. It was the first time I had painted. Who would buy my card? Ten people bought my card. It’s very uplifting, encouraging, empowering, exciting.” Frida also seems to value having the

ability to learn and improve, citing education as something that was very valuable to her, as well as gaining feedback both from the volunteers, as well as the larger community in learning what sells. Frida also has experiences of spiritual reverence in the art creation process. Flowers often appear as a motif in her art, and she talked about inspiration coming from appreciating the beautiful city of Denver on her walks, and she considers God to be the source of her inspiration.



*By Frida - A gingerbread man Holiday card in the process of being repurposed into a Valentine's Card. The gingerbread man is intentionally dynamic – she wanted it to look like it was moving or jumping.*



*By Frida - A completed Valentine's Day card that was transformed from a Holiday Card. The gingerbread man was transformed into a teddy bear, and it holds a flower and balloons.*



*Flowers, by Frida*



*Flowers, by Helen*

The next artist, Helen, identifies as a white cisgender woman between the ages of 65-74. Helen started the art programs at TGP after she came to TGP seeking other services. Helen talked about the materials she receives as something that supports her in her art. Helen is a long-time lover of art and mentioned creativity several times throughout the interview. When asked, “What does art mean to you?” Helen simply replied, “Creativity.” Helen also cited friendships as an aspect of her experience in art programming at TGP.



*A horse laying down, by Helen*



*A sitting cat, by Helen*



*A horse standing up, by Helen*

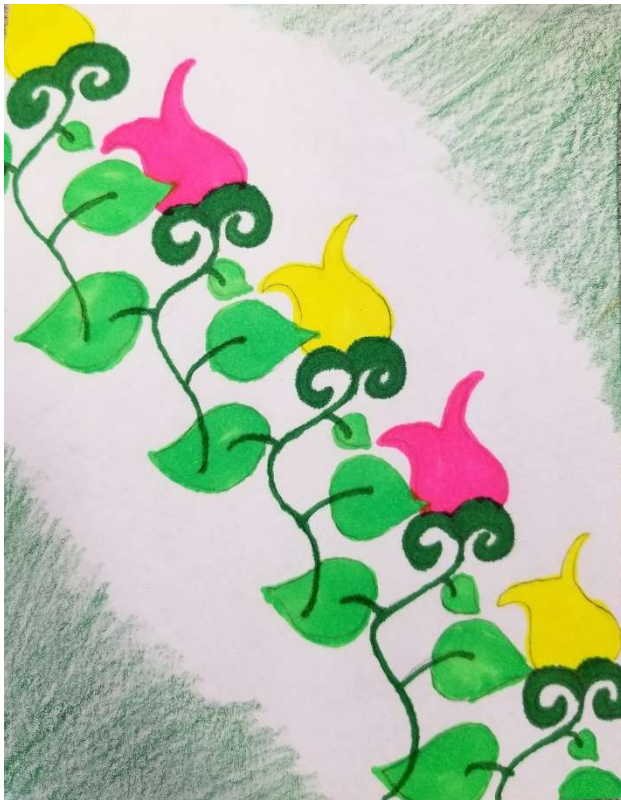
The next artist, Faith, identifies as a cisgender black/African American woman between the ages of 55-64. In this interview, she also revealed that she is presently experiencing homelessness. Faith took some time thinking about her answers to the interview questions, and when she answered, talked at length about the inspiration she receives from being in the art programs at TGP, and how art, for her, is relaxing, soothing, and gives her focus. She also described being in the art programs at TGP as something that provided her with



*A collection of nature-inspired and abstract works, by Faith*

perspective. For Faith, the process of creating art helps her to be present, engage with things that she enjoys doing, and improve her skills so that her works reflected a level of quality that she was unable to create before. Faith also took great inspiration from the community within TGP. She takes inspiration from the works of her fellow artists in and instructors of the art programs. She even mentioned the times in which children of neighboring schools come by to visit the art programs, and the innocent feedback that they give the artists as well. Of the programs, Faith said “It helps you stay positive. Because we each have to encourage each other. Everybody is going through something. We encourage one another and by what we create, it’s more encouragement on top of that. It’s just a very positive, it can be a positive place.”

The next artist, Georgia, identifies as a white cisgender woman between the ages of 65-74. Georgia also revealed throughout the course of the interview that she has experienced a great amount of housing insecurity, and she presently has a disability. Georgia talked about how she started art programming after finding out about other services that TGP offers. She talked about how she enjoys being in the art programs because they give her a “day out”, that they’re healthy and good for you, and she described art itself as a “release of inner energy.” Throughout her time in the art programs, Georgia has learned that “[she] can make cards”, and “[she] learned that they sell”. In fact, at the time of the interview, Georgia was creating cards with springtime flowers in response to a request from the Denver Art Museum to make these sorts of cards to sell. Georgia also talked about the community aspect of the art programs at TGP. In response to a question asking about how these programs have impacted her life, Georgia replied, “I’ve made a lot of friends here. And we work together, and we talk. They’re all nice ladies. I like coming here.”



*Flowers, by Louise*

The next artist, Louise, identifies as a white, cisgender female between the ages of 35-44. Louise also experienced homelessness and housing insecurity, and she came to TGP for services, becoming interested in the art programs to make money. Louise values the creativity and expression aspect of her artistic process, and she also talked about having improved in her art since attending the art programs, (like gaining different skills, incorporating different textures, and changing

her composition) through feedback from volunteers and instructors. She also talked about how art calmed her down, especially after a stressful week. Another positive aspect of attending the art programs that Louise talked about was increasing her ability to focus. Being in the art studio space motivated her to work on and improve her art, and her increased concentration improved her works as a whole. Louise also enjoys the community aspect of the art programs. She is a self-described “Chatty

Cathy”, and she enjoys visiting with others in the room to the extent that her mom, who attends the programs with her, has to remind her to do her artwork. Of the art program, Louise said “It’s



*A Leprechaun and a pot of gold, by Louise*



*Flowers and a butterfly, by Louise*

a good place to come and enjoy yourself and relax and be around other people that could help support you and encourage you.”

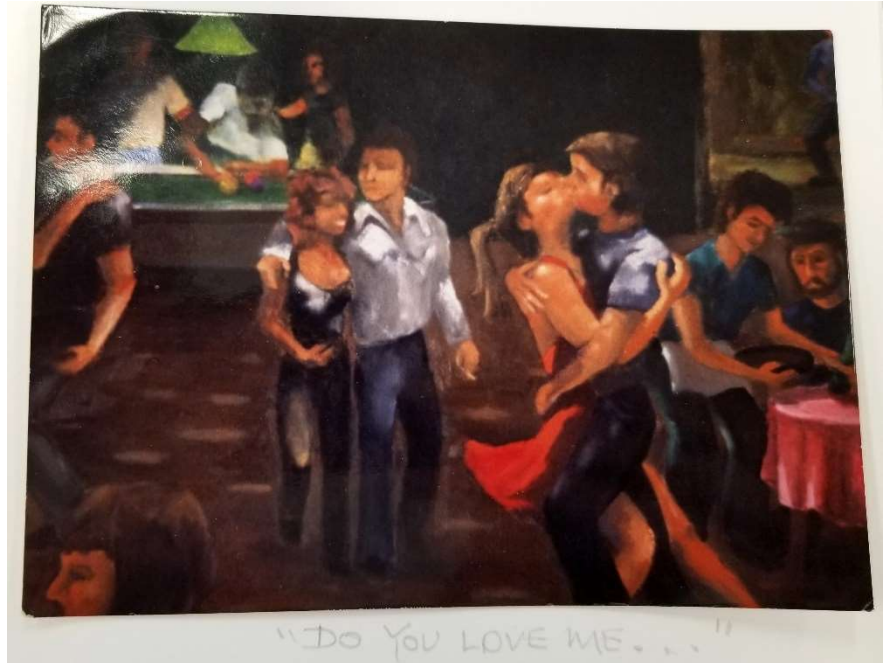
The final artist that was interviewed, Agnes, identifies as a white female, between the ages of 65-74. During the interview, she also said that she was a refugee. Agnes came to The Gathering Place in search of other services, but because she had been an artist all of her life, she

joined the art programs.

She described her experience with the art programs as a place where she has the peace of mind to be able to creatively experiment with her art.

Through the art programs, Agnes has the materials to be able to make designs

and put them out to the world, seeing what people like and are willing to spend money on, giving her guidance and direction for her future pieces, without any personal risk to herself. In fact, Agnes credits the art programs at TGP for jumpstarting her becoming a serious artist. Additionally, Agnes talked about how coming into the art space motivates her, and she is compelled to be productive there.



*"Do You Love Me..." by Agnes*



*Photographs of artwork, from Agnes' sketchbook*



*"Ode to Neissie", by Agnes*

Agnes also spoke at length about her artistic, creative process, talking about the different materials she uses (like oil paints and screen printing) and her fascination with the way that the color interacts. Agnes valued greatly the aspect of learning and education in her artwork. She also talked about how she expresses herself in her art. Outside of artworks for TGP, Agnes creates political pieces to express her viewpoints as well.

Agnes also spoke highly of her fellow artists, saying, "The Card Project is an inspiration. You're with a variety of people, not in your own little safe spot. It's mainly

about a communal experience without being afraid of rejection." Agnes also talked about how the art programs at TGP allow her to make an impact on members of the larger community, and how the genuine, heartfelt feedback from those community members inspires her to do her work. To illustrate this point, she recounted stories related to a charming artwork that she created called "Rock Collector", which depicts an astronaut, collecting rocks on the moon, gazing back at earth.

According to Agnes, one version of this work reached a little boy in Texas, who had cancer, and a heartfelt note to TGP revealed that this card gave the boy inspiration and energy. A reproduction of “Rock Collector” was also given to a TGP employee, who was leaving his position to pursue a position at NASA.



*An armadillo, by Agnes*

This employee approached Agnes to tell her how much he loved it.

Overall, Agnes really values her involvement with the art programs at TGP. She finds great value in the artistic process and drawing inspiration from her fellow artists. Agnes said, “I love The Gathering Place, and I am inspired by the women I work with because, to be honest, a couple of years ago I caught that rush there could be an art movement that comes out of this building. Like the Ashcan School. Like abstract expressionism. There is an art movement that will be recognized, [even if it takes] a decade or so. There is such raw and refined talent in this building. I spent years going to Rocky Mountain School of Art, back in the 80’s, and this is what it reminds me of. Everybody having a common purpose to express themselves and to market their work. I am convinced in my own head, that there are going to be women from this building that are going to be in art history books.”

### *Insights*

Conducting these interviews provided a rich wealth of knowledge into the value art programs at TGP provide to the participants. While there was not a large enough sample size to draw statistically significant results, insights gleaned from these interviews, in many ways,

reinforced, but also complicated, ideas that art programming can mitigate social exclusion among participants. Additionally, the notion of the programs being valuable to personal growth and development was also complicated but ultimately reinforced. Additionally, a common theme among participants that is worth further exploring in the future is the value of the artistic process itself.

### *Addressing Socioeconomic Exclusion*

All of the artists interviewed became integrated into art programs because they were seeking services at TGP or other places to address other needs that they had. Artists, in this sense, do face socioeconomic exclusion because they do not have adequate resources for survival, and they rely on traditional aid models to help them with their physiological needs. These insights reinforce the notion that art programming, per an RCT framework, is complimentary to programs created that address basic physical needs per Maslow's hierarchy. The value in art programming is not diminished by the fact that other physiological needs must be met; rather, individuals who rely on this aid also find value in having art programming to meet other psychosocial needs.

Four out of the six artists directly cited the ability to make money as a valuable aspect of the program, some of them citing the ability to make money as a reason for joining the art programs in the first place. For some, like Frida, the fact that they made money gave them confidence to further pursue making art. For others, like Agnes, the fact that the materials were provided, and that there were ready channels of buyers, meant that they could experiment with their art to figure out what people liked and would buy, at no personal risk to themselves. By creating opportunities for artists to earn supplemental income by providing channels of distribution through which work can be sold, and by providing resources to make art so that lack

of resources is not a barrier, the art programs at TGP, at least to some extent, help to mitigate the socioeconomic exclusion.

### *Addressing Cultural/Symbolic exclusion with Access to Social Groups*

While the words used to describe community were different, all of the artists also cited the community present within the art programs as being valuable to them. Some of the artists, like Helen, cited the ability to create friendships as valuable, while others, like Louise, talked about socializing frequently with volunteers and participants. Still others, like Frida, searched for interaction with instructors and volunteers as a way to improve their art. Some artists, like Faith and Agnes, found the community members within TGP to be very inspiring, as the artists had different skills and talents. Notably, in two interviews, artists stated that other artists acting counter to accepted community standards and practices detracted from their experiences overall. One artist, Frida, discussed at length a time when another artist accused her of copying her work, and this disagreement was very stressful for Frida. Another artist, Faith, discussed that sometimes other artists do come in that are negative, but usually this negativity is quickly remedied.

Aside from the periodic negative interactions, access to smaller, more intimate social groups proved to be an important dimension of the art programs to the participants. RCT assists us in exploring how and why the social dimension of art programming becomes important. From the discussions with participants, echoes of all four tenets of RCT can be found. Relational authenticity can be found in the expression of art and the sharing of it with other participants for feedback. Discussions on lasting friendships that have been formed out of the art programs suggest the presence of the tenet of mutuality. The tenet of relational connection can be found in the zest that some artists have when discussing another's artwork, as well as the desire for

continued connection with other artists in friendships. The tenet of relational empowerment can be found, as many of the artists interviewed spoke positively about other artists' distinct styles and expression through their art. It should be noted that the tenets of RCT are not perfectly represented within the interviews, but these echoes spark curiosity. These artists are citing aspects of their experience in community in the art programs to have the similar characteristics of empowering, growth-fostering relationships.

### *Personal Growth and Development*

The artists at TGP also talked about how art programming contributes to their own personal growth and development. Three of the artists talked about improvement in their art skills, one going so far as to say that the art programs at TGP have been a springboard into her professional art. Some artists talked about expression and creativity in the artistic process, and others described art as being calming and centering, allowing for a release of energy or reprieve from stress. Notably, three artists described the art programs as increasing self-determination in participants and willingness to act on their own behalves, as they have either improved their concentration or motivation, or they described the art space as being a place of motivation and productivity.

### *Value in the Artistic Process Itself*

An area of future research is the value of the process of creating art for those who are experiencing poverty. For example, some of the artists talked about how the process of creating art is calming and centering, and some artists talked at length about the creativity and expression involved in the artistic process. One artist, Frida, went as far as to describe art as a spiritual experience. From this research design, the value of the artistic process to the participating artists

is inextricable in analysis from the value of the art program as a whole, and this topic could be worth exploring in the future.

### *Addressing Cultural/Symbolic Exclusion with Access to the Broader Community*

Four out of the six artists also mentioned their art as being a catalyst for integration to the broader community. Some artists, like Frida, described great excitement with the sales of her initial cards, and that, by having people buy her cards, she was encouraged. Two artists specifically mentioned their work being sold out of the Denver Art Museum Gift shop, where a great number of people go to visit. One artist, Faith, mentioned that neighborhood kids come to visit the art programs, describing it as “healthy”. Finally, one artist, Agnes, told a story of how her art affected community members, giving an example of the “Rock Collector” pieces. In these sorts of instances, artists have access to the broader community and have the chance to better their community with meaningful interaction based on their artwork.

### **Concluding Remarks**

It’s been a long time since I met the man in the cannabis leaf hat and his “second chance” dog. Working on that project several years ago sparked my interest in wondering if there was a way that art programs could potentially be a tool in mitigating the effects of social exclusion and marginality. What I’ve come to realize since that project is that art provided a platform in which my friend and I could meaningfully connect with that man, understanding a part of his story and what is important to him.

Our society is grounded in this way of understanding humanity that gave rise to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, where we prioritize physiological and safety needs and we deemphasize our needs of love, and belongingness to a community. These love and

belongingness needs are central to our humanity – our brains feel real pain when we are isolated and excluded – and yet, somehow, we have convinced ourselves that these needs are less important, and we have structured our society and value systems in a way that marginalizes and excludes those who are most vulnerable. Even when we try to help those who are marginalized, we generally only provide services to help with their physiological and safety needs, but it does not address the real, pervasive exclusion that people experiencing poverty face. This is not to say that providing for the physiological and safety needs is not important, but when we conceptualize of poverty-alleviation services we try to take a more holistic view of the needs of the people that we are serving.

Under this thesis, topics of social isolation and social exclusion (namely socioeconomic and cultural/symbolic exclusion) were explored through the framework of intersectionality. Social exclusion operates within complex systems of power in which there are systemic factors and cultural expectations that marginalize people, and this marginalization is exacerbated when a person holds multiply-stigmatized identities. These are important when looking at poverty alleviation services, because social isolation and social exclusion hurt people, and we need to address these aspects of human needs. This being said, conceptualizing and offering programs that mitigate social exclusion can be overwhelming when we truly consider the large and pervasive nature of exclusion as a result of power structures. Relational-Cultural Theory offers a way to navigate intersectional concerns of marginality and exclusion by creating empowering relationships and community integration.

Art programming, through a RCT framework, offers one way that poverty alleviation services can move forward through issues of social exclusion. Through monetized programs and programs situated within a social enterprise models, we can address socioeconomic exclusion

and help with the financial stability of program participants. By art programs enabling access to meaningful community within the program, we can help a person address their love and belongingness needs. With having these needs met, art programs can also mitigate psychosocial stress that arises from poverty and exclusion and can help an individual's self-determination in navigating challenges. Finally, art programming can give individuals experiencing poverty a chance to make a positive impact on their communities.

I consider myself to be incredibly lucky to have spent time with the amazing artists who participate in the art programs at The Gathering Place. Just like my experience with the man and his "second chance" dog, my interactions with the artists began with questions of art and marginality and have greatly inspired me throughout the process. I am inspired because I have gotten a glimpse into what is possible, and I have witnessed the incredible things that being in community with one another enables. Art programming is just one way in which we can create a meaningful community with others.

My call to action is this: let us continue to explore questions of what makes us human through more deeply understanding our identities and our needs. Let us better understand what it is that makes us not only survive but thrive. Let us challenge ourselves to see the ways in which we are marginalizing and excluding others, taking a real, honest, and empathetic look at the difficulties that others face that we might not. Finally, let us be creative in finding solutions so that our most vulnerable and marginalized members of our society have access to the resources and community that will truly help. My love and passion for art and places like The Gathering Place has led me to offer art programming as one solution, but there is incredible opportunity to find other solutions that could change the lives of people experiencing poverty in our communities.

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