



Motivation to be an Artist: Insights relevant to mental health

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Despite the challenges associated with sustaining a career as an artist, enrolments in tertiary arts programs remain strong. The research question which underpinned this study was the extent to which artists' motivations reflect mental health issues and whether there are implications for higher education providers. Interviews were held with twelve undergraduate artists as well as twelve artists practicing in industry, to explore what motivates them to pursue or continue a career as an artist. The interviews revealed a range of issues relevant to mental health, including what drives individuals to be an artist, what sustains their interest despite considerable challenges, and the potential for artists to be affected by or at risk of mental health conditions. The findings propose implications for higher education providers of degrees in the arts, in terms of the policies and procedures that are put in place to support both staff and students.

Biography

Professor Ryan Daniel is a senior researcher in creative arts and creative industries at James Cook University, Australia. His research is published in *Studies in Higher Education*, *Creative Industries*, *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, *Music Education Research* and the *British Journal of Music Education*.

Introduction

The discourse in relation to what motivates artists is centuries old, dating back to Plato and his reference to the presence of “divine madness” in poets (Schlesinger, 2009, p. 62). While for several centuries artists were often employed as servants or apprentices, this began to change during the age of enlightenment. Lofty ideals associated with being an artist arguably reached a peak in the 19th century, where the individual poet, painter or sculptor was revered and seen as an elite member of society, having an almost halo effect. Alongside this theme was the notion that artists who achieved altered mental states were best placed to release their innermost creativity, to the extent that unless they were able to reach an altered state, their true creativity might not be achieved (Bain, 2005). This is articulated by Friend (2005, p. 160) who presents the following view:

Artists are a race apart, it seems to me. Their urge to communicate their perceptions of the visible world (whether seen by outer or inner eye) is over-whelming: almost violent, almost a disease, a madness. Most of the artists I know spend their lives in lonely rooms obsessed by one theme in their work for years at a time.

Over time, what emerged was the stereotyping of the artist as one who exists on the fringes, is drawn to creativity as a result of mental illness, or is on the verge of madness (Cropley, Cropley, Kaufman, & Runco, 2010; Elias & Berg-Cross, 2009; Schlesinger, 2009). This stigma arguably continues today and which is to some extent justified given the frequency of artists demonstrating mental health conditions, in particular bipolar disorder (Taylor, 2017). Schlesinger (2009, p. 71) goes as far as arguing that “the ‘mad genius’ idea is embedded so deeply in our collective imagination that it hardly matters whether it stands on science or not”.

There are additional stereotypes of artists beyond those inclusive of altered states of being. According to Elias & Berg-Cross (2009), artists can be labelled as destitute or at least poor, as most do not pursue a commercial career and instead opt for inner reward and satisfaction. These stereotypes continue today, with a wide body of research documenting the precariousness of artists’ careers (Abbing, 2004; Boyle & Joham, 2013; Morgan, Wood, & Nelligan, 2013; Yagoubi & Tremblay, 2016). Few constraints to workforce entry exist with a steady stream of new individuals including amateurs placing significant pressure on artists to find and sustain employment (Morgan et al., 2013; Yagoubi & Tremblay, 2016). Abbing (2004, p. 11) for example

describes how most artists “are poor. They hardly sell [work], have lousy second jobs, and yet they carry on”. Despite this, “never has [a career as an artist] been so widely aspired to” (Morgan et al., 2013, p. 398). This is also regardless of the fact that recent literature continues to refer to job prospects in the arts as bleak (Pepper, 2017).

In terms of what motivates an individual to choose to become an artist, it is often discussed that the “intrinsic motivation to create art is powerful in these individuals” (Boyle & Joham, 2013, p. 157). Melchionne (2007, p. 142) refers to how many artists explain their devotion to art due to “a desire to express themselves or develop their gifts”. Elias and Berg-Cross (2009) explored the motivations of a sample of 75 painters. They were able to identify three motivational constructs: the *visionary* artist model which involves those driven to artistic expression in order to deal with their mental suffering; the *self-actualized* artist model which posits that those who engage in art-making will be more healthy and happy; and the *commodity* model which underpins the motivations of those seeking commercial return from their work.

There is some research into the broad field of tertiary arts education. According to Bathmaker et al. (2016) however, there is limited specific research regarding what motivates artists to study at the higher education level, although there is acknowledgement that higher education is, in general, seen as a way for young people to transition into adulthood. In addition, higher education allows an individual to engage in a period of upskilling and to achieve a qualification to boost positionality in industry (Marginson, 2016). While an attraction of higher education is the opportunity to attain a tertiary qualification, the arts sector is driven more by reputation, networks and key gatekeepers (e.g. Directors, Curators, Producers), with these gatekeepers in a considerable position of vertical power and influence (Daniel & Johnstone, 2017). Despite this, the global arts sector in higher education continues to expand (Daniel & Johnstone, 2017).

Motivations driving higher education enrolments in the arts

Motivation theory is a well-established area of scholarship and research, in such areas as organisational psychology, employment, weight loss, smoking cessation, sport participation and social networking. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is also a well-researched theoretical field that was first introduced by Deci and Ryan (1975) (Benabou & Tirole, 2003; Legault, 2016). For example, in relation to school settings, Covington and Müeller (2001, p. 163) describe intrinsic

motivation as “a tendency to engage in activities for their own sake, just for the pleasure derived in performing them” with extrinsic motivation the act of performing the action for reward e.g. praise, grades, gold stars. They also discuss ‘need achievement’ as an important element of motivation theory, describing how “human achievement is a result of an emotional conflict between striving for success and the fear of failure” (Covington & Müeller, 2001, p. 165).

More recently, Reiss (2012) discusses two forms of motivation theory: dualism (intrinsic and extrinsic) and multifaceted theory. Multifaceted theory is described as involving a “number of genetically distinct motives, such as hunger, curiosity, positive self-regard, fear, sex, power, and so on” (Reiss, 2012, p. 152). Reiss (2012, p. 152) challenges the notion of a clear distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, claiming that “motives cannot be divided into just two categories”. He argues that multifaceted theory is much more relevant to understanding motivation, stating that “universal human motives are multifaceted (genetically diverse)” (Reiss, 2012, p. 155). The work of Reiss (2012) could seem to be relevant to artists, given the latter are required to manage multiple internal and external influences and motivators.

While motivation to learn in an academic context is a well-developed field (Prowse & Delbridge, 2013; Skatova & Ferguson, 2014), there is a relatively limited body of research that explores the motivations driving new entrants to higher education arts programs (Elias & Berg-Cross, 2009). In a recent study, Daniel and Johnstone (2017) surveyed 120 undergraduate students from five disciplines (photography, theatre, music, visual arts, design) and at first, second and third year levels. They discovered that the primary motivation for students to enrol in higher education was to engage with and explore their creativity. Applying an exploratory factor analysis, they also identified self (yearning, meaning, expression) and audience (kudos, wealth, celebrity) as two key motivational factors. The authors also recommended further research including interviews to explore various areas in more depth.

Gibney, Moore, Murphy, and O'Sullivan (2011) align with the dualism theory of motivation and refer to study at the tertiary level as either influenced by self (intrinsic) or outside influences (extrinsic). In their research, they surveyed 1227 students from a range of disciplines (e.g. business, arts, engineering) at the largest tertiary institution in Ireland, the University College Dublin. They identified the primary motivation for students attending university was to “enhance their employment prospects, closely followed by a desire to explore subjects that really interest them,

demonstrating the relevance of both extrinsic and intrinsic motivating factors” (Gibney et al., 2011, p. 338). The authors also found that students enrolled in professional programs were more strongly influenced by external factors (most notably parents), yet they also were less likely to be enjoying their experience at University.

Lehmann (2009) investigated the reasons why working-class students attended university in Canada. In their study they interviewed 75 first year students with a working-class background at a large research-intensive university. They identified three key motivations for attending higher education: weak labour market conditions, discourse around the benefits of higher education, and parental influence. For many of these students, a University education was a way out of the hardship that their parents had experienced. In addition, the students acknowledged the need for a qualification to be competitive in the employment market.

Skatova and Ferguson (2014, p. 1) identified that people are motivated to enrol in higher education for four reasons: “career concerns (Career), intrinsic interest in the subject (Interest), an opportunity to help others (Helping) and because they are looking for an easy option to get into higher education (Loafing)”. Involving 989 undergraduates from two large universities in the United Kingdom, the authors identified the “choice of arts and humanities degrees was driven by interest and low concern about future career, accompanied with high loafing” (Skatova & Ferguson, 2014, p. 1). One of their concluding statements has potential implications for higher education providers:

... the fact that arts and humanities students report significantly higher levels of loafing than other students can be used as a trigger for respective departments to focus more on societal impact of the future careers in arts and humanities. This can contribute to the quality of students’ education making their future work endeavors more relevant to societal needs (Skatova & Ferguson, 2014, p. 14).

In general, there is a substantial body of research in relation to motivation in various settings, however far less so in terms of artists in general and why they are motivated to study at the higher education level in particular. This creates a knowledge gap and hence justification for this research, underpinned by the following research question: to what extent do artists’ motivations reflect mental health issues and are there implications for higher education providers?



Exploring artists' motivations

This study set out to explore in depth key motivating factors relevant to artists and the extent to which they have implications for or reflect mental health issues. Applying an interpretive and constructivist framework (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), questions were designed to require participants to reflect on what motivates them to be an artist and/or sustain a career in the arts industry (e.g. What motivates you to undertake art-making today?). A sample of undergraduate artists as well as artists working in industry were sought for interview. Interviews with these two groups would enable the researcher to identify if there were any significant differences in the views of undergraduates compared to those with considerable life and/or industry experience.

Once ethical approval was obtained to conduct the research, undergraduate artists at the researcher's institution were emailed in order to ascertain their willingness to participate in the research; the institution is a medium size regional university in Australia. Twelve indicated that they would do so and these individuals were sent the interview questions and appropriate ethics paperwork, with a time for interview arranged shortly after. The sample included seven females, with two of these mature aged students. Of the five males, two were mature aged. Broad fields of practice included photography, design, illustration, visual arts, creative writing and theatre although some individuals worked across several fields and which is discussed further below. Using the institution's alumni network, a call for graduates to participate was also sent via email. A total of twelve alumni responded (nine female and three male) and agreed to participate in the research. Fields of practice included design, photography, film, visual arts, craft, new media however like the undergraduates, several worked across more than one area. This group resided in a range of regional locations and capital cities on the east coast of Australia.

Interviews with each of the 24 participants typically lasted 30 minutes and were held in person, over the phone or via skype and were audio recorded. Once all interviews were transcribed, instead of sending the transcripts to participants, the recordings were transcribed and checked for accuracy by the researcher and a research assistant. The interviews were then analysed inductively (Creswell, 2013) and in two cohorts; undergraduate students and those in industry. Once each group was examined inductively, the next step involved an abductive approach (Walton, 2014) of going back and forth between the transcripts of the two groups to see if there were any major commonalities and/or differences. While there was a range of ages across the sample of 24, age did not have a

major influence on the main themes to emerge. In general, there were more similarities than differences across the two groups hence the data are presented as one cohort below.

Key Findings

Becoming an artist

In relation to what motivates this group to study or work as an artist, five themes emerged. These themes, with two example quotes to illustrate them, are presented below in Table 1. The first column also includes the number of times each particular theme was referred to by participants.

Table 1. Key factors that motivate artists

Key theme	Example quotes
Inner drive (9)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I couldn't imagine life without it (graduate visual artist) • I felt compelled to do creative things (photography student)
Therapeutic benefits (4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relaxing and therapeutic (graduate visual artist) • [I can] express feelings through art (design student)
Understanding of self (4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It helps me to understand the world around me (graduate visual artist) • Being an artist means I am being myself and doing something that I love (graduate designer)
Intrinsic reward (3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [The arts] lift our spirits, comfort, take us to imaginary places, help us dream and give us hope (visual art student) • [Artists are] a weird bunch with a delightful mix of arrogance (strength) and fragility (innocence) that's almost intoxicating to spend time with (graduate creative writer)
External recognition (2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The most gratifying is having my work around, just randomly seeing people's reactions to it (graduate designer) • Faith that when I'm doing something and uploading it online, someone sees it and might find something they appreciate (graduate visual artist)

Table 1 highlights key reasons why artists pursue art-making, with inner drive being the most frequently cited reason. Overall, it is personal factors that are most prominent, including the therapeutic benefits that some artists gain from engaging with creativity. The findings also suggest

an overarching theme of *reward*, be this intrinsic or extrinsic. Being an artist clearly brings significant personal reward, both through the making of art and through recognition by others. While it was not explicitly explored in the interviews, the data could also suggest that negative reviews or feedback may be as equally possible as positive recognition. This therefore has the potential to be a factor relevant to the mental health of artists.

Artists and mental health

In discussing motivation, some of the interviewees presented responses that explicitly reflect mental health and wellness. The following statements were presented in relation to motivation and which reflect mental health:

- Self-development, plus it was an attempt to improve my very low self-esteem. I was scared that if I didn't do something to combat it, I would become housebound (graduate visual artist)
- I was deeply misguided and in conflict with my personal identity. I was recovering from several traumatising and conflict-ridden points in my life, one after the other, and I needed direction (graduate visual artist)
- [It was] definitely cerebral (graduate creative writer)
- It's a way to relax, explore and keep my sanity (graduate designer)
- I listen to music to calm my anxiety or stress that I may be feeling [from] the time pressure (design student)
- I am miserable if time goes by and I cannot paint or draw (graduate visual artist)

Two interviewees also voluntarily presented comments that further reflect mental health issues:

- There are artists who cannot manage the reality of everyday life well due to medical conditions (graduate visual artist)
- I believe that a lot of artists may suffer from substance abuse to cope with anxieties relevant to the job. There does seem to be a need for further support to prevent mental illness, particularly for creative individuals (design student)

Pressures associated with being an artist were also presented by several interviewees:

- ... there is a lot of rejection, a lot of “no” (graduate photographer)
- ... industry can be very deadline driven and stressful (graduate designer)

- ... in the first few years of university, no matter how much I tried no one really liked my work (design student)
- ... if I have a solid few weeks where I can't seem to do anything I am happy with, then it's really crushing (design student)
- Artwork always stresses you out (photo student)
- The perception of the boheme is still colouring community attitudes (graduate writer)
- I think that the Australian general public thinks that [artists] are all dole bludgers and they are all on the fringes and they don't belong in the main stream society, they are always being drunk or high (design student)
- I think we in Australia are less respected than in other countries (photography student)

Discussion

While a small sample of interviewees, and from one country only, there are several key findings from this study that contribute to an understanding of the factors that motivate artists. In general, intrinsic factors are strong (drive, understanding of self, reward). External recognition is also valued as a motivator through positive feedback and recognition in particular. These findings reflect those of Daniel and Johnstone (2017) and the broader field of motivation theory that posits a dualism of influences (intrinsic, extrinsic). The findings also reveal the fact that being an artist comes with particular challenges, including criticism, stress, negative public perceptions, as well as rejection and pressures when working in industry. Therefore, it is possible to provide a preliminary response to the research question, in that the findings of this study propose that – for certain individuals – there is to some extent a relationship between artists' motivation and mental health issues. The findings also point to the need for additional research to further explore this issue further, as well as the relationship between intrinsic and extrinsic motivators for artists and how these intersect and develop over time. The extent to which they are separate processes and incompatible is also worthy of exploring in relation to this group (Covington & Mueller, 2001), as is more recent multifaceted theory espoused by Reiss (2012), given the complex issues that are associated with being an artist as either a tertiary student or in industry.

Notable from the findings is the identification of the therapeutic benefits that art-making brings. Some participants explicitly identified how the process of producing art has helped them deal with mental health challenges, the latter including low self-esteem, trauma, as well as the need to retain



a sense of sanity and engage in relaxation. This therefore supports the extensive body of literature that cites the therapeutic benefits of engaging with art, such as the work of Bain (2005) and Elias and Berg-Cross (2009). Also raised by one participant was the prospect of some artists using drugs and alcohol as a mechanism to cope with stress and mental health issues, hence another area for further research. The highly complex area of research relating to artists and mental health arguably requires a multi-disciplinary approach however, given new research would benefit from experts in creative arts, education, psychology, psychiatry, medicine, sociology and counselling.

In terms of the second part of the research question (implications for higher education providers), the findings propose a number of issues for consideration by those in academia. They propose that academic staff are cognisant of motivation theory and the potential mental health issues that student artists may face or deal with. This could be achieved through professional development workshops and training. In addition, the data suggest that academic staff build into the curriculum lectures and workshops around the potential mental health challenges that students may face, not only while studying, but once they have graduated. These challenges can manifest as a consequence of engaging in art-making as well as the stressors associated with the pursuit and maintenance of a career as an artist. While many artists are highly motivated individuals, they are less likely to understand how their motivations may potentially relate to or result in mental health challenges. Hence a focus on career advice and the tools to maintain physical and mental health reflects an emerging theme in the literature (Skatova, 2014). There are also implications for tertiary institutions in relation to the policies and support procedures they put in place for both students and staff, in order that there are clear mechanisms for providing strategies to assist all participants to receive assistance where necessary. While academics should not be expected to qualify as mental health workers, it is reasonable to assume that they would be cognisant of any policies in the mental health area, in a similar way to the expectation that academics are aware of many standard University policies (e.g. Health and safety, Assessment etc).

Conclusion

In a time of increasing focus on mental health, it is important that the tertiary sector continue to place a spotlight on this broad and complex area. While there is an ongoing focus on mental health in tertiary education in general, for those training to be or working as artists it is less well known. Those working in the field therefore need to consider how they pay closer attention to the potential



mental health issues and challenges artists might face, in order that students are able to put in place personal management strategies that will enable them to have a viable and healthy long-term career.

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