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An exploration of the potential interplay between mood disorder and the artistic process

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Daphne Nayar
An Exploration of
the Potential Interplay
Between Mood Disorder
and the Artistic Process

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study was to provide a deeper understanding of the complex reciprocal interplay between an artist's diagnosable mood symptoms and his or her creative process through the personal narrative of the artists. To this end, 15 artists of both solitary and performance orientated disciplines were interviewed utilizing a semi-structured open-ended interview format. These artists included painters, poets, an actor, a performing artist, vocalists and musicians, who had all considered themselves to be professional artists for at least five years. As part of the inclusion criteria, each of the artists had been diagnosed with either Depression (Dysthymia or Major Depressive Disorder) or Bipolar Disorder (I or II or Bipolar Disorder Not Otherwise Specified), by a mental health worker, psychologist or psychiatrist.

Lee's (2008) attribution of the transient creative benefit of hypomania being as a result of the "increased energy, confidence, enthusiasm and fluency of ideas and the long lasting creative benefits of depression as allowing greater depths of insight, sensitivity and awareness (p. 10)," have both been upheld by many reports of the participant artists. Within the severe extremes of depression and mania creative productivity was either extremely difficult in the case of a severe depression or chaotic and without technique.

Often, however, reflections and insight gleaned in these extreme states could later creatively be used when the artist became more stable.

If one is not able to cognitively problem solve or work through the emotional experience via the creative process, then it is possible that one could be passively pulled into a whirlpool of chaotic emotions. The theory that a third variable is necessary in order to creatively transform the extreme emotions resulting from a mood episode was also held up by my qualitative findings. This third variable is described by Guestello et al. (2004, p263), as emotional intelligence which is the cognitive ability to “accurately perceive, appraise and express emotion.” Each artist had his or her own vocabulary for describing this transformation of emotion into art, which supported the concept of “working through” of emotion through cognition, as posited by Ludwig (1995).

While conducting a thematic analysis of their narratives I found several unexpected themes that were extremely important to the artist’s healthful transformative experience of affect, filtered through cognition, within the creative process. They are as follows: 1) achieving a sense of mastery and competence; 2) having a need to contribute to the world and to communicate to others; 3) sensing that the art transcends itself, that it partook of something greater such as Beauty or the Human Condition; 4) sensing a separation from self during the process of creating; 5) achieving a sense of timelessness and fluidity during the process, (sometimes called being in the “zone) and 6) creating of symbolic representations of personal emotions and thoughts, within the art itself. I then described the healthful ramification of these themes through the lens of Self Psychology, using Winnicott’s concept of the transitional space and Kohut’s theory of the selfobject function as fulfilling the needs of the tripartite self.

AN EXPLORATION OF THE POTENTIAL INTERPLAY BETWEEN MOOD
DISORDER AND THE ARTISTIC PROCESS

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Masters of Social Work.

Daphne Nayar
Smith College School of Social Work

2011

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Finally, in the end, this thesis is dedicated to the fifteen artists who trusted me with their stories. Thank-you.

“The depression is still going to be there. Maybe on a good day, it doesn’t swallow me whole. It just feels like another part of the fullness of my life. The creative process is right there. Visualizing it is like a galaxy, a constellation, a grouping of particles that make up an entity and that entity feels like my life or my being and I can be proud of that. That’s on a good day.” Painter, participant 4,

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Why is it that all those who have become eminent in philosophy or politics or poetry or the arts are clearly of an atrabilious temperament, and some of them to such an extent as to be affected by diseases caused by black bile, as is said to have happened to Heracles among the heroes?, (Aristotle, trans. 1953).

As a former professional actor who self-identified as an artist for many years and who has at times experienced the more pale shades of melancholia, I have been fascinated with the reciprocal influence that heightened affective states seem to have on the creative process. The potential connection between affective disorders and highly creative people has been contemplated and evaluated since the time of Aristotle, who wondered why eminent artists tend to have melancholic dispositions, (Aristotle, trans. 1953). In the *Phaedrus*, Plato referred to the true artist as one possessed by a divine madness, which is inspired by the muses, (Plato, trans. 1964).

More recently, social scientists and psychiatrists have derived varied quantifiable results on the question. These results depended upon which mood disorder they focused and whether the researchers sampled clinically diagnosable affective cases to assess how creative they tended to be or began with a sample of creative people in order to determine how many suffered from mood disorders. The lives of distinguished artists have been studied retrospectively, as have living artists and individuals who are simply creative, (but do not define themselves as professional artists). Persons with bipolar disorder, schizophrenia and depression have also been studied in order to ascertain how creative they are compared to control subjects who do not have a mood disorder. Researchers have studied the question through the use of creative and affective

measurements, questionnaires, biological markers, personality traits, neuro-cognitive pathways and regressive analysis of the literature or other artistic work of eminent artists, such as Emily Dickenson or Schubert, who suffered from affective disorders, (Ramey & Weisbberg, 2004). My interest lies in qualitatively exploring how mood disorders affect individual artists and their artistic process and conversely, how actively participating in their artistic process affects their mood disorder symptomology.

The purpose of my study was therefore, to understand, from an artist's perspective, how he/she experiences the complex interplay between his/her mood symptoms and creative process. To this end, I chose a sample of 15 artists who had been diagnosed by a mental health professional with either bipolar disorder (I, II or Bipolar Not Otherwise Specified) or unipolar depression (Dysthymia or Major Depressive Disorder). The artists worked in a variety of disciplines which included, painters, poets, essayists, playwrights, sculptures, performing artists, actors, musicians and vocalists. As part of the inclusion criteria, each artist had to have been working as a part-time or fulltime professional over a minimum course of five years. The one hour long interviews were semi-structured in order to remain open to all relevant information with a minimum of bias. All interviews took place in person and were held in private rooms at my placement site of Lesley University in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

From a social work perspective, due to the small sample size, this exploration could have limited implications for the mental health treatment of creative individuals, as well as for creative mental health interventions such as art, dance, drama, or art therapy. The findings potentially address issues of meaning making and identity of the artistic individuals who contribute to the collective unconscious of our society. It may also help mental health

professionals to understand, on a deeper level, the complex nature of various mood states in relation to elements of creative thinking as healthful, integrative and adaptive processes.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

In now considered classic studies, several researchers have quantifiably supported the connection between mood disorders and creativity, (Andreasen, 1987, Jamison, 1989, Ludwig, 1995). Andreasen (1987) conducted psychiatric interviews with 30 writers-in-residence at the University of Iowa Program in Creative Writing with 30 controls. She found that whereas, only 10% of the controls had bipolar disorder, 43% of the writers suffered from the illness. In addition the writers had a substantially higher rate of affective mental illness as a whole, (80% of writers vs. 30% of controls). Jamison (1989) sampled 47 esteemed British artists and writers, questioning them on their mood states and treatment histories. She reported that 38% of them had sought treatment for mood disorders, a rate about 30 times the general population. When Ludwig (1995) compared the rate of psychosis, suicide attempts, mood disorders and substance abuse in accomplished artists to that of persons in other professions such as businessmen and public officials, he found that the artistic group's rate was 2-3 times higher.

Consequently, an affiliation between persons who are highly creative and individuals with mood disorders is strongly suggested. Researchers have found various ways of explaining this positive connection, using biological, personality based and philosophical methods which I will explore throughout this literature review. For example, this link may be based upon neurobiological underpinnings that are common to both highly creative individuals and those with certain mood disorders (Nowakowska, C., Strong, C., Santosa, C., Wang, P., Ketter, T., 2005). These mutual pathways would lie in the mesolimbic and frontal lobe cortical systems where generating ideas and creative drive as well as elevated mood, found in bipolar disorder,

and psychotic thinking (dopaminergic system) are associated (Rybakowski, J., Klonowska, P., Patrzala, A., Jaracz, J., 2006). Reduced numbers of dopamine receptors, (D2) in the thalamus, which filter incoming information before being sent on to the cortex, are found both in people with schizophrenia and highly creative people. Therefore, there is a higher flow of uncensored information from the thalamus which may account for the unorthodox connections and for the creative drive in both groups (Roberts, 2010).

In a more indirect pursuit of understanding the potential connection between mood disorders and creativity, several researchers have attempted to assess which temperamental traits, if any, are common in highly creative people. Neuroticism, cyclothymia and openness are traits that have regularly been linked to higher creative indexes within these studies (Nowakowska, C. et al. 2005, Rybakowski, et al. 2006;, Sylvia & Kimbrel, 2010). Because neuroticism as a trait “represents a broad disposition to experience negative states”, (McCrae & Costa, 1999), it is a strong predictor of mood disorders such as major depressive disorder, dysthymia and anxiety. Cyclothymia, in which an individual cycles between high and low emotional states, is a mood disorder as well as a temperamental marker.

By comparing four groups including euthymic bipolar (BP), and unipolar (MDD) patients, creative controls (CC) and healthy controls (HC) using personality and temperament measures, it was discovered that while the BP, MDD and CC groups share increased neuroticism and cyclothymia scores, only BP and CC groups also share increased openness, implying that creative persons have a somewhat greater temperamental commonality with individuals who have bipolar disorder than those with depression (Nowakowska, C. et al. 2005). Silvia and

Kimbrel's, (2010) results concur with these findings, concluding that measures of anxiety, depression and social anxiety predicted little variance in creativity.

On the other hand, researchers at Harvard University found that those with a tendency toward depression, combined with manipulated situational social rejection, produced artistic work that was evaluated by artists to be of significantly *higher* creative quality than those who did not have affective vulnerability. The biological marker, DHEA, was used to indicate who was vulnerable to depression and who was not. Low levels of DHEA signified a vulnerability to depression, high levels did not. (Akinola & Mendes, 2008). Other researchers have also shown negative mood to facilitate creative problem solving (Mraz and Runco, 1994; Symanski and Repetto 2000,) This motivation to problem solve, in a creative manner, may spring from the rumination and self-reflection that occurs during depressive states. The amount of time and persistence of thought regarding one or two cognitive categories that is brought about in depressive moods may lead to creative fluency and originality on the perseverative sole subject in mind (De Dreu, Carsten K. W.; Baas, Matthijs; Nijstad, Bernard A. 2008, Verhaeghen, P. Joorman, Jutta. Khan, R. 2005). For example, during her depressive episodes, Emily Dickenson was driven to write poetry almost exclusively on the subject of death (Ramey and Weisberg, 2004, p. 176).

Therefore, paradoxically, the concurrence of a bipolar or depressive mood disorder and creativity may provide benefits to sufferers in that hypomania and depression can potentially both increase creative thought and/or production (Guastello,, S., Guastello D., Hanson, C., 2004; Lee J., 2007). How might this process of adaptation increase in creativity through extreme moods occur? The authors of each article reach their conclusion through different paths and with

distinct vocabulary. Guastello et al.(2004) directly attribute negative mood as a positive predictor of creativity only if the person's emotional intelligence (EI) is high enough to be able to cognitively view their mood issue as "a problem to be solved" (p. 266). Lee (2007) first confirms the link between the two and then attributes the transient creative benefits of hypomania as "increased energy, confidence, enthusiasm and fluency of ideas," and the long lasting creative benefits of depression as allowing greater depths of insight, sensitivity and awareness (p. 10).

Lee (2007) continues by comparing the creative process to a similar process of the mood illness in that initially there is a psychological unease that occurs when ideas are beginning to form out of the chaotic "primordial soup," (p. 12). The ability to cope with this time of ambiguity is salient to both the beginnings of the creative process as well as to the illness process. Both can further a beneficial integration of self, (meaning a healthfully adaptive, harmonious integration of emotional, cognitive and physical experience with the core aspects of self), *if* the creative tension sourced by the psychological unease "can be relieved when the individual is at work or in the midst of solving a problem," (Ludwig, 1995). This ability to reach clarity of feeling through cognition could be recognized as a component of Emotional Intelligence, (Guastello et al. , 2004). If this working through of psychological unease does not occur, the initial ambiguity is not tolerated and the emotional discomfort is not channeled through a creative outlet, then presumably the individual could spiral deeper into a negatively charged, chaotic emotional morass.

Consequently, in both articles the authors find that a *third* variable is necessary to ensure that an individual is able to creatively channel the emotional state resulting from a mood disorder. In one article, emotional intelligence is the variable term used to denote the cognitive

ability to “accurately perceive, appraise and express emotion,” (Guastello et al., 2004, p. 263). While in the other, this creative, adaptive potential is described as the ability to tolerate ambiguity and make sense out of complex experiences and organize divergent elements (Lee, 2007).

Throughout this literature review, I have attempted to show that the bulk of quantitative research reveals a positive link between creativity and the specific mood disorders of bipolar and depression. Researchers have used various conceptual frameworks in order to prove and explain this connection which include: quantifiable comparisons of creative individuals and controls through the use of creative and affective measurements; quantifiable comparisons of bipolar and/or depressed individuals through the use of creative and affective measurement; common neuro-cognitive pathways; personality and temperamental traits; biological markers and philosophical understandings of *how* this creative adaptive potential could stem from the psychological unease of mood extremes.

Although the potential link between affective disorders and creativity has been addressed *broadly* by quantifiable and statistical means, it is rare to come across an applied, thematic analysis of comprehensive narratives by individual artists themselves of their felt experiences of this complex and meaningful interaction. In fact, I have yet to find such an exploration except through the more informal literature, letters or diaries of individual artists or retrospective historical analysis. Through his/her own narration, prompted by questions within a semi-structured interview process, I wished to understand on a deeper level *how* a living artist *experiences* and perceives the interplay between his or her mood symptoms and the process of creating his or her art. After thematically analyzing my subject’s narratives, I was able to

ascertain that there is a conceptual relationship between the artist's understanding of the interplay between their mood symptoms and their artistic process and the third variable theory of creative adaptive potential espoused by Lee (2007) and Guastello et al., (2004). These themes are covered in the following findings and discussion chapters.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Research Question and Study Design

If an artist, who has been diagnosed with either bipolar disorder or depression, perceives an interplay between his/her mood symptoms and the process of creating his/her art, then, through the use of a semi-structured interview, I wished to understand on a deeper level, *how* does the artist specifically *experience* that interplay? Thus, this study was qualitative and exploratory in design using flexible, rather than fixed, research methods. In order to elicit a detailed narrative, I asked specific sub-questions within the interview that included: Do the mood symptoms creatively inspire or inhibit the artist? Does the creative process heal or intensify the extremities of emotion in the moment? What is its effect, if any, over time? What meaning does the extreme emotion carry for the artist, in terms of his or her creativity? Is it necessary for him/her in order to create? Does the artist recognize a similarity between any psychological unease that occurs at the beginning of a mood state and a creative tension? If so, what follows from there, both in the artist's mood and in his/her sense of creative tension?

A pilot test was conducted with a fellow social work intern who had a background in the visual arts. The pilot test was helpful in improving the clarity of questions and the pacing and timing of the interviews. Pilot testing also gave me an opportunity to practice monitoring subjective reactions in an attempt to minimize researcher bias. Feedback from the pilot test subject was incorporated into the final instrument.

Because little qualitative research has been done on an artist's experiential relationship with the cyclical pattern of his or her affective disorder symptoms and its interplay with the

process of art-making in whatever form, I conducted interviews with 15 artists of various disciplines, such as fine artists (painters, sculptors, visual artists), composers, performing artists (actors, dancers, musicians) and writers (fiction writers, playwrights, screenwriters or poets), who have been diagnosed with either bipolar disorder or depression, in order to explore this inter-relationship.

Sample

It would not have been feasible to interview more than 15 subjects, as my time was limited due to other commitments for The Smith School of Social Work. I chose only adult male or female artists, (over the age of 18), as children were a vulnerable population and generally would not have been experienced enough to be considered professional artists for five years, which was an inclusionary criterion. As this study was exploratory and fairly new in scope, I decided to diversify the artistic disciplines, organizing them into solitary and performance oriented artistic processes in order to evaluate whether or not there was a difference in the way the two creative groups experienced this interplay. The diverse number of inclusionary disciplines also increased my chances of a successful recruitment. These sampling criteria may lead to a greater need to narrow my sample in any future studies, in order not to incorporate too many competing factors. Bipolar and depressive mood disorders were my diagnoses of choice, as these were the disorders that had the majority of research behind them, in terms of a positive link to creativity.

The artistic disciplines, of which I included several, were additionally analyzed as either participating in public or solitary artistic practices, as this difference influenced the interaction of the mood symptomology and the artistic process. Five years or more of full or part time

professional artistic experience was one of my inclusionary criteria, so to make more likely the subject's discerning level of awareness of his or her artistic process and increase the likelihood of a detailed narrative. By making the level of professional experience five years and not ten, 20 or 30 years, I attempted to not make the bar so high that I cut off too many prospective subjects. Therefore, the sampling frame was the following: professional male or female artists of at least 5 years practice, who were over the age of 18, and who had been formally diagnosed with either bipolar disorder (Bipolar I or II, or Bipolar Not Otherwise Specified), or a form of unipolar depression (Major Depressive Disorder or Dysthymia). All other types of mental health disorders were excluded, as were those who had not been diagnosed by a mental health professional. Those with professional artistic experience of less than five years were excluded, as were those under the age of 18 or those who did not have clinically diagnosed bipolar or depressive disorder or those who did not feel they were currently emotionally stable enough to participate in the interview. Finally, all of the participants spoke English fluently.

The Recruitment Process

As my resources were extremely limited for this study, I used a convenience sampling technique. Due to a need for convenience sampling, I did not focus on racial or ethnic diversity, but to some small extent addressed a diversity of artistic disciplines by grouping them into artistic processes that were either solitary or performance oriented.

After obtaining the Human Subject's Committee of Smith College's approval, (Appendix A) I recruited these artists through a variety of methods. These included: placing leaflets in theaters, networking with my own friends and acquaintances and putting an approved recruiting notice on Craig's list under the "artist's community" link (Appendix B). In addition, using my

approved recruiting letter, (Appendix C) I first contacted via e-mail and then spoke with members of consumer run organizations such as the Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance, the Boston Resource Center and the Anchor House of Artists. My e-mail address was on the leaflets and if someone was interested in participating, I asked for their telephone number and conducted an initial screening (Appendix D). I went over the inclusion criteria to make sure they were eligible, described the study, including what would be expected of them and answered any questions they had. I highlighted that the interview will be audio taped and went over confidentiality with them when I discussed the consent form information (Appendix E). In the end, all interviews were conducted in person, rather than by telephone, in order to ensure full communication both verbal and non-verbal.

Risks of Participation

Ethically, it could have been an issue to ask someone who suffers from an affective disorder to discuss her experience in detail, as the experience may have engendered difficult emotions. However, no participant was emotionally triggered during the interview. Perhaps this risk was counterbalanced by my asking that each artist link it to their artistic process, which may be healthfully adaptive and “problem solving” in scope. While we were signing the consent form, I referred each subject to the attached resource list of therapists, hotlines and emergency services (Appendix F) in the event that the interview was emotionally difficult.

I began the interview by asking if the subject was currently experiencing a depressive or manic episode. I confirmed the participant’s fortitude by asking if he or she felt strong enough to discuss the connection between his/her mood disorder and his/her artistic process. Periodically, I asked the subject if he/she felt alright to continue. During my years as a clinical researcher with

pediatric bipolar patients, I interviewed subjects on a weekly basis about the specifics of their symptomology, mood states and subsequent behavior. Fortunately, this process never triggered a subject into a pathological mood state. On the contrary, the opportunity to discuss their mood states and experiences in a safe setting seemed often to have a cathartic or therapeutic effect. The research interviews I gave in this study seemed to have had similar benefit.

Benefits of Participation

Participants generally appeared to find it therapeutic to share their experience of the interplay between their mood symptoms and their artistic process and their reflections upon it seemed to bring personal insight. A few of the participants asked for their transcripts in order to have a written record of their interview, because they had found the process to be meaningful.

Data Collection

All of the interviews took place in person. Prior to the interview, I e-mailed a copy of the consent form to the participant to read and then brought two copies with me to the interview to sign, answering any questions beforehand. I kept one copy and the participant kept the other for his or her records.

If the subject drove to meet me for an interview, I reimbursed him/her with a nominal fee to cover the gasoline, (\$10.00). As my subjects were not connected to my internship agency in any way, I was able to obtain a private room at the Lesley University's counseling center or student center in Cambridge, MA in order to meet and interview a subject. The interviews were in depth and semi-structured in order to remain open to as much unexpected and elaborate information as possible and avoid any bias I may have as a formerly identified artist. Each interview took 45-60 minutes.

When I began the interview process, I first asked for demographic and background information such as age, race, ethnicity, gender, years as a professional full time or part-time artist, discipline, type of mood disorder, time of personally determined onset, approximate dates of last mood episode and type of last personally identified strong mood state (depressive, manic or hypomanic). This demographic information was important as it may have later helped to explain some of the variance in responses that appeared in the narratives. I then proceeded to the semi- structured interview in order to facilitate discussion (Appendix G). With the subject's permission I audiotaped the interview, in order to later personally transcribe it accurately.

Participation in the study was voluntary and the participant could have withdrawn from the study, by contacting me through my provided cell phone number and telling me that he/she would like to withdraw, at any time up to April 1, 2011 at which time the thesis was at the writing stage. No participant chose to withdraw. During the interview process the participant was free to refuse to answer any question or to stop the interview altogether.

Data Analysis

Interviews were recorded using a cassette recorder in order to gather the in-depth narratives of participants. I decided to transcribe the recordings instead of utilizing a third-party transcriber in order to preserve the participants' confidentiality as well as to keep costs to a minimum. Upon completing the transcription process, I reread transcriptions and organized the data by question and salient themes. I used an open coding technique to develop code categories after closely examining my qualitative data. As I coded data, I used the practice of "memoing" by writing periodic code, theoretical and operational notes to document the analytic process. Throughout, I derived a set of themes using the constant comparative method whereby a concept

in recognized in one case and then looked for in other, integrated, conceptualized and communicated in writing. (Babbie & Rubin, 2010, p. 308-309). Both manifest and latent content were addressed in the thematic analysis in order to reach a depth of understanding, (Babbie & Rubin, p. 244).

Every reasonable precaution was used to maintain confidentiality during the course of this research. I transcribed the interview myself. Although no personally identifying information was used in the writing of the thesis, it was evident that individual artists were speaking about their personal experiences.

In any future publications or presentations, the data will be presented in the aggregate. All brief illustrative quotes or vignettes will be carefully disguised so as not to include any personally identifiable information. The subject's name never appears in the thesis, in a potential publication or in any presentation of the thesis material. I assigned codes to each participant and keep the consent forms in a locked filing cabinet separately from the transcribed interviews or other data. All data (notes, tapes, transcripts, questionnaires, etc.) will be kept in a secure location for a period of three years as required by Federal guidelines and any data stored electronically is password protected. If for any reason I should need the materials beyond the three year period, they will continue to be kept in a secure location and will be destroyed when no longer needed.

The study's most obvious limitations included its small sample size and lack of racial or geographic diversity (all participants resided in Eastern Massachusetts). As a result, generalizations cannot necessarily be made from the study results. However, this study did explore the complex experiences of working artists regarding their perceptions of the reciprocal

interplay between their active mood symptoms and their creative process. I can only hope that these findings will have some informative value in future research and in the therapeutic understanding of and approach to highly creative individuals.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

This chapter reviews the findings from 15 interviews with artists of both solitary and performance orientated disciplines. These artists included painters, poets, actors, performing artists, vocalists and musicians, who had considered themselves to be professional artists for at least five years. As part of the inclusion criteria, each of the artists had been diagnosed with either Depression (Dysthymia or Major Depressive Disorder) or Bipolar Disorder (I or II or Bipolar Disorder Not Otherwise Specified), by a mental health worker, psychologist or psychiatrist. The purpose of the study was to explore the artist's personal experience of the potentially reciprocal interplay between his or her mood symptoms and his or her creative process.

This study generated several major findings. One finding that I considered to be quite important is evidence of the process of "working through" or "problem solving" extreme emotions through the artist's creative method, an adaptive concept which concludes my literature review. In other words, affect is filtered through cognition in order to have a healthful adaptation of the mood state through the creative process. While poring through the transcripts, I discovered there were several important thematic aspects of this "working through" that proved to be important in attaining a healthful transformation of mood. They are as follows: achieving a sense of mastery and competence through their work; having a need to contribute their art to the world and to communicate to others through it; sensing that the art transcends itself, that it partook of something greater such as Beauty or the Human Condition; sensing a separation from self during the process of creating; achieving a sense of timelessness and fluidity during the process,

(sometimes called being in the “zone) and the creating of symbolic representations of personal emotions and thoughts, within the art itself.

Each and every artist perceived an inter-relationship between their mood states and their artistic process. On the whole, artists could not produce in the extreme ends of the mood spectrum, either severe depression or full blown mania. Or, if they could produce work, the end product was chaotic and without the technique necessary to be a piece of high artistic quality. Most of the artists found that within the range of mild depression to hypomania, they were at their most creative. Several found they could be quite creatively fertile during a moderate depression as well. Many reported that even if they were not producing during a severe or sometimes moderate depression, the reflections and epiphanies that would occur during this period could often be used later as they gathered energy and became more functional. The majority of the participants experienced both an inhibition and an inspiration of their creativity depending on the severity of their symptoms. Twelve artists disclosed that their creative process had a healing effect on their mood symptoms in the moment and eleven understood their artistic process to ameliorate their symptoms over time. A full two-thirds stated that their extreme moods, either past or present, were necessary to draw from in order to create. Two thirds or more found their intense emotions were intrinsic to who they were as creative individuals. They could not separate their emotions from their art nor from their sense of self. The others were ambivalent or would rather they did not have the burden of their more intense emotions to carry.

Demographic Data

At the start of the interview, participants were asked a series of ten demographic questions. The first few questions addressed the participants’ personal characteristics such as

gender, age, race and ethnicity. The next set of questions addressed professional characteristics such as artistic discipline and years as a full-time or part-time professional artist. The final set of demographic questions gathered information on mental health characteristics including diagnosis, age at onset of symptoms, last mood episode and whether or not the artists felt emotionally strong enough to answer the interview questions.

Participant's Personal Demographics.

The study sample was comprised of 15 artists. There were seven females and eight males. They ranged in age from 19-years-old to 66-years-old, with the average age being 35-years-old. All but one subject identified as Caucasian. She was biracial: half African-American and half-White. Ethnically, the artist's identified as: Midwestern (n=1), Anglo-Saxon (n=1), Italian/Irish-American (n=1), Jewish (n=3), German-American (n=1), English/French American (n=1), Scottish/Lithuanian American (n=1), Scottish-American (n=1), English-American (n=1), French Canadian/French-American (n=1), Polish-American (n=1) and German-American (n=1).

Artistic Demographics

Subjects were asked in which artistic disciplines they took part professionally. The artistic disciplines represented were: musician (n=1), vocalist/musician (n=2), painter (n=7), photographer (n=1), actor (n=1), performing artist (n=1), poet and essayist (n=1), poet and playwright (n=1). Their years of practice as a professional artist ranged from 5-23 years, with the average being 11 years. Ten artists practiced their discipline in a solitary manner and five practiced in public, through performance.

Mental Health Demographics

Eleven artists had been diagnosed with Depression and four with Bipolar Disorder. However, upon closer inspection and after going over hypo-manic symptom criteria with them, two of those artists, who had been diagnosed with depression, were clearly Bipolar II. And so, for the purposes of this study, the final breakdown of diagnoses is: Depression (n=9) and Bipolar Disorder (n=6). The age of personally determined symptom onset ranged from 5-years-old to 37-years-old, with the average being 18-years-old. At the time of the interview, nine artists reported being non-symptomatic, one experienced negative thinking, two reported they were mildly depressed, one that she was moderately depressed but functional, one admitted to having the “blahs”, and one artist was mildly hypo-manic. All of them stated that they felt strong enough to answer questions.

Following the demographic questions, I then proceeded to ask ten open-ended questions during the semi-structured portion of the interview. This part of the interview began with three broad questions meant to allow for the personal narrative of the artist to unfold. The first asked, how would they describe their creative process? Second, did they experience interplay between their mood symptoms and their creative process and third, if so, how do they experience that interplay? Almost all of the artists spoke of their mood influencing their creative process immediately, when describing their creative process. And so, the responses of all three questions overlapped considerably.

The Creative Process

Participants were asked to describe their creative process as a way to have them self-define the term, rather than by my imposing a definition onto their understanding of their own

method of working. By beginning with an explanation of each subject's creative process, it set the foundation to better understand subsequent allusions to their mood states in relation to their process. I have broken down "creative process" into inspiration, the method of art-making and structure.

Inspiration

Most of the artists believed that their inspiration came from within their internal emotional and psychic landscape, whether in response to the cycle of their mood states, affect laden memories, relational interactions, situational circumstances or objects in the external world. Subject 6, a vocalist and a musician explained that, "I think that it feels like going inside myself. It sort of feels like a moment of deep honesty with yourself... it feels like a very vulnerable place." Subject 7, a painter, conveyed it this way:

As you know, I work abstractly, and think my paintings are very related to my internal emotions. But, I also get inspiration from the outside world and from visual things that I see in the outside world and I might see something, you know, when I'm driving or walking it catches my eye, that I find of interest somehow. I might see some kind of emotional content in something I see visually. I'm really interested in when I see something organic and natural is up against something inorganic or manmade, like a fence, like those orange fences. You know, it's something that is manmade but then it's sagging and it takes on a human, an anthropomorphic living quality and the two kind of meld together. I sort of think about that as the intersection between the organic and the inorganic.

Another painter, subject 11, observed that an example of an inspired idea would be her own unattainable quest for perfection:

Psychological issues have played such a huge role in my life; I do a draft of issues of perfection. Trying to ...I start with an object and try to paint it as realistically as possible and then it starts to break down. In that process, I start to aesthetically break it down and then it becomes more of an abstract piece. It could be a combination of both. Sort of like a cubist idea. I just like playing with reality and what it means to be perfect; or if perfection is something that we should try to strive for.

Finally, subject 13 does not believe in waiting for inspiration to strike:

Yes, it (my mood) does (interplay with my creative process)...the mood or how I feel... but I don't wait for inspiration? To me that's bulls***. That's a hippy painter. It's like a job. Even if you're not inspired, you get in front of that easel and you do something. By doing that, something is going to happen.

Method of Art-making

Because artists of different disciplines work in different mediums, the process of each method differed. Even within the painting discipline alone, each painter might have a slightly different way of making his or her art, as seen in the following three examples of painters discussing their process. Subject 9 prefers to work with the immediacy of an idea with no preparation. He also refuses to work on the piece in more than one sitting. He states:

Mostly I work with liquid paint. I've used the exact same paint. It has the same consistency as house paint. It's just 5 cans, my black my white my red, yellow and my blue; nothing with these 5 different reds and everything else, in these tubes! My process starts in as simple a place as I can make it. I always assume that whatever it is that I need to say is not going to be said unless it says itself. If I do a dozen sketches of an idea before painting it, I've killed the idea. The idea was probably done in the second incarnation of the sketch. By then it's gone. These are fleeting moments. If a painting takes more than a sitting, if I do something that requires several sittings, even if I execute it perfectly, they are these dead lifeless things. However many sessions I work on it, I've been painting a corpse. So, the most important part is that the work has to happen now.

Whereas, subject 11 first works out ideas in a sketch book before he begins the painting itself and will often work on a piece for more than one sitting.

My current process: I keep a colored journal or a sketch book. I call it my crayon studies. It's meant to be more liberating, throwing it down. Sometimes, I'll have an idea and it's a place to play. Sometimes, I just feel like drawing -Oh look, a red crayon. I'll draw a couple of lines and something comes from that. That's process stuff. Right now I've tried to put my paintings sort of in this real transitional phase of--color fields or abstract paintings but I'm trying to finish those up. I'm trying to do more figurative work, more color shape relation, still keeping flat but more surface texture.

Painter 11 describes her process as a building up of materials and then repeatedly covering over previous work if she feels it isn't right:

I start with an idea, it's not fully formed. I like to experiment and figure things out through the process. I definitely would say that I go into it with a more conceptual intent than some. I think my stuff is more abstract. It depends on the project. I work with the idea. I apply the materials. A lot of times it's a collage, mixed materials. I can be very destructive. If something isn't working I can paint over it, the whole thing. It ends up building up this rich history of different discoveries through the process. Hopefully, if it works out, it comes to a point of resolution. Nothing is really finished, but it gets to a point of exhausting this idea. I've discovered as much as I can through this process. I'm a perfectionist so nothing is ever what I want it to be, but they do reach a point of resolution enough.

Subject 9, a playwright and poet, builds her dialogue on the foundation of humorous moments that she overhears in her daily life:

I write a lot of comedy. Or, I turn it into something funny. I write it down if I hear people having funny conversations. This was an assignment of mine years ago, just to write down what people were saying to each other, I do that all the time, even if I'm saying it. You know and if someone responds with something funny, I write it down. From there I can try to build off of that.

Structure

Several of the artists admitted that they needed a structure in which to work, whether it be a deadline, a commission or a regular schedule of showing up at the studio, rather than waiting to feel inspired. Others, like subject 13 needed the structure of form, size and color within which he could be creative:

It (aesthetic proportions) gives me a structure. I always felt that I lacked structure or discipline. Not only did I want to go Art school, but I wanted to go to one that was very traditional, where the skills build upon one another. Some schools are like, make your own curriculum or do your own thing. I need the structure. I want that. I know that it is in the structure that you create, it's within those limitations that you go beyond it. Once you make those choices, like (the paintings) they're going to be 30 x 30 and I'm going to do 30 of them. I've only done ten so far. So it's a work in progress. They're all the same

composition, it's just more color. It's playing with colors and getting more surface texture into it as opposed to a more shallow plane... I'm trying to see within those limitations how many ways it can be similar but very different and unique. What other emotions can be conveyed through.

Subject 1 observed that a deadline forced her to sit down and work:

I do a lot of music writing and I suppose that I could describe that creative process in terms of it being fluid and easy. If it's going to happen then it happens. If I sit down and I'm going to write something then it usually comes out very easily. It doesn't happen all the time though. I go through periods of not writing at all. Often a deadline is required for me to really sit down and make something appear.

Subject 4, a painter, described the same experience and went on to explain why:

My rhythm is sporadic. I work best quickly and surprisingly with a deadline. The process is a lot slower when I don't have a deadline. It's almost too much freedom for me, which is why I didn't do too well in art school in the freest program they had. It was too much. I needed some limitations.

Subject 3 spoke about a commission motivating him to complete two works when he was mildly depressed. One turned out to be quite meaningful and his mood lifted but was dashed again when he felt dissatisfied with the second piece.

Performers, like the musician subject 2, of course, have the structure of scheduled performances to make:

The structure of getting ready for the performance? Yeah, it does (subdue my symptoms), because I have to worry about the other people. I seldom play alone. I'm playing with two or three or four other people in the classical. I have to make sure there were getting along together. You can't have any fights. You can't miss rehearsals. ...As long as I have big responsibility and I know that I have to get everything on time, set an example, then I'm not going to get depressed...I have to be clever, managerial, friendly. I have to swallow my criticisms, although I'm very critical.

The Interplay between Mood States and the Creative Process

Continuing with the intention of eliciting a more broad narrative from each artist, I then asked the following two questions: Do you experience or perceive any interplay between your mood symptoms and your creative process? If you do, how do you experience the connection? b. How does one affect the other? c. Please describe the effect in as much detail as possible. (If you are bipolar, could you please describe the connection separately in terms of your depressive phases, your hypomanic phases and your manic phases.)

Participant 4, a painter, referred to her creativity blossoming both in spite of and because of what she “goes through with depression; with so much feeling inside.”

...because of this solitary feeling that so often accompanies depression, I really feel like it's just so easy for me to separate myself from the world if I'm in a certain slope with it and just find a place to work and be receptive to painting. I can really go out on a limb and create. Then there are things that kind of begin. There are thoughts, obsessive compulsive stuff, trivial thoughts. They fester. They are kind of their own presence. They might be there. They might rear their heads, but I'm able to keep working past that, past that, even if it's a little bit disruptive it doesn't halt me, I'm still able to bring something beautiful into the world which is empowering to me.

Participant 15, who writes poetry, relates his writing directly to his manic symptoms:

I really do identify existential threats to what I consider to be my way of life and I attack them and I degrade them and bring them and drag them through the dust as much as I can. I would compare myself to the Greek poet Archilocus who was once considered to be just as good as Homer. But he's kind of the opposite, because Archilocus would write poetry so scathing that his ridiculed targets would often hang themselves afterwards. That is the bent of poetry with which I associate. And that's really my creative process. A lot of it comes out of my anger and my defiant attitude. That's totally tied into my (hypo) manic symptoms, in my experience.

Participant 5, a painter, described how, in the hospital, after a suicide attempt, he could no longer function as a “normal person in society” and that the first thing that he could tap into, that could “bring him back to reality” was drawing.

So, everyday for two weeks I made a long series of drawings and the drawings were very abstract. They're precious to me now because they're profound. They're there to remind me of that time. At the time, my drawings helped me get through a period where my brain had such information overload that there was no way that my brain could function as a normal person in society. I couldn't talk to anyone. I couldn't order food in a restaurant. I couldn't go out in public. I couldn't read a book. In that sense, my emotion was directly connected to the physical act of creating lines on a paper. That helped me a lot because I felt very much like a stranger in a strange land.

A photographer, participant 8, relates that the content of his photographic images reflect what emotional state he is in and so, documents his mood at the time.

Well, you know, if I'm high or happy or whatever, I'll use the cliché; it's the kids playing or the carnival or that sort of thing. If I'm feeling low, people are not quite as happy- that sort of thing. I'm trying to document having flashbacks or whatever things have gone by... There's this guy panhandling on C. Street all the time, so I take that sort of picture. So, wherever my mood leads me I will do that. It depends on where my mood is at. I will go and document where my mood is taking me.

How do Mood States Affect Creativity?

The next set of questions becomes more specific and somewhat quantifiable, on an ordinal scale, for example mild, moderate or severe. They address how the artist perceives their mood symptoms affecting their creativity: Do you notice if you are more or less creative as your symptoms become more mild or more severe? Do your mood symptoms creatively inspire you or do they inhibit your creativity?

More or Less Creative as Moods Fluctuate?

Almost all of the participants admitted that, at a certain level of severe depression, they could not function as a person, let alone as an artist. Participant 1, a vocalist and composer put it this way

Well, I've spoken to my psychiatrist a great deal about that I lose the ability to practice at certain levels of depression. When I'm way low, I have no will power, I lose that ability to practice and I don't even care about art or music or...

She was alone in reflecting that she couldn't practice her art when she felt stable either:

But I also, lose it too when everything is ok. ..and I wasn't singing at all because I just wasn't feeling very much. It's hard to care about... I found it hard to care about wanting to create beauty because I felt ok. The world was ok and it didn't need me to make more beauty in it.

All of the artists who experienced depression spoke of a very fertile time creatively when they were mildly or sometimes moderately depressed Subject 4, a painter, observed:

Well, my depression can really get in the way of functioning in terms of a daily routine- you know in terms of hygiene, showering, brushing teeth, everything regularly getting out of the house, running errands, feeling competent. But then...and this was something that I wasn't ever aware of before we talked about it, but because of this I think it's just kind of the residue of depression, because of this solitary feeling that so often accompanies depression, I can really feel like it's just so easy for me to separate myself from the world if I'm in a certain slope with it and just find a place to work and be receptive to painting. I can really go out on a limb and create.

Artist 11, a painter, stated that "near that low (mild) depressive state, if I can dance along that line then it's my most creative point, but if I go just a step farther, it's a complete physical and emotional shut down." The same vocalist (1) who couldn't work when she was severely depressed or stable was very creative

When I'm a little below ok, I do have access, because at that point it is a balm to me. I'm able to sing joyful music and cry over it because it is something that I can't find. I can sing sad music because it is deeply felt.

Several artists said that, even if they couldn't work while they were severely depressed, they were able to "gather ideas for (his) work" during the depression. Participant 15, a poet, stated, "My mind is always very active, even when I'm depressed. Those ideas, those little epiphanies, they build up over time and the best ones stay, as I always like to think." Participant 5, a painter and sculptor, reported that he "did a lot of thinking and reflecting and processing that came out later when I escaped the depression." He went on to say, "I felt these things and then bring these things to life (in his artwork)." A painter (13) related

More recently I started doing these process drawings. Those provide...later on, when I'm coming out (of the depression) and I'm more on an even keel, I'll reflect and look back on those and, "Oh, I want to paint that, I want to work on this. And some of those have turned into a body of work...I've been trying to build and do...I want to build a series from it."

One artist, participant number 9, was the only one who declared that his best work generally is formed when he is at a very low point in his depression

At that point, I feel like my work has been a series of major breakthroughs mixed with a series of minor experiments....The breakthroughs in the painting have always come at a time when the depression had gotten very bad. I was very isolated, ummm usually turning to one kind of drug or another just to cope and then somewhere in there deciding, F*** it, I'm going to paint! Usually, its happens around the time that I've been trying to paint and it's been not working for a little while already so, it's like I don't even have any hope that what I do is going to be any good. And then it is.

On the other end of the spectrum, artists who had bipolar disorder felt that when manic, although he or she might be prolific, the resulting work was not good. Participant 2, a musician described it:

You see, high gives you a quick fix, gives you a push. But it's not something that you can control. It's devious. It pushes you but it disorganizes you at the same time. So people who say, "I like to get high, because I'm much more of a genius at the time." Horses ass! If you're high you're disorganized and you think that everything you do is wonderful and then you look at it and its just garbage! It's all a delusion!

An actress, participant 12, expressed her experience of mania in relation to performance:

Again, maybe I do have a lot of confidence when I'm manic because I think that God is running everything. But I wouldn't be on time for the performance. I wouldn't have checked to see if I had everything. I wouldn't stop on time. I probably wouldn't listen well. I just am in my own world when I'm manic. God is running things. I'm going to swoop to my death. I'm going to be remembered as a martyr.

Hypomania, however, was a boon to those who experienced it. Subject 8, the photographer made clear that he was his most creative when hypo-manic. A poet, subject 15 related

When I'm in a hypomanic state I would say that I can just keep going. And I will. I'll just go on and on and on. The superior computation speed of my brain is the way that I think about it. I just think that it's absolutely necessary for writing poetry. It's so much more complex than writing prose. I mean, I don't go by, you know, I'm not a minimalist like Buchowsky. I use a lot of complicated diction and alliteration and a lot of rhetorical devices. I'm always puzzling them together to make them perfect. I'm not confident that I have the facility to work fast enough to get the spirit of a poem out and at the same time do all these complicated rhetorical techniques. Because if you spend time thinking about them you lose the thread of the poem and the poetry loses itself. You need to do it all at once. I can't do it all at once, unless I'm at least a little above my baseline.

An actress, subject 12, recalled

A couple of months later I started with hypomania. I started doing these speeches and it was planned. I told the audience that I was hypomanic and this is what I'm doing about it. Well, I was so charismatic, I was so... you know what happens to me when I'm hypomanic is that I lose fear. And so I was just ... And when it was time for questions everyone wanted me to answer the questions. Then afterwards, everyone wanted to talk to me, because I was just so fearless and confident. And that brings people to you. And it did.

Artist 3, a painter equated hypomania with increased confidence and self-esteem

I'm more inspired when I'm mildly manic, but I think that it's just the sense of self-esteem that I have at the time. I'm more confident. When I'm depressed, it's not easy or even if it is, it's not like...getting started is the problem where anything could go wrong to screw it up. Whereas, if I'm manic, I could probably do something with a sharpened toothbrush and ink from a pen. But, (when I'm depressed), if I don't have proper paintbrush style and a fine topped pen and certain colored paint, I'm not going to deal with it.

Inspire or Inhibit Creativity?

Most artists (N=9) found that their mood states could both inspire and inhibit their creativity depending on the severity of their symptoms, which I described above, and the circumstances. A visual artist, who is subject 3, responded, "The symptoms themselves? I guess I would have to say, both and... So often, I just feel so alone. On a good day I can embrace that and create and on a bad day it's my downfall." On those occasions when she can embrace her sadness, she explains playfully the how and why:

I remember before, talking about feeling at my most competent and empowered when I create. These are great moments, where I can feel myself in action and I know that something is coming forth and I'm just really proud. It's really joyful. And if that sadness lingers there may be almost be a bit of indignance or almost, how do you describe it, almost like a "so there" to no one in particular, like an imaginary harrumph! I'm an artist, I'm unique and I'm sad, "Damn it!" And I just created something beautiful. Yes, it's my story. It's my struggle. It's that validation that I can give myself that I didn't get growing up.

Artist 7, a painter, reports that , although she can't work when she is severely depressed, she can create when she is moderately depressed, even if she has a "somewhat conflicted relationship with it because being depressed is such a solitary experience and painting is a solitary experience." When the depression inspires her it's because she is able to

...get at these feelings of loss, of all of this loss, of myself and my stability, you know, this period of time that I could have been growing my career or my social life or getting married. Instead I was depressed for four years. So, it's ... I think some of those feelings,

I feel the need to express them or put them in some form. For me it's visual, it's painting, it's non-verbal.

Participant 13, a painter, spoke of his old dear friend, who had been killed suddenly at a young age, being both a source of his depression and an inspiration for his creativity.

Consequently, he would be inspired in his depression but then find that by continuing to think about his friend he would be pulled back into his depression

Yeah and it would suck me back into my depression. I would be doing this work about it and really over thinking it about K. and then this would really bring me down. So, it was this constant, I would pull myself out and go back in this really bad cycle. It would inspire me but then it kept ...and I would keep pulling from it and now that I realize I've been trying to change my pattern or understand it.

Participant 11, also a painter expressed similar feelings

I would say both. They inspire me, the transformative process is exhausting. The whole process is emotionally exhausting, so it's contributing to my depression too. But at the same time I can't live without it. I'm possibly digging myself out and then gliding back in and digging myself out again through painting. Like I said, I'm skirting this like... high creativity versus tipping over the edge and breaking down completely. If I can maintain that very small space it's great, but things don't work that way.

Several other artists felt that their extreme moods solely inspired them. (N=5) Subject 14 is a performing artist who writes her own pieces. "I think that they have given me a lot of material, so I would say that they have certainly inspired me. In my mystic search for understanding..." Participant 15, a poet, found that his deeper understanding of humanity was fed through his mood episodes.

No. I would definitely say that they creatively inspire me. I don't think that they inhibit my creativity at all. Because even things that I don't do when I'm episodic, a lot of the research that goes into doing them, the humanitarian research of the human condition and the human mechanism- all that comes from my superlative experiences of being episodic.

Subject 6, a vocalist, went back and forth, expressing a great deal of ambivalence about whether or not his mood symptoms inhibit him

I think they probably inhibit me. Yeah. Again, I think I want to hold on to this idea that they do inspire me. They make me stronger. And I wonder how much of that is lore... So I want to say that yes, maybe my symptoms do make me a better artist but then I think really in practice, most of the time, they just hinder me. So, I want to hold onto this romantic ideal that they help me... Yeah and (my sadness) it's a part of me. So, I want to say yes, that the sad times help, you know? They make me a more multi--faceted person. But I don't know that they have to be there, you know? I don't know. In terms of inspiration it just feels like the feeling of overcoming...

Only one artist, subject 2, who is a musician, felt that his mood symptoms only inhibit his creativity. (N=1)

Absolutely inhibit! The only way anything can get done is by keeping these wolves at bay! If a wolf is one that's... that's, for example, a suicidal thought. A suicidal thought is one that comes out of absolutely nowhere. And if I'm trying to do something such as rehearse or I'm trying to do business meeting or something and that hits me you... you can't... you have to deal with it. It's... it's going to disrupt everything.

How does Creativity Affect Mood States?

Conversely, I asked specific questions exploring how each artist's creativity affected his or her mood states. Does your creative process heal or intensify your more extreme emotions in the moment? Can you describe how that may happen? How about over time? Does your creative process affect your mood episode over time? How so?

Heal or Intensify in the Moment?

Twelve artists thought that their creativity helped to heal their mood symptoms in the moment. Three felt that their creativity sometimes helped to heal and at other times to intensify their symptoms.

Participant 14 is a performing artist. She believed performing healed her extreme emotions in the moment

Performance? I think that it heals them. It transforms the emotions. They start to become art. It's ritualistic. It's healing in that you are taking all these difficult things and expressing them in these kinds of ways. I will sometimes go into trances from expressing these deep, deep emotions or the truths of them. They're something that you are using instead of being...you're using for a good reason instead of stuff that you're just struggling with... With me, and it fits one of the lines in my performance. "If I ever were to leave depression behind I would need to learn its lesson and find its jewel." It's finding the jewel once again, and using the jewel and using its lesson and using the positive side of depression over and over again. For me, it was definitely learning self-knowledge and staying self aware and being true to yourself. Only sometimes playing with a bit of stuff, but not really actively disassociating. You having control over it and not letting it have control over you.

A painter, subject 11 experienced her painting at times intensifying and other diminishing her symptoms.

It's not black and white. It's not like I painted a painting and everything is sunshine and daisies. It can go either way. But I think that I need it survive even if it occasionally backfires and hurts me rather than helps me.

I then asked, "Why does it help you survive in terms of your mood?"

Because, it gives me a reason to live. It gives me purpose. It gives my life meaning. I don't experience those spikes in elation and intellectual stimulation, in the same way of doing anything else. I've run the whole spectrum of inspiration into something actually working, it's more rewarding than anything else. So, in that sense it is healing. But, if it doesn't work out. It can pull me down.

Artist 7, also a painter, perceived that her emotions can momentarily intensify as she's painting, but the expression of them onto the painting allows her to heal

I think it can in the moment, maybe intensify them but overall, that might lead to more healing. If I'm painting something might come up for me that's very upsetting and I might feel very upset, but I keep painting and I keep thinking about what color I'm going

to use, and what shape that's going to symbolize what I'm thinking about and feeling and then, I think I have more of an understanding of it. Then I've created something, so even though I felt intensely bad, then I can feel...if it turns out to be a really good painting then I can feel great. Does that make sense? It's hard. It's not black or white. Or I can feel like a painting isn't successful and feel very, very bad. Yeah, it depends, but I really think that overall, it's healing because if I weren't doing it then I'd still have all of these feelings and emotions, but they'd be stagnant. They wouldn't be expressed. And then I wouldn't be able to get better.

Just as painter 7 noted that thinking about color, shape and symbol makes her feel that she has more of an understanding of her emotion, subject 1, a vocalist remarked that thinking about her technique fulfilled a similar function.

You can't just be miserable when you're singing because you have to think about your breath. Once a little bit of attention is diverted from "poor me," then I'm not sliding down anymore. It doesn't heal my sadness or lessen my happiness but it makes both things less present in my mind. I think there's something to be said for singing sad music and feeling sad and then remembering, "Right, I have to remember to breathe and remember to keep the sound going forward... I'm just feeling less."

One of the poets of the group, subject 15, characterized the transformation of his emotions and his resulting mastery of them rather eloquently

I would say that it crystallizes my emotions. So I don't feel like I'm carrying them around but at the same time, I do feel that I have them in my pocket. I could really access them at any moment. It gives me a feeling of ownership over my emotions and mastery rather than... I wouldn't say they ebb away because my creative work that's inspired by my emotions is intended to inspire those very emotions that it was made out of. So, if it totally obliterated my own sensibility in that regard, then it wouldn't really be a success. It would just be catharsis. I don't think that it would really be art. You could look at it like distancing, but I don't think that it's so much like distancing myself from it but it could give me closure on painful emotional topics. For example, years ago I wrote one of my greater poems I think that was nearly published. It probably will eventually be; about a girl that I once dated who was anorexic. I had a lot of bad feelings floating around because of that. After having written the piece, which is extremely pungent, you know, I did in a sense feel like it was vindicated and a weight was lifted off my shoulders. But at the same time, by insuring the immortality of that emotional element, through poetry, that is in a sense really strengthened on a larger scale because before that, the emotion would have died with me. But now it has an opportunity to live forever. So the emotion, really it has a life of its own outside of the body now.

Heal or Intensify over Time?

Eleven artists reported that their creativity did help heal their mood states over time. Two reported that their creativity did not affect their mood cycles over time. Two were ambivalent about whether or not their creativity helped to heal or intensify their mood episodes over time. A vocalist, subject 6, articulated the effect his music had on his symptoms. “And that’s when I think music can be a way to deal with these depressive symptoms. It can be a way to learn to shut down these negative voices inside.”

Participant 8, a photographer felt his artistic process helped his mood episodes over time.

I think over time is more beneficial. It’s one of these things, two steps forward and one step back sort of thing. I’ve got to recognize that I sometimes go one step back with it. It’s not a straight line. I don’t know if it’s a tool or a crutch for me to be able to deal with this. At times I am able to recognize I am going off the other way. Is that necessarily a bad thing? I think as a tool to deal with my symptoms the creative process in dealing with my symptoms is analogous with diet and exercise with diabetes. It’s one of the things in my toolbox.

While comparing his current mood states to his past emotional experience, participant 9 discovered that his painting did contribute to the healing of his mood symptoms over time.

The only way that I can answer that is to try to compare my mental state when it gets bad now to how it was before the art, was a really large and worthwhile part of my life. It was a whole lot worse for me then. So, while part of me would like to say that the art is really like a drug covering up the symptoms, and it’s not actually in a long term way helping, I tend to suspect that it is. Because I never had any way to step away from myself at all before that and now I do. It’s made all the difference just that potential even when I’m not in that moment doing that, knowing that it’s in the play book takes a little bit of the pressure off when things get bad. I’m not painting right now but I know that it’s in there. That can happen. That brings hope, I guess. Even when I get really depressed now, it’s not anywhere near as bad as it was other times.

Extreme Emotions as Identity

The following two questions were meant to examine how each artist makes meaning out of his or her extreme emotions; if they are part of his or her identity as a creative human being.

What meaning do your intense emotions have for you in terms of your creativity? Are your more intense emotions necessary for you to create?

Meaning

Two thirds or more of the artists found their intense emotions were intrinsic to who they were as creative individuals. They could not separate their emotions from their art. The others were ambivalent or would rather they did not have the burden of their emotions to carry.

Artist 5, a painter and sculptor, cherished his extreme emotional states as profound life experiences

Well, they're deeply meaningful for me. Because I believe there's a status quo. I don't fit in there. I do these things because I have to but I don't fit into the status quo way of life. My extreme depressive emotions and my extreme manic emotions, I value so deeply, they are the most meaningful things in my life. I'm so proud of the states I've been in, because to me that's experiencing life. I remember the coldest rain storms, when I was freezing, because there was no shelter; or the time that I slept in the desert on a trip; or the time I was homeless for a couple of days; or the time I lived in a redwood tree. These are the states where your mind and your emotion are racing. These are the states that I remember. I reflect on them and say that's a life worth living. The suicide, I have no regrets. I'm proud of it because I survived it. It's a moment that I'm thankful for because the explosions happened and I survived.

Poet (15), believed that it was these emotions that defined him as an artist

My shrinks are trying to convince me that major bipolar artists did their best work when they are not episodic. But I think that if that's not the case, then they gathered their material when they were episodic and then worked on it when they're not because I think it's the episodic condition that gives artists a superior insight into the human condition because we experience feelings superlatively.

Painter (11) searches for meaning when depressed and finds it through her contribution as an artist

When I get that depressed I'm searching for some sort of meaning in my life. I don't want to feel like I went through my life working at a desk job the whole time. I want to feel like I contributed something, something that can be left behind. It's a desire to communicate and reach out and touch someone else who's experiencing the same thing and provide a community through pain.

While participant 1, a vocalist and composer, regretted that she suffered through her depressions

Well, I wish that I didn't have them a lot of the time. I used to have this romantic idea that I'm glad that I suffer because some people don't and they miss a lot: the beautiful sadness of the world and also the intense joy. I am so joyful as a human. I felt that it was terrible that other people would miss this or that I would ever want to miss this. But as I've gotten older, it's just exhausting being depressed and I lose my ability to work and I lose months of practice. I lose my drive and I fall out of touch with people because I feel rotten. I feel like I'm broken and I'm made of flawed parts and I just wish that I could be a receptionist.

Necessity of Extreme Emotions in Order to Create

Again, two thirds of the artists declared that their intense emotions were necessary to create. Participant 10, a poet and playwright stated, "Well, I don't think that I could have my creativity without the intense emotional struggle. They kind of go hand in hand." Participant 4, painter, described her emotional experiences as an intrinsic part of who she was and therefore, what she would create

Yes, but it's not a linear... It's not a direct equation, but I really do feel I am stronger for what I have to go through. And for all the times that I've been misunderstood or treated badly or... I may be stewing in some of that stuff when I go to create, but I really do feel like it's kind of inseparable from who I am and what I create. It is a direct connection there. So, yeah I'm not looking for more trouble but I would say that these things, inevitably they shape your life. Best case scenario. You work with them and you grow.

And you're able to offer the world something that makes you feel you're most confident and empowered. I really do feel like this is what I have. My art.

Painter 7 conveyed a similar perception

That's so hard to know because I don't know what it would be like, otherwise. Yeah, I think so, because I think that they're part of the totality of who I am and that sometimes it's hard to totally separate them out or what I would do with them. But I think that the things that have happened to me in my life, the various tragedies and the fact that I've suffered from depression, the chronic headaches, I also had encyphylitis in high school and was hospitalized and I couldn't walk. So, all of these things have happened to me. So I think that all of those things need to be channeled in some way –to take these things that are dark and they may still be a little dark in the paintings, but they are beautiful. Some painting could be brown and seem ugly but could be beautiful in a way. So it's about the totality of experience including the worst of the worst. Yet, that, in some way, is beautiful and has meaning. So, I probably need those emotions and those experiences are what lead me to want to strive towards beauty and meaning.

Participant 12, an actor postulates that she would have been creative as a performer regardless of her bipolar symptoms.

I hear people say I'm glad that I have my disorder. It's made me stronger it's made me appreciate things. I had a real good life before I was diagnosed and I'm not happy at all that I have this illness. I would have done something else creative. I would have done some more performing about other things, if it wasn't about mental illness.

Relationship between Psychological Unease and Creative Tension.

Many of the participants had some trouble with the last question and I often had to explain it further. Generally, I defined creative tension as “that ambiguous place where things are bubbling up in the primordial ooze of your unconscious, but they haven't quite evolved into ideas or expression. Do you recognize a similarity between any psychological unease that occurs at the beginning of a mood state and a creative tension? If so, what follows from there, both in your mood and in your sense of creative tension? Regardless of any initial confusion, I was given

some interesting responses. Painter 9 felt that there was a sense of urgency in both the creative tension and the psychological unease that occurred at the beginning of a mood state. Painter 11's immediate response was the following

I think that it's just the intensity of the emotion. It builds on itself and it starts growing, growing and with it starts growing the creative impulse.

Painter 7 drew a similarity between the two states, in that the organizing creative impulse follows from the disorganizing feelings of the psychological unease at the beginning of a mood state.

I think they are. Yeah. Because I think that being in that ambiguous state and sliding into it feeling worse and sliding out of it, then my mind starts to feel very disorganized. I have all these thoughts flying around in my mind about all these different things. Painting helps me because then I can kind of ...it's like this laser beam of these thoughts. I can use this color here and this color here. Or this blue is too intense, it's not quite right. It needs to be toned down a little bit so I can get the right pitch. So, that I'm mimicking, but in an active tangible way everything that's going on in my mind. It doesn't totally organize it but I think that it directs it.

Participant 8, a photographer, posited that the emotional states of the beginning of his mood state were more "knee jerk" whereas the creative tension was more of a "cognitive thing."

Participant 13, a painter, illustrated his creative tension with visions of places he has seen that resonate with him. When he is psychically or physically in these places, he feels a sense of melancholy while there which informs his creative sensibility

I guess I see things in places. When I went to Italy, I would walk through the piazzas late at night... the architectural space. I felt it would take forever to walk across this piazza. But then you would walk across and it would feel like forever, but you would look at your watch and it would be three minutes. I remember this vastness, this feeling. It's familiar but it's not familiar. In that moment, I didn't have any idea for, "Oh, I want to do a painting like this or I want to depict..." It was more that feeling, that timelessness, to be in Florence, next to that old town hall, the history...It's almost like you're walking with ghosts or something. It resonates. I'm usually in a more upbeat depressed when that

happens? It's more that melancholy. Its romantic in that sort of sense, not necessarily dreamy, things are still solid. Things aren't foggy. They're not in a haze. It's sort of surreal. I'm present. I'm sad. I'm with that emotion in a space that reflects that as well. Even in Boston, I'll be walking on the cobblestones in Harvard Square, late at night. It's always late at night; having that brick in the building and the light falls on it. It's always about the lighting too. That's what captures... it sticks with me, things reveal themselves to you.

Working Through or Problem Solving

One finding that I consider to be quite significant is evidence of the adaptive process of “working through” or “problem solving” extreme emotions through the artist's creative method, a concept which concludes my literature review. In other words, affect is filtered through cognition in order to have an integrative adaptation of the mood state through the creative process. I have intentionally used more quotes here than I generally feel are necessary, because I believe it is important to allow the artists to speak for themselves with no impingement on my part. In the following quotes each artist uses their own vocabulary to describe to transformation process.

Performing Artist 14.

I think that the performing gives me an outlet. It definitely gives me an outlet to express myself and I tend to do intense emotional stuff...so I'm expressing that. I act depressed so that...I'm kind of doing it, I'm kind of doing the language. And, it becomes a sort of catharsis. And it becomes Art. So, it takes difficult material...a difficult experience gets transformed and turned into art.

Painter 13.

It's more of that process of just making work. Its problem solving. But how does that relate to the sadness or the depression? I think that it just distracts me from it. Maybe I am dealing with it, but it's also...setting a task for myself and just giving myself something to do that is... For me, it's meaningful but in the grand scheme of things, life is just meaningless. It's what you put on to it. Life really has no meaning. It's what you want it to mean... Basically, I had the sadness and the feeling but then it turns into aesthetics where like I said, I was just trying to do the problem solving on the picture plane. It's almost the feelings, I acknowledge them but I don't let them hold me back? Or

maybe they do hold me back? I'm not really sure where those feelings go, I've never really thought about it.

Poet and playwright 10.

When I'm going through it and writing about it, I'm acknowledging it, that's a big step for me. It's healing a little bit for me every time I acknowledge it. Because I spent a long time trying to numb myself from everything. I reached a point where I thought, "I can't go on like this." Then I started feeling stuff and so writing was extremely good in allowing me to deal with what I'm feeling. It's a way for me to put some Neosporin on the wound. It's a way for me to heal it in a healthy way....I would do anything I could to not feel anything at all. Actually, accepting myself for who I am and accepting these feelings and being able to channel something positive makes me feel a lot better.

Painter 9.

It allows me to separate a part of my mind that allows me to analyze and pick apart and decide that I f***ed everything up. That part of me that wants to solve problems, I can engage that in the painting and then let the rest of me sit back and instead of trying solve problems and place blame and try to figure out how best to explain my case, you know, or manipulate somebody to do what I want them to do, I can just realize what's happening.

Painter 7

So, I think that my artwork is related to my moods. But I see now how my moods are related my thoughts, thoughts about myself. You know like a thought can really be like an emotion. It won't just be about sadness. It would be sadness about something which has some content and meaning to it. Then, I put it into some sort of visual form in my painting and by doing that I articulate it for myself in my mind that I wouldn't be able to do.

Painter 4.

Yes. I feel like it's both in spite of and because of what I go through with depression; with having so much feeling inside. I really feel like I'm blessed with the ability to translate this to this object and capture somebody else's presence in between. That's really powerful for me.

Painter 5.

It involves creating visual art primarily through painting, sometimes through sculpture. Most recently through writing although I don't do that professionally yet that allows me to process in a creative way the things in the world of how I perceive things, that I might not understand or I might have trouble dealing with; whether it's something as benign as a landscape, just my way of seeing beauty, something that brings happiness to me or something more non-representational and abstract. It will simply be a cathartic experience to help me get through a disconnection with everything, with society, with how I view myself fitting in with the world or just processing things that I don't understand that causes me anxiety or hopelessness at times.

Painter 7.

I think a lot about things dematerializing but also materializing and happening at the same time almost. One thing could look one way one time and another thing could look another way another time. Even what's happened to me recently, how I may then be able to appreciate something else more or trying to figure out how to take something that's so horrible and how to incorporate it into my experience but try and find something in it that doesn't just feel negative and dead.

Painter 5.

Prior to my suicide attempt, the way that I fit into the world was very critical and I saw a lot of things that I wanted to take down and change and became very misanthropic. In the extreme cases it was very difficult for me to exist in civilization and I had thought of wanting to tear civilization down. I was reading a lot of literature about hunter gatherer way of life and living closer to the land. Before 2008 my art was very much focused on destructive elements and after my suicide attempt, I had to make some choices of how I could fit into society now. My painting and my writing and my sculpture is focused a lot on what I believe in and building towards something rather than taking away. So, I had to flip it into an optimistic mode in order to survive. That's how I use art as my creative process, to understand the world.

Painter 11.

I'm trying to make something beautiful out of something ugly. Being depressed is ugly, it's is not fun, I tend to be very violent towards myself. Maybe I'm painting more a portrait of loneliness, maybe taking away from an idealized form of... I guess maybe it's being dishonest a little if I'm trying to mask all the violence I feel inside by making it... I still care about beauty. I don't want to contribute more ugliness to the world. Maybe if I can transform this emotion maybe it might somehow reflect back on me and transform myself? I don't know. I suppose it's a way of romanticizing it.

As I read through the transcriptions, in addition to the concept of filtering affect through cognition and integrating these into one's psychological self, I found other themes which, in order for the transformation to be a healthful one, seemed to partake of the larger process of "working through" one's intense emotions through the creative process. They are as follows: achieving a sense of mastery and competence; having a need to contribute to the world and to communicate to others; sensing that the art transcends itself, that is part of something greater such as Beauty or Humanity; sensing a separation from self during the process of creating; achieving a sense of timelessness and fluidity during the process, (sometimes called being in the

“zone) and the creating of symbolic representations of emotions and thoughts within the art itself. The following are some but not all examples of each part of the greater theme

Mastery/Competence

Half of the artists referred to a feeling of mastery over their emotions during their artistic process or of their own artistic competence as extremely important to their sense of well being.

This often included being seen by others to be talented, productive and good at what they did

Actor, participant 12.

If I remember the show, cause I have it there. It's very important, because I want to do well. I want the audience to hear and to feel what I feel. I want them to applaud because I did a good job. Before I start, I think about doing a good job. I don't think about it when I'm up there. Just my own stable self, I'm a really good actress...

Painter, participant 13.

I feel in a way that you need to be able to control the paint. You can't have the paint control you. Or hearing people say, "I can't do that" or "I don't want to screw it up." I can't wait to screw it up. Or I can't screw it up because I'm in control. And there is no screwing it up. It's always going to be right. It's more the controlling or mastery aspect of it as opposed to letting it manipulate you.

Poet and playwright, participant 10.

I have definitely had issues with being unclear about whether people liked my writing or not. I've gotten a lot of really good feedback. It just confirms that this is what I should be doing.

Poet and essayist, participant 15.

I would say that it (my creative process) crystallizes my emotions. So, I don't feel like I'm carrying them around but at the same time, I do feel that I have them in my pocket. I could really access them at any moment. It gives me a feeling of ownership over my emotions and mastery rather than...

Painter, participant 11.

So, then I found this thing that I actually had a talent for and that gave me the motivation... It initially came from other people recognizing that maybe I had something that I didn't even realize that I had. My parents certainly never encouraged it. My professors did. They got really excited and were able to work with me. Having a community that was excited to see what would come next in my life made me think, "Maybe I should be interested to see what came next in my life too." That was a good feeling.

Painter, participant 7.

It was an accomplishment. Yeah. It was an accomplishment. Instead of doing nothing and being nothing and making nothing, you're doing something. And then people really respond to my work as well a lot, so...which is another thing... It makes me feel like I'm good at something.

Communication/Contributing

At least half of the artists noted how important it was to them to feel that they were contributing and/or communicating to others through their art.

Painter and sculptor participant 5.

...the physical act of creating something on a sheet of paper that wasn't there in the first place was very exciting and very positive for me but also allowing myself in a small way to feel like I was contributing something to those around me. I think that art is communication on a base level.

Poet and playwright participant 10.

It makes me feel like I'm doing something worthwhile. I want to be able to help people with my writing. If people can relate to it or like it, it reassures me.

Painter, participant 11.

When I see Agnes Martin's paintings and reading the words that she's written, I see that as a reflection of what I'm experiencing. Somebody really gets me. And I'm seeing this in a series of dots or grids or something. It's almost like experiencing a connection with a really good friend. If I can create that for someone else, and make their life a little more bearable, and at the same time be making my life more bearable. I'm not a religious person and I feel like I have to take advantage of what I see right now. I don't see any afterlife. I've got to do it right now. I don't want to be miserable and I don't want anyone else to be feeling what I'm feeling.

Actor, participant 12.

So, although it might not bring a hypomanic state down in the moment, over time its helping you heal. It's because you're feeling better about yourself, you're feeling useful, you're communicating to other people in a helpful way.

Vocalist, participant 6.

So, the catharsis moment, I had this kind of overwhelming connection with everyone around me, and I kind of felt weightless, and I had to cry. ..And I could see that the audience was having a reaction to it. I could see that both the organist and the conductor were both in it. It was just a really intense part of the music and all the words had new meaning to me. I felt a new revelation about the composition about why it was composed

that way. Again, it's those moments that are really ephemeral. What is the other word, like transient, I don't know... just short-lived moments. I don't know if that music will ever really sound that way again. Well, I know it won't, because that choir probably won't ever do it again. That's amazing to me. It was so powerful. I was crying or just misty and short of breath and my heart was racing.

Painter, participant 7.

Yeah. "Cause it can be really hard, but I have to do it. I've heard other artists say that too. "Why do I do this thing that's so hard?" And I think about stopping but then I can't, you know? ...I think (I need) to leave some kind of legacy or to make something...make beautiful things that other people can find meaning in. You know when these people wanted to buy my paintings it was this amazing feeling... It's the connection! Yeah. It's not just like, "Oh, you're just good at something. A+." It's like this connection.

Performing Artist, participant 14.

I really love the connection that you feel with an audience, when you're, you know, performing for them. It's more than that. It's a spiritual transmission, a communion with them. You're trying to communicate something and you're doing it for them.

Beauty and Transcendence

Many artists referred to their work as contributing to the Beauty in the world or in some way transcending the piece itself.

Subject 13 equated his source, from which to draw as:

It's more of an existential sort of thing.-Questions on why you are here. Life and Death. Or the myth of Orpheus is another. You go down to Hell then you come back and you pull back a little bit of something, some truth resonates with the greater, the bigger population or people or the human condition, the human psyche.

By participating in Beauty, some of the artists believed they could be lifted out of their own sadness and suffering. One vocalist illustrates this feeling through the metaphor of a piece that she had sung by Gabriel Faure (1917) about Eve in the Garden of Eden:

...there's suffering but (Eve) knows she is Beauty. She gives herself to the world to perfume the breath of the dead, to make the world better for having given herself to it. That was so true to what I was feeling. You can give sadness and beauty and not have it

be bad or dangerous but allow your melancholy to really give more to the world. It was the right thing for me to be singing at the time.

Visual artist, participant 4.

They, (depressive thoughts), might rear their heads, but I'm able to keep working past that, past that, even if it's a little bit disruptive it doesn't halt me, I'm still able to bring something beautiful into the world which is empowering to me.

Painter, participant 13.

I guess my own perspective on it is that for whatever reason painting has just grabbed a hold of me. There is a saying, "God isn't in the heart of me. I am in the heart of God." It has consumed me as opposed to I having consumed it. I guess I also contribute to something greater.

Symbolism

Several artists indirectly or directly expressed the symbolic representations of their emotions and thoughts in their work.

Painter, participant 7.

I think a lot about the intersections of supposed opposites like chaos and order. Things you might have noticed in my paintings. Some objects are diffuse. There are a lot of layers of things being veiled, underlayers and things that come forward more. That has to do with my various feelings or things inside feelings that are veiled or held back and also feelings of loss of actual... loss within myself of some things. Attached to my father and then feeling the loss of my father. So, the objects represent...it's not like, "Oh, this is this person and that is that person but while I'm making it there are these intellectual and emotional overtones you know different symbolic meanings that aren't fixed or consistent. There is some commonality between them, as in loss. Then also, rebuilding and repair, I think, is part of it too

Painter and sculptor, participant 5.

There is a feeling of terror and anxiety and wondering, "How am I going to walk out this door and continue with life? What will I do?" It was mostly terror. I wasn't consciously so much, as symbolically pulling things from my mind and trying to work them out on canvas. I was painting at that time because I didn't know what else to do.

Painter, participant 3.

I never have a full idea of what it is that I'm going to do until I start these but there's always some sort of idea that I have that I want to express. It could be something external that makes me depressed. I think about that. I hold onto that. I try to work with and put it

through different symbols through a piece, whatever it is that I'm working on. Sometimes its vague...they're not very... the symbols...it's more meaningful when I'm depressed. When I'm manic it's stupid. When I'm manic and I'm working on something, usually it's vulgar or violent.

A Sense of Timelessness.

Approximately half of the artists recalled working in a state which partook of a timeless quality

Painter, participant 13.

It's just more the process, you get into this zone. Just wanting to accomplish this and the time, everything just escapes in a way. I've always wondered if, do I escape into painting or do I escape from painting? Meaning, when I'm doing it, am I escaping the world? Or when I'm in the world am I just escaping painting?

Poet and playwright, participant 10.

That's how I feel when I'm in it, like depressed and writing? I'm in a zone. I'm just a vessel for the words to go through. Words come into my head and I can't not write them down. I know that they mean something important and they're good. Just me sitting down and letting myself be ok with writing down whatever comes into my head.

Performing artist, participant 14.

I will sometimes go into trances from expressing these deep, deep emotions or the truths of them.

Painter and sculptor, participant 5.

But when I'm creating art, it allows me to almost transcend time and I go into my other world. Clocks don't matter. I don't know what day it is. It's a profound healing process to escape into that world where you transcend these things that you don't necessarily understand or agree with in the first place.

Painter, participant 4.

The joy that comes with these marks that feel so abstracted and so right. And then, it's almost as if I'm in the dark a little bit. It's that unknown place. Having this abstraction become a representation that may look nothing like the photograph of what I painted, but it is its own entity and it's a presence that I've captured. Getting lost in that, I think, is a real joy. Having that... I've heard other people describe it as flow. Having time be somewhat irrelevant. You're birthing something.

Distance from Self.

About a quarter of participants alluded to a sense of feeling separated from their own self as they worked, which seemed to connect to the meditative or trancelike timeless quality mentioned above. This allowed a space or distance from their emotions as they worked

Visual Artist, participant 4

...I do feel so separate and so alone but at the same time I'm embracing that and getting something out of it; that commuted process. I think when those two are coupled, I think that's how I work best...to have that distance between self and the rest of the world.

Painter, participant 9.

There's a compartmentalization there. What I paint, unless I pop out a landscape...It's something that can happen with only part of my brain there. It's like a meditation. Instead of my sitting cross legged on the floor and humming...it's like the subtle pressure of your hand on the squirt bottle at the right time and achieving just the right depth with a very small squeegee to peel back one layer of color from another. Letting one part of myself meditate with the color, it frees up the rest of me to pull back to ...It allows me to separate a part of my mind that allows me to analyze and pick apart and decide that I f***ed everything up.

Summary

This chapter presented the findings from ten demographic questions and ten semi-structured interview questions. The interviewees consisted of fifteen artists, who had practiced their discipline professionally for five years or more and had been diagnosed by a mental health professional with either Unipolar Depression (Dysthymia or Major Depressive Episode) or Bipolar Disorder, (I or II). The artist's disciplines included painters, a painter and sculptor, an actor, a performing artist, a visual artist, a photographer, a poet and essayist, a poet and playwright, a vocalist and composer and a vocalist.

All of the artists confirmed that there was interplay between their mood symptoms and their creative process. Generally speaking, if one was at either end of the spectrum, either fully manic or severely depressed, then he or she couldn't produce work or the work that they did

produce was not of good quality. The majority of artists reported that it was in the zone between mild depression and hypomania that they were the most creative. Some also considered moderate depression a fertile time. Several found that, even if they could not work when they were severely depressed, they reflected and processed their life, emotions and thoughts during this time, which then could be used later as their depression began to lift enough for them to be able to function. Most artists found that their mood states could both inspire and inhibit their creativity depending on the severity of their symptoms. Several found their mood episodes to be solely a source of inspiration. The majority of artists thought that their creativity helped to heal their mood symptoms in the moment as well as to help heal them over time. Two thirds or more of the artists found their intense emotions were intrinsic to who they were as creative individuals. It was a part of their identity. They could not separate their emotions from themselves or their art. A few were ambivalent or would rather they did not have the burden of their intense emotions to carry. Again, two thirds of the artists declared that their intense emotions were necessary for them to create.

One finding that I considered to be quite significant is evidence of the process of “working through” or “problem solving” extreme emotions through the artist’s creative method, an adaptive concept which concludes my literature review. In other words, affect is filtered through cognition in order to have a healthful adaptation of the mood state through the creative process. While pouring through the transcripts, I discovered there were several other important thematic aspects of this “working through” that proved to be important in attaining a healthful transformation of mood. They are as follows: achieving a sense of mastery and competence through their art; having a need to contribute to the world and to communicate to others through their art; sensing that the art transcends itself, that it partook of something greater such as Beauty

or the Human Condition; sensing a separation from self during the process of creating; achieving a sense of timelessness and fluidity during the process, (sometimes called being in the “zone) and the creating of symbolic representations of personal emotions and thoughts, within the art itself.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Allow your judgments their own silent, undisturbed development, which, like all progress, must come from deep within and cannot be forced or hastened. Everything is gestation and then birthing. To let each impression and each embryo of a feeling come to completion, entirely in itself, in the dark, in the unsayable, the unconscious, beyond the reach of one's own understanding, and with deep humility and patience to wait for the hour when a new clarity is born: this alone is what it means to live as an artist: in understanding as in creating. 1903. Rilke R. Letters To A Young Poet (translation 1984)

On the whole, my qualitative findings, which are borne of the felt experiences of artists who have been given the gift or burden of extreme mood fluctuations, bear out and elaborate upon the quantitative conclusions of my literature review. Additionally, I have discovered themes in their narrative content which may provide a more in-depth analysis of Guastello et al. (2004), Lee (2007) and Ludwig's (1995) concept of the transformation of the extreme emotional state through the creative process, if there is an ability to work through or problem solve the disorganized affect by way of the artist's cognition. Depression and hypomania can increase adaptive creativity if the artist is able to recognize and reflect upon their emotions.

Therefore, I will divide my discussion into two sections. In the first, I will compare and contrast my qualitative findings with points made from quantitative research in my original literature review. In the second, I will discuss my further findings and put them in the context of the theoretical construct of self psychology.

Quantitative Literature

The literature review begins with the findings of quantitative studies which examined the connection between mood disorders and creativity. The bulk of the research found a positive relationship between bipolar disorder and creativity and many found the same for depression although not as uniformly. There was a higher incidence of mood disorders amongst artists as well as a higher degree of creativity amongst individuals prone to depression and bipolar disorder. The following section of my literature review, examined why this might be via neurobiology, temperamental and personality profiles, biological markers historical regressive analysis and philosophical constructs. Due to the inclusion criteria requiring that study subjects be both artists and have a diagnosis of depression or bipolar disorder, the study sample was self-selective, in that it insured that the findings would connect creativity to the mood disorders discussed in my literature review.

De Dreu et al.'s (2008) hypothesis that the rumination on one or two cognitive categories that occurs during depressive mood states facilitates a creative fluency of original thought within these limited areas is borne out by several of the participants. The sudden death of painter 13's adolescent friend and subsequent depression was the ruminative source of many of his works. The traumatic accident that led to the suicide of participant 7's dear friend and consequential angst motivated her to work through her feelings through her painting and "try and find something in it that doesn't just feel negative and dead." Painter 11's issue of perfectionism has occupied as much space in her body of work as it has in her psyche. In it, she has tried to play "with reality and what it means to be perfect; or if perfection is something that we should try to

strive for.” The depressive ruminating and reflecting on these tragic experiences and ideas has stimulated each of these artists’ creative impulse and has produced many original pieces.

Lee’s (2008) attribution of the transient creative benefit of hypomania being as a result of the “increased energy, confidence, enthusiasm and fluency of ideas and the long lasting creative benefits of depression as allowing greater depths of insight, sensitivity and awareness (p. 10),” have both been upheld by many reports of artists. Painter 3 spoke of his increased sense of self-esteem and confidence when mildly manic. Poet 15 addressed his “greater computation skills” while in a hypomanic state which he felt were essential to writing his form of poetry. Actor 12 remembered how charismatic, confident and fearless she was the last time that she performed in a hypomanic state. The audience was drawn to her magnetism, which in turn increased her confidence.

Lee (2007) also concluded that the long lasting creative effects of depression allowed for more profound insights and awareness and many of the participants supported this finding through their accounts. Participant 15, a poet, mentioned his epiphanies while depressed. Painter 5 spoke of his reflection and processing which “came out later” when he “escaped the depression.” Painter 13 used the process drawings that he did during his depression as a foundation for later work when he “was on a more even keel.”

The reader may remember from the literature review that Lee (2007) compares the creative process to that of the mood illness. She notes a similarity between the two, in that there is psychological unease that manifests itself from the ambiguity inherent in both the state of creative tension and at the beginning of a mood episode as ideas and/or feelings are starting to bubble up from the unformed chaotic depths of the unconscious. The ability to cope with this

time of ambiguity is salient to both the beginnings of the creative process as well as to the illness process. Both can further a beneficial harmonious integration of emotional, cognitive and physical experience with core aspects of self, *if* the creative tension sourced by the psychological unease “can be relieved when the individual is at work or in the midst of solving a problem,” (Ludwig, 1995). If one is not able to cognitively problem solve the emotional experience through the creative process, then it is possible that one could passively be pulled into a whirlpool of chaotic emotions.

This supposition is conveyed, I believe, by the overwhelming narrative data of the artists when they state that their creativity mainly unfolds in the range of moderate or mild depression up through hypomania. It is probable that it is generally in this range that the affect is not so overwhelming that there can't still be the ability to cognitively process it. There is rarely any art produced in a severe depression because the illness has literally depressed most of the physical, psychic, cognitive and vital systems in the human being. Any piece that may be produced in a manic state would most probably be chaotic with no structure or technique to contain it. Therefore, in neither case would there be an organizing, cohesive effect that comes from the reflection and insight that resides in our cognition.

The theory that a third variable is necessary in order to creatively transform the extreme emotions resulting from a mood episode was also held up by my qualitative findings. This third variable is described by Guestello et al. (2004, p263), as emotional intelligence which is the cognitive ability to “accurately perceive, appraise and express emotion.” Narrative examples would include: Photographer 8 describes his mood episodes as knee jerk, meaning reactionary in

the emotional sense, while his creativity is “more of a cognitive thing.” Painter 7 describes this process clearly

If I’m painting, something might come up for me that’s very upsetting and I might feel very upset, but I keep painting and I keep thinking about what color I’m going to use, and what shape that’s going to symbolize what I’m thinking about and feeling and then, I think I have more of an understanding of it.

She is filtering her affect through her cognition when she considers what color or shape she is going to choose to represent her emotions and this then brings understanding, which is also a function of cognition. She is organizing her emotional experience through this process which can help her make meaning of it. Through the integration of the affective intensity and the cognitive insight she is shoring up her psychic self-structure.

Lee (2007) formulates the same concept as the ability to tolerate this period of ambiguity, make sense of complex experiences and organize divergent elements. A performing artist, participant 14, points out that her acting has organized her disorganized impulses and given her a sense of coherence. Participant 7, a painter, observed that her “mind starts to feel very disorganized” when she begins to fall into a depressive state. She believes that “painting helps me because...it’s like this laser beam of these thoughts”, which illustrates this cohesive sense of clarity that her creative process focuses on her emotions.

In order to describe the “working through” process, i.e. the act of transformation of their emotions into their artwork, artists used verbs such as: to process, to translate, to express, to understand, to channel, to articulate, to acknowledge, to realize, to transform, to figure out, to incorporate, to convey and to turn into. Some even used the exact phrases “problem-solving” and “to work through” with no prompt from me. These words were not in my research questions.

Artists perceived a projecting of their emotional experience onto the artwork or into the performance and out of himself or herself; through which process it transformed from just his or her personal emotions into another entity, a greater whole full of symbolic representation, partially the artist's direct emotional experience and thoughts and partially not.

Self Psychology as a Theoretical Construct for the Artistic Process as “Working Through”

During this second phase of my discussion chapter I have attempted to go beyond the purview of my literature review and extrapolate on the various aspects that may partake of the overarching process of “working through” or “problem solving” that I originally quote from Guastello, et al. (2004), Lee (2007) and Ludwig (1995). This extension of material emerged from my intuitive grasp of specific reported content within my thematic analysis that seemed to be extremely important to the artist's healthful transformative experience of affect, filtered through cognition, within the creative process. I have named these themes in my findings. They are as follows: 1) achieving a sense of mastery and competence; 2) having a need to contribute to the world and to communicate to others; 3) sensing that the art transcends itself, that it partook of something greater such as Beauty or the Human Condition; 4) sensing a separation from self during the process of creating; 5) achieving a sense of timelessness and fluidity during the process, (sometimes called being in the “zone) and 6) creating of symbolic representations of personal emotions and thoughts, within the art itself.

In order to place these themes in some sort of theoretical construct, I needed to look to other material, not previously covered by my literature review. Carl Rotenberg's article *Selfobject Theory and the Artistic Process*, (1988) which is based on Kohut's concept of art as a

selfobject, as defined by self psychology, as well as Winnicott's concept of the cultural experience, (by this he means creativity), based in the "potential space" between what "is me" and what is "not me." Both believed that creativity was a sign psychological growth and therefore of health (1993).

Winnicott

Winnicott states, "The place where cultural experience is located is in the potential space between the individual and the environment (originally the object). The same can be said for playing. Cultural experience begins with creative living first manifested in play (1993)." The individual is the subjective object. In this case, he or she is not delineated by his or her physical boundaries. The individual includes the psychic "me extensions" into the environment and within the potential space, the creativity lies in how the "me extensions" interplay with the "not me" of the object objectively perceived.

The original paradigm for this creative interaction between self and the environment is the infant and the caregiver. At first, the infant experiences the mother as part of himself/herself and not as separate. As the infant develops, he or she comes to a stage where he/she begins in an alternating fashion to perceive the mother as a separate being. During this separation and individuation process, the use of a transitional object is used (a blanket or teddy bear is common), as an intermediate area (1971) between the child and the parent. This object is in part a creation of the child's, a self-soothing way to adapt to both the perceptual and emotional separation from the parent. It is a created illusion in the confusing zone between the "me" and the "not me" which is filled with the projected attributes of the self and the other.

In the case of the artist, I would extrapolate that the “object objectively perceived” or the “other”, is the art itself, onto which the artist is projecting his or her own emotional experiences, perceptions and insights, the autobiographical aspects of the artist, if you will. These are the “me extensions” of the artist. They in turn interplay with the “not me”, which is the enigmatic transcendent aspect which happens in the symbolic transformation into art, where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Just as the transitional object is the intermediate place where a child begins to separate and individuate from his or her parent, so too the art, whether a painting or a performance, has individuated from the artist in that it partakes of the artist and not of the artist, of something beyond the artist’s personal history and emotions.

The individuation process of the art from the artist is taking place during the interplay between the artist and the piece as it forms. I posit that this dialectic is the “working through” process discussed in my literature review. Participant 7, a painter eloquently illustrates this dialectic. As she steps away from the painting after it is complete her final, “oh” is exclaimed in a tone of surprise because the totality of the painting was a surprise to her.

I’m thinking back to one painting that I did where I had these different colored objects. They were laying on top of an area of white and then I would paint some white over them and paint new ones. There was this going back and forth between there being this growth and discovery but also this concealing. I’m healing if I’m putting this thing down. Oh, this is something that’s fully expressed if I’m putting this down “ but then I think “it’s not really like that so much, I don’t feel like that.” So then, I might cover it up a little bit because then that articulates more what I’m feeling. Then I’ll do another one. That’s the painting that I’m thinking about, “E.” Then it’s about finding just the right pitch of these... the space between things being concealed and being revealed. But then, when I’ve finished it and I got it, after working on it for a while, then I looked at it and it was kind of like, “Oh!”

Winnicott believes that the child’s initial use of a transitional object is the “child’s first use of a symbol and the first experience of play” (1993 p.4). He elaborates in a later work that

the symbol of the transitional object shows the child's ability to sustain illusion (1971, p.11).

Therefore the play, like the transitional object, is located in the potential space between child and parent (1971, p41). In the same way that playing is understood as an ability to sustain illusion in this intermediate area, creativity is also defined as the interaction that unfolds in that potential space between person and the world or self and other. Winnicott states that "there is a direct development from transitional phenomena to playing, then from playing to shared playing and from this to cultural experiences" (1971 c. p. 51). By cultural experiences, he is referring to the creative process. Winnicott also describes the "preoccupation" characteristic of children's play which is in keeping with the trancelike state that the artists described where time became irrelevant. Participant 12, an actor, captured these ideas perfectly when she said

And I'm happy. I'm playing. That's what I'm doing. That's what I learned in child development. We become competent through play. Play is when you forget about time and you forget about excellence and you just do. I'm not thinking how good I am when I'm doing the show. I'm just doing it with all my energy. Playing.

Kohut

Self psychology is based in the theoretical concept of the tripartite self, by which an individual's emotional and psychological needs can be met if properly attended to by the caretaker. These part or poles are the idealized parental imago, the grandiose self and twinship. The first gives the child a sense of calm knowing he or she is protected by the omnipotent, wise, all good parent. Through the self object of the caregiver, the child internalizes values, ambitions, ethics and morals. The grandiose self is the healthy narcissism of the child which needs to have his or her strengths, characteristics and talents, reflected back to him or her initially by the caregiver and then by other self objects that could be persons, activities or cultural categories like "art, literature or music" (Berzoff, Flanagan and Hertz, 2002, p. 181) . From this pole flows a

sense of confidence as mastery and competence are positively acknowledged. Kohut developed the idea of the selfobject from Winnicott's concept of the transitional object. Twinship is the need to have commonalities with others. It is through this empathic identification with others that the self is also reflected in a different way perhaps, than the grandiose self is mirrored. In a later developmental stage it is also a way perhaps, to compare what is different from self and other. If these basic needs are met, then the psychological self structure of the child is strengthened, a cohesive self is formed. More than this, "empathic attunements to the needs is not meant merely to fill or soothe; it is meant to stimulate the needed energy for the individual to work and grow in their own way, (Berzoff, 2002, p.190). Therefore, a selfobject is experienced intrapsychically as providing functions that add or maintain a cohesive self (Chessick, 1993) as well as stimulate the person to further growth.

Mastery and competence

The feelings of mastery and competence that the artists spoke to, as a result of pride in their artwork and positive feedback and recognition from others, points to Kohut's concept of art as a self object as this validation is mirroring the artist's healthy sense of narcissism and thus fulfilling the need of the grandiose self pole. It also speaks to Winnicott's connection of creativity to play because it is through play that the child develops a sense of mastery and competence which shores up his or her self-structure.

Communication and contribution

The need for communicating and contributing to others through their art addresses, I believe, the third pole of twinship, in that the artist is connecting to others through an extension of themselves, i.e. his or her art and thus provides a selfobject function. The artist is part of a

greater community of which they are a valuable, contributing member. He or she is seen, understood and even identified with through viewer's resonance with his or her art.

Symbolism

"The study of the symbolic function particularly highlights the ability of art objects, redolent with symbols bearing affective and cognitive significance, to serve as self objects for the self" (Rotenberg, 1988, p. 207). The metaphoric experience lends itself to serve as a self object as it promotes the cohesion of self, as alluded to by several artists when they spoke of the mood illness resulting in chaotic disorganization and the resulting creative process manifesting clarity of thought and organization of mind and spirit. As Milner (1957) stated, "Are we not rather driven by the internal necessity for inner organization, pattern, coherence, the basic need to discover identity and difference without it becoming chaos (p. 182)?"

Separation from self

The sense of there being a separation from one's own self as the artist is working is illustrated by participant 9, a painter when he observed that, "Getting involved in a meditative process, where I can constantly be amazed by the interplay that is happening with only so much input from me. It's like watching clouds form, making the picture that you want them to make by thinking at them really hard." This feeling seems to be analogous to my idea mentioned earlier, based on Winnicott's theory of the transitional object, where the creative process as a time of "working through," is also a separation and individuation of the piece from the artist, while it is being transformed from only being directly informed by the artist's personal emotions, perceptions, instincts and tendencies to becoming something greater than this through symbolic representation and formation. As a separate entity, it partakes of "the me," the projects attributes

of the artist and the “not me” and during the dialectic interchange of the two, the interplay that the painter speaks of in the above quote, this separating process may be reflected in the artist’s feeling of being separate from himself.

A sense of timelessness

One cannot fail to notice that painter nine also speaks of this feeling of being separate from himself as being like a meditation. Of course, while meditating there is also a sense of timelessness and flow, presuming one is practicing correctly. And so there appears to be a connection between these two categories. Again, Winnicott points out that this “preoccupation” is first experienced in play with a transitional object which is the child’s first symbol and so the connections to the creative process continue.

The art transcends itself

As mentioned previously, the transcendence of art transcends itself into something greater is, I believe, a part of that transformational dialect between what Winnicott refers to as “the me” and “not me.” In terms of functioning as a selfobject, the sense the artist has of his or her work transcending himself/herself and partaking of something higher such as Beauty or the Human condition is a spiritual experience. This was captured by painter 13 when he mused, “God isn’t in the heart of me. I am in the heart of God.” As Rotenburg observes, “The process alters the self-experience and enables metamorphosis to higher levels of organization and development,” by providing a symbolic interchange that is incorporated into the organization of self (1988. P. 207). Is this partaking of God or Beauty not fulfilling the idealized parent imago, the universal self-object need; the need to “have someone strong and calm in order to merge with in order to feel safe and complete within oneself” (Berzoff et al.,2002, p185)?

Summary

The goal of this study was to discover a deeper understanding of the complex reciprocal interplay between an artist's diagnosable mood symptoms and his or her creative process through the personal narrative of the artists themselves. How did the artist experience the interplay? What meaning did the artist make of it? I compared and contrasted their narrative with quantitative research and found, for the most part that the qualitative data supported it.

Lee's (2008) attribution of the transient creative benefit of hypomania being as a result of the "increased energy, confidence, enthusiasm and fluency of ideas and the long lasting creative benefits of depression as allowing greater depths of insight, sensitivity and awareness (p. 10)," have both been upheld by many reports of the participant artists. Within the severe extremes of depression and mania creative productivity was either extremely difficult in the case of a severe depression or chaotic and without technique. Often, however, reflections and insight gleaned in these extreme states could later creatively be used when the artist became more stable.

If one is not able to cognitively problem solve or work through the emotional experience via the creative process, then it is possible that one could be passively pulled into a whirlpool of chaotic emotions. The theory that a third variable is necessary in order to creatively transform the extreme emotions resulting from a mood episode was also held up by my qualitative findings. This third variable is described by Guestello et al. (2004, p263), as emotional intelligence which is the cognitive ability to "accurately perceive, appraise and express emotion." Each artist had his or her own vocabulary for describing this transformation of emotion into art, which supported the concept of "working through" of emotion through cognition, as posited by Ludwig (1995).

While conducting a thematic analysis of their narratives I found several unexpected themes that were extremely important to the artist's healthful transformative experience of affect, filtered through cognition, within the creative process. They are as follows: 1) achieving a sense of mastery and competence; 2) having a need to contribute to the world and to communicate to others; 3) sensing that the art transcends itself, that it partook of something greater such as Beauty or the Human Condition; 4) sensing a separation from self during the process of creating; 5) achieving a sense of timelessness and fluidity during the process, (sometimes called being in the "zone) and 6) creating of symbolic representations of personal emotions and thoughts, within the art itself. I then described the healthful ramification of these themes through the lens of Self Psychology, using Winnicott's concept of the transitional space and Kohut's theory of the selfobject function as fulfilling the needs of the tripartite self.

In the case of the artist, I extrapolated that "the other" within the transitional space, is the art itself, onto which the artist is projecting his or her own emotional experiences, perceptions and insights, the autobiographical aspects of the artist, if you will. These are the "me extensions" of the artist. They in turn interplay with the "not me", which is the enigmatic transcendent aspect which happens in the symbolic transformation into art, where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Just as the transitional object is the intermediate place where a child begins to separate and individuate from his or her parent, so too the art, whether a painting or a performance, has individuated from the artist in that it partakes of the artist and not of the artist, of something beyond the artist's personal history and emotions.

Implications for Clinical Practice

There are, perhaps, several implications for clinical practice based on the findings for this study. The theoretical framework of self psychology may be one that is conducive to working with artists because it has such philosophical yet practical implications for working with the self-structure of an artist by using the therapeutic space intersubjective space as an analogy for the transitional space of the artistic process as described by Winnicott and the use of art as a selfobject as outlined by Kohut. The concept that both the mood illness and the creative process can further a beneficial integration of self, (meaning a healthfully adaptive, harmonious integration of emotional, cognitive and physical experience with the core aspects of self), *if* the creative tension sourced by the psychological unease “can be relieved when the individual is at work or in the midst of solving a problem,” (Ludwig, 1995). This ability to reach clarity of feeling through cognition, of course, is perfectly in keeping with the therapeutic process.

The therapist can encourage the artist client to not see his or her extreme mood states of mania and depression as a fallow time by outlining that these psychic worlds can be a source of profound depth and reflection which can be used at a later time when the artist is able to feel more productive and balanced in his/her affect and cognition. The therapist could invite the artist to develop tools to gather these small epiphanies or observations while in these states. For example painter 13 would do small process drawings during his deep depressions and use them later when he felt more on an “even keel.” Other artists would write down their feelings or associations and possibly use them later as a foundation to build upon. Even just noting images, color or texture while in a severely depressed state could be enough to inspire the artist at a more productive time. These tools could give the artist a feeling of agency and mastery over these

chaotic emotional otherwise unproductive periods and therefore help them negotiate and manage them. These small acts may afford hope in an otherwise hopeless time.

The beneficial use of structure to many of the artists may prove useful as a guide to artist clients who are feeling unproductive and may provide a necessary impetus to create. The therapist can recognize the use of symbols in the artist's internal world and develop the use of a more metaphorical language when working with a creative client. Naming the artistic client's moods also as sources of light and strength and validating him or her through a specific and sincere appreciation of his or her work would be valuable. To this end, the therapist can suggest that the artist use and bring in his or her work, for example poetry, monologue, painting or song into the session as a way of working through material. The therapist does not need to be an artist or, if he/she is, the therapist does not need to work in the same medium to do this. It is a matter of developing the skill to speak about the artistic process and work in dialectic with the artist.

As an intern therapist and a former classically trained actor, I invited several of my artistic clients to work through, for example relational issues that we had been verbally exploring through their artistic medium. One particular client, a painter, recently had a meaningful relationship end and was sliding into a depression when he came into see me. Eventually, he painted a series of ten small and one large paintings to creatively work through his unresolved feelings about the loss. He then brought them in and we spent several sessions having a very rich dialogue exploring their meaning. It appeared to me that in the beginning of the series, his emotions were raw and violent in their intensity. The middle paintings of the series were romantic and nostalgic for what had been with the female figure the object of admiration and idealization. Finally, he was alone, with his future before him with integration of color

representing the integration of his ambivalent feelings. Somehow, the solitary figure reached a point of calm and had come to terms with the complexity of his feelings. The entire process appeared to help ameliorate his mood and his grief.

Future Research

Although my findings may support the previous research and add information to social work through a deeper understanding of the creative process, there were some limitations in the study. As mentioned in the methodology section, this sample was at fifteen participants, fairly small. A future study might have a larger sample, in the order of forty artists, perhaps half of them could be solitary in their artistic process and half performance oriented so that this area of potential difference could be addressed. Every effort should be made to recruit and enroll a racially diverse group of artists in order to make the finding more generalizable. It might be advantageous at that time to use grounded theory as the method of qualitative data analysis..

I hope that by sharing the personal narratives of the artists, this study has contributed a further understanding to the complex interplay between the mood symptoms and creative process of artists who experience bipolar disorder and depression, and therefore will help improve the quality of the lives of these artists who so enrich our own self-understanding as human beings in society.

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Appendix A

Human Subjects Committee Approval Letter



Smith College
 Northampton, Massachusetts 01063
 T (413) 585-7950
 F (413) 585-7994

February 7, 2011

Daphne Nayar

Dear Daphne,

Your revised materials have been reviewed and for the most part they are fine. We do have some questions about the extent of your personal questions about them before they have signed an Informed Consent. They also go farther than what you state are the requirements for participation in Characteristics in your Application. There you say they have to have been diagnosed as Bi-Polar or Depressive. In your phone script for screening, you ask them to specify the diagnosis. You can ask that after the Consent is signed when you get more background information but you don't need it here for screening. Also, you ask if they are feeling emotionally stable right now. That is all you need. You then ask if they are depressed or manic right now. Please delete that question. If they say they are feeling stable, that is enough.

We will go ahead and give final approval to your study at this time with the understanding that you will delete those two questions from the phone script and send Laurie Wyman a copy of the corrected script for your permanent file.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Maintaining Data: You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

I am glad that you found our suggestions about recruitment helpful and wish you good luck with your very interesting study.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads 'Ann Hartman / Shw'.

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.
 Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Jean LaTerz, Research Advisor

Appendix B

The Recruiting Advertisement for Study

Are you a professional artist, writer or performer over the



k0421397 www.fotosearch.com



cwe4244 www.fotosearch.com

age of 17?

Have you been diagnosed with either Bipolar Disorder or Depression?

If so, you could be eligible to participate in a research study looking at the interplay between your mood symptoms and your artistic process. In a one-hour interview, I would ask you questions regarding your understanding of how your mood symptoms interact with your art-making and the meaning that you place on this relationship. The research study may help mental health professionals to understand, on a deeper level, the complex nature of various mood relations to different elements of the artistic process as *healthful* adaptations that bring the creative individual a deeper understanding of him/herself.

Its only an hour of your time!

Please call Daphne Nayar at xxx xxx-xxxx or e-mail: ----- if you are interested in participating.

Appendix C
Recruiting E-mail

Hello,

My name is Daphne Nayar and I am a graduate student at Smith College School for Social Work. I am conducting a research study looking at the interplay between mood symptoms and the artistic process and am looking for any adult professional fine artist, writer or performer who has been diagnosed with Bipolar disorder or Depression to take part in a one-hour interview.

As a former professional actor who self-identified as an artist for many years and who has at times experienced the more pale shades of melancholia, I have been fascinated with the reciprocal influence that heightened emotional states seem to have on the creative process. The potential connection between mood disorders and highly creative people has been contemplated since the time of Aristotle, who wondered why eminent artists tend to have melancholic dispositions, (Aristotle, trans. 1953). In the *Phaedrus*, Plato referred to the true artist as one possessed by a divine madness, which is inspired by the muses, (Plato, trans. 1964).

My interest lies in exploring how mood disorders affect individual artists and their artistic process and conversely, how actively participating in their artistic process affects their mood symptoms.

Can you help me find artists to participate? I have enclosed a leaflet advertising my study and would be eternally grateful if you would send it out to your artistic list serve.

Sincerely,

Daphne Nayar

e-mail

telephone number

Appendix D
Screening Phone Script

Hi, am I speaking with (name of caller)? My name is Daphne Nayar and I am a graduate student at Smith College School for Social Work. I'm calling because you answered a notice for a research study that I'm doing with artists who have been diagnosed with either Bipolar Disorder or Depression. Do you have a few minutes to hear more about the study? (If yes...) In this study I would like to explore how mood disorders affect artists and their artistic process and then, how actively participating in their artistic process affects their mood states and symptoms. Through your own words, I would like to understand on a deeper level how you experience and understand the interplay between your mood symptoms and the process of creating your art. I will then write my understanding of any major themes that emerge throughout the interviews, into a Master's thesis to submit it to Smith's graduate MSW program.

I would like to ask you a few questions to see if you would be eligible to participate in the study. Is that alright? (If yes...)

Are you over the age of 18 years?

Yes _____ No _____

Are you a professional artist? What type of artist are you?

Either in the fine arts (painter, sculptor, illustrator, visual artist), or a composer, or a director, or a performing artist (actor, dancer, musician) or a writer (fiction writer, playwright, screenwriter or poet)?

Yes _____ No _____ Type of Discipline _____

Have you worked in your artistic discipline or disciplines for over 5 years?

Yes _____ No _____

Have you been diagnosed by a professional mental health worker, counselor, psychologist or psychiatrist, with Bipolar Disorder or Depression ?

Yes _____ No _____

Are you feeling emotionally stable right now?

Yes _____ No _____

As a participant in this research, I will ask you to answer several questions in the form of a semi-structured interview which we can either conduct on the phone or in person. I would prefer to meet you in person if at all possible. Would you prefer to hold the interview in person or over the phone? _____

The entire interview should take between 45 and 60 minutes. It will be audiotaped in order not to lose any valuable information. If we hold the interview in person I would reimburse you ten dollars for gasoline or public transportation. Participation in this study is completely voluntary.

(If the person is eligible) Would you like to participate? Yes _____ No _____

(If the person is not eligible) I'm so sorry but you are not eligible for the study because you do not fit all of the criteria. (Name which criteria is missing, if they would like to know). But thank-you very much for calling. I appreciate your interest.

(If the person is eligible and states that he/she would like to participate.) That's great. I will send you a copy of the consent form to read and to sign. After reading the consent form, if you have any questions please feel free to call me at xxx xxx-xxxx.

(Choose one of the following paragraphs):

Since we are going to do the interview over the phone you can send me the signed copy of the consent form in the self-addressed and stamped envelope that I will provide for you and you can keep a copy for yourself. Why don't we schedule the interview in one week so that the consent form will be returned before we have the interview. Legally, I won't be able to interview you if I do not have the signed consent form so please send it back right away, ok? Could you please give me your address so that I can send the consent form to you?

OR:

Since we are going to do the interview in person, why don't I e-mail the consent form to you so you can have a chance to read it before you arrive. You can ask me any other questions then. Afterwards, you can sign two copies with me and keep one for your records. Let's schedule a time and place to meet.

Appendix E

Informed Consent Form

Dear Participant,

My name is Daphne Nayar and I am a graduate student at Smith College School for Social Work, in Northampton, MA. In this study I would like to explore how mood disorders affect artists and their artistic process and then, how actively participating in their artistic process affects their mood states and symptoms. Through your own words, I would like to understand on a deeper level how you experience and understand the interplay between your mood symptoms and the process of creating your art. So, I am asking you, as a working artist who has been diagnosed with either bipolar disorder or depression to tell me your experience of how these interact. I will then write my understanding of any major themes that emerge throughout the interviews, into a Master's thesis to submit it to Smith's graduate MSW program. These results may be used for presentation or publication.

In order to participate you must be: over the age of 18 years; a professional artist (fine arts, composer, director, performing artist or writer) having worked in your discipline for more than five years; have a diagnosis of either Bipolar Disorder (Type I, II or Not otherwise Specified) or Depression (Major Depressive Disorder or Dysthymia) given by a mental health professional, feel emotionally stable and not currently depressed, manic or hypomanic.

As a participant in this research, I will ask you to answer several questions regarding your understanding of how your mood symptoms interact with your art-making and the meaning that you place on this relationship. These questions will be in the form of a semi-structured interview which we can either conduct on the phone or in person depending on your preference, your comfort level and your convenience. I will also ask you several specific demographic and background questions. The entire interview should take between 45 and 60 minutes and will be audiotaped.

It is possible that you may experience some emotional discomfort or stress during the interview, because we are discussing previous mood episodes that you have had. If you do feel upset or stressed during the interview, please tell me if you need either to take a break or stop the interview and I will respect your wishes. If at any time during the interview you feel

uncomfortable in answering a question you may refuse to answer. Attached to the consent form is a list of mental health and crisis referral resources should you need them.

There may be several benefits of the findings of this study. This exploration could have possible implications for the mental health treatment of creative individuals, as well as for creative mental health interventions such as art, drama or art therapy. They may address issues of culture, meaning making and identity of the artistic persons who contribute to the collective unconscious of our society. It may also help mental health professionals to understand on a deeper level the complex nature of various mood relations to different elements of the artistic process as healthful adaptations that bring the creative individual a deeper understanding of herself. Also, you may find it therapeutic to share this experience of the interplay between your mood symptoms and your artistic process and by reflecting upon it may bring personal insight. If we hold the interview in person I will reimburse 10 dollars to pay for gasoline or public transportation.

Every reasonable precaution will be used to maintain confidentiality during the course of this research. I will, however, show the interview to my thesis advisor in order to obtain guidance in the organization and integration of the information provided. No names will be shown during these meetings. I will use a code number instead of your name. Should, I need a professional transcriber, he/she will sign a confidentiality pledge beforehand.

In any future publications or presentations, the data will be presented as a whole and if a brief illustrative quote or story will be used, it will be carefully disguised so as not to include any personally identifiable information. Your name will never appear on the thesis, on a potential publication or in any presentation of the thesis material. All data (notes, tapes, transcripts, questionnaires, etc.) will be kept in a secure location for a period of three years as required by federal guidelines and data stored electronically will be password protected. If for any reason I should need the materials beyond the three year period, they will continue to be kept in a secure location and will be destroyed when no longer needed.

Participation in the study is voluntary and you may withdraw from the study, by contacting me and telling me that you would like to withdraw, at any time up until April 1, 2011 at which time the thesis will be at the writing stage and it will be too late to withdraw. If you choose to withdraw prior to this date then all materials pertaining to you will be destroyed immediately.

Please contact Daphne Nayar at xxx xxx xxxx if you have any questions or would like to withdraw from the study. If you have any concerns about your rights or about any aspect of the study, you are encouraged to call me - Daphne Nayar (xxx xxx xxxx) or the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee at (413) 585-7974.

Thank-you very much for your participation. Please keep a signed copy of this consent form for your records.

YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Signature _____ **Date:** _____

Daphne Nayar _____ **Date:** _____

Appendix F

Research Interview Questions

Demographic information:

Male or Female:

Age:

Race:

Ethnicity:

Artistic discipline:

Years spent as a professional full time or part-time artist:

Have you been diagnosed with depression or bipolar disorder? Which one?

Time of personally determined onset of either Depression or Bipolar Disorder:

Approximate dates of last mood episode and type of last personally identified strong mood state (depressive, manic or hypomanic):

Do you currently feel depressed, manic or hypomanic?

Do you feel emotionally strong enough to answer the following questions?

Research Questions:

1. Can you describe your creative process to me?
2. Do you experience or perceive any interplay between your mood symptoms and your creative process?
3. a. If you do, how do you experience the connection? b. How does one affect the other? Please describe the effect in as much detail as possible. If you are bipolar, could you please describe the connection separately in terms of your depressive phases, your hypomanic phases and your manic phases.
4. Do you notice if you are more or less creative as your symptoms become more mild or more severe? Please describe in as much detail as possible.
5. Do your mood symptoms creatively inspire you or do they inhibit your creativity?
6. A. Does your creative process heal or intensify your more extreme emotions in the moment? b. Can you describe how that may happen?
7. a. How about over time? b. Does your creative process affect your mood episode over time? c. How so?
8. What meaning do your intense emotions have for you in terms of your creativity?
9. Are the more intense emotions of your mood episodes necessary for you to create? Please explain.
10. a. Do you recognize a similarity between any psychological unease that occurs at the beginning of a mood state and a creative tension? b. If so, what follows from there, both in your mood and in your sense of creative tension?