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How Do Expressive-Creative Arts in Focusing Promote Experiencing Ubuntu and Relational Empathy? A Review of the Tübingen FOUR Project

This paper reviews how Expressive-Creative Arts in Focusing (ECAF) promote mutual support within a Community Wellness Focusing group, enabling participants to experience the Pan-African concept of Ubuntu and the Western paradigm of relational empathy first-hand. Based on the Tübingen FOUR Project (Focusing-Oriented Ubuntu Repair) and years of experience of working with the Ubuntu concept in Focusing contexts, the paper examines how ECAF can encourage a sense of connectedness within a group.

1. Ubuntu-Based Community Building – The FOUR Project

I 2008, while teaching Focusing to a group of professionals, I had a dream that reflected my understanding of Focusing at that time. The dream was very short, with no imaginative imagery except for open space, such as the sky. A voice said, 'Focusing is ecumenism.'

I used Self-Focusing to explore the meaning of 'ecumenism'. Ultimately, I understood it to mean 'bringing together groups or people with highly differentiated beliefs to share a sacred space'.

The result of that was reading the books 'God Is Not a Christian: And Other Provocations' and 'Made for Goodness: And Why This Makes All the Difference' by Desmond Tutu. I also undertook an in-depth study of the Pan-African concept of Ubuntu under the mentorship of Prof. Dr. Workineh Kelbessa, Addis Ababa University in Ethiopia. These studies culminated in workshops on Ubuntu at the 2013

International TIFI Focusing Conference in Switzerland and the 2014 European Focusing Association's Focusing Fair in Germany.

At the 2016 International TIFI Focusing Conference in the UK, I presented a poster session on the Ubuntu-Focusing project, titled 'FOUR' (Focusing-Oriented Ubuntu Repair), that I had run for two years in Tübingen, Germany

The FOUR project meetings were free and held monthly in the first year and quarterly in the second. The meetings were open to everyone, regardless of their Focusing experience. Each meeting lasted three hours and was held in person. The FOUR workshop concept was based on Focusing and Felt Sense-based arts engagement. Participants were encouraged to explore what community and interconnectedness meant to them and to express their Felt Sense through visual art, writing, movement, or sound depending on their preferred modality.

These FOUR workshops were special because the concept of Ubuntu was integrated into group interactions. Participants identified the person in the greatest emotional need during the meeting based on their sense of interconnectedness. They addressed their Felt Sense with the question of whether it was okay to give their painting, poem or write-up to the person who needed it most. Group members gave their personal contributions as gifts to the person they had chosen. Sometimes, most of the group members gave their gift to the same person. At other times, more than one person had the greatest Felt Sense need. This part of the workshop was done in silence

I would like to mention that creating art from the Felt Sense is a highly personal and intimate process. The final artwork—whether a painting, poem, or phrase stemming from movement and sound—reveals something about the creator that is difficult to share in words. The symbolic character of the artwork contains enormous depth, as well as the essence of the artist's own processing toward becoming. For this reason, giving away a piece of art to someone else is difficult. This is not what normally happens in groups, whether they are art therapy groups or Focusing-oriented workshops that use visual symbolization for the Felt Sense.

For everyone in the FOUR groups, the most intense feeling was that those who gave away their artwork as a gift felt enriched, more connected, and more at peace with themselves and the group after performing this act of Ubuntu which in Western terms, is about living in accordance with the paradigm of Relational Empathy (Maureen O'Hara).

The next part of the FOUR group process was a verbal sharing activity during which participants could reflect on and speak about their inner processes. They took their lived experience of expressing Ubuntu/Relational Empathy into conscious reflection. To further explore Ubuntu-informed Relational Empathy, participants were encouraged to challenge themselves by practicing it in their daily lives during the meetings.

After two years, I closed the FOUR project because the participants had become too comfortable with the free workshops. While they enjoyed the cozy atmosphere of the Ubuntu group, they did not find the time or energy to incorporate the Ubuntu spirit into their daily routines. This became evident when we reflected on the participants' experiences with the Ubuntu prompts for daily life. Reflecting on these prompts was part of the opening at each meeting.

I began reflecting on what had prevented the project from building the kind of community I wanted. When I started the project, I planned to build a strong community in my area that would encourage people to take the risk of detaching from an ego-centric worldview. However, I helped build a community that resembled the community life in my area. The regional community life was conservative rather than experimental. It was characterized by sticking together and enjoying repetitive rituals with only like-minded people. Newcomers who were not born in the region were usually excluded. As my mentor Workineh Kelbessa said, the community was driven by tribalism. Focusing workshops inspired by Ubuntu and using the arts were not powerful enough to alter the influence of these cultural norms or encourage people to act in ways that embodied the Ubuntu spirit outside of their reference groups.

I also reflected on my role as a facilitator. Guiding a group through the different phases of a workshop clearly caused participants to become consumers, even though the program was part of a Focusing-oriented, transformative approach to adult learning. However, the longer the project, the more emotional consumerism seemed to occur. What could I have done differently?

Although I saw myself as someone in service to others, I realized that my intention to bring Ubuntu into the daily lives of my group participants was an attempt to impose my worldview on them. Despite the group participants' deep emotional connection to the Ubuntu spirit during FOUR meetings, I had not fully embodied the true nature of Ubuntu in my professional role as a facilitator.

Years later, I realized that I could have participated in the Ubuntu meetings' artistic activities as part of a co-creative group of equals rather than taking on the roles of group leader and facilitator. This approach would have prevented me from acting as an expert who assigns "Ubuntu homework" between group meetings. At the time FOUR was running, I identified with my professional background as a clinical psychologist and psychotherapist, a role that demanded abstinence from participatory group activities.

But on other occasions when I was a facilitator, I participated artistically during group sessions, as I did when I ran open online art studios during the pandemic. Group members were given space to interact with their pictures implicitly and beyond the scope of any Focusing didactics. In this way, their art could serve as their most effective inner guide. Their art became a source of creative self-mentoring, even in everyday life.

Participating as an artist while facilitating a co-creative group process at the same time is challenging. Perhaps during FOUR, I lacked the courage to create art while holding the space. However, knowing when to offer a Focusing invitation that reveals the artistic process of the participants while staying connected with my own inner artist is exactly what the art of Relational Empathy suggests. It's about pendulating between the needs of the group and the needs of the individual depending on the

situation. This requires giving up the advantages of an ego-centered worldview, such as sticking to the role of a group leader, and committing to being an equal among equals throughout the process, which is a social-centered activity. In retrospect, I realized that I had asked my participants to do something I had not done myself: incorporate Ubuntu into my understanding of social identity. A more co-creative approach to group facilitation would have proven that.

Today, I would change the way I facilitate the art-making portion of a FOUR workshop. After taking a fresh look at the FOUR project, I have decided that the best way to create a natural flow of interconnectedness and a strong Ubuntu spirit that can spread is to have a high level of trust in the healing and self-actualizing power of Felt Sense-Based arts. This implies offering fewer Focusing-oriented art invitations during the process. Participants only need to be invited to pause during the process, reconnect with their Felt Sense, and sense the unknown evolving beyond what their art reveals. This style of facilitation, dedicated to studio art, has proven highly effective during the monthly online FOCUSZART studio sessions that I have run for the past five years.

In evaluating my new perspective on Ubuntu-based community building through Expressive-Creative Arts in Focusing (ECAF), I would like to offer the following provocative statement: 'It's all about engaging in less Focusing and more Felt Sense-based arts.'

2. Creative Compassion for Peacebuilding (CCP)

The FOUR project resulted in the design of a new program: the self-paced Creative Compassion for Peacebuilding (CCP) practice, which I set up during the pandemic. I created online materials for self-exploration on Relational Empathy through Focusing-informed, receptive-active arts engagement. Participants had the option of reaching out to me for group or individual support.

CCP became one of the Expressive-Creative Arts in Focusing (ECAAF) programs, which promote positive growth, healing, and creative living. Since 2023, CCP workshops have been offered online and at various conferences. One such workshop was held at the Focusing Oriented Therapy Conference TIFI in November 2023.

We invite you to visit my website for to check out the [Creative Compassion for Peacebuilding \(CCP\)](#) self-paced program. Participants testimonials describe their experiences with CCP as: 'It is a lesson to welcome it all and be with it all'. It makes you get 'in touch with the bigger aspect of life' and 'it becomes an inner ressource'.

3. Appendix

FOUR Project Questions That Help Coming to Community and Building Relational mpathy:

How would you like to join in and participate?

What does it need for you to feel connected here?

What makes you participate at your best?

What do you miss here that could help balance things out?

What does your body know is missing for the whole?

What's missing here to make it complete?

What does the whole need to be contributed?

What makes a difference to fulfillment for all of us?

How does your body feel our WE-ness?