



2017

# A Historical Overview of Art and Music-Based Activities in Social Work with Groups: Nondeliberative Practice and Engaging Young People's Strengths

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## Author Manuscript

This is a pre-publication author manuscript of the final, published article.

## Recommended Citation

Kelly, Brian and Doherty, Lauren. A Historical Overview of Art and Music-Based Activities in Social Work with Groups: Nondeliberative Practice and Engaging Young People's Strengths. *Social Work with Groups*, 40, 3: 187-201, 2017. Retrieved from Loyola eCommons, School of Social Work: Faculty Publications and Other Works, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01609513.2015.1091700>

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## **A Historical Overview of Art and Music-based Activities in Social Work with Groups: Nondeliberative Practice and Engaging Young People's Strengths**

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*This paper provides a historical overview of the use of art and music-based activities in social work with groups. The authors review archival, empirical, and theoretical literature that explores the use and effectiveness of these activities in the recreation movement and group work practice from the late 19<sup>th</sup> to mid-20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Hull House settlement in Chicago from the late 19<sup>th</sup> to mid-20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and in recent group practice in social work and related fields. Findings suggest that art and music-based activities encourage and facilitate nondeliberative practice and allow for important opportunities to engage young people's strengths.*

**KEYWORDS** nondeliberative practice, activity groups, strengths-based, children, adolescents

**Acknowledgements:** We would like to thank Dr. Mark Mattaini, Dr. Cassandra McKay, and members of the International Association of Social Work with Groups for their feedback and support in developing previous iterations of this manuscript. We would also like to thank the guest editors and reviewers for their thoughtful critiques, which greatly strengthened our work.

**Funding:** The work described in this study was funded through the Fahs-Beck Fund for Research and Experimentation Doctoral Dissertation Grant Program and the University of Illinois at Chicago Chancellor's Graduate Research Fellowship.

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A Historical Overview of Art and Music-based Activities in Social Work with Groups:  
Nondeliberative Practice and Engaging Young People's Strengths

Several scholars have documented the use of activity in social work practice with groups (see Andrews, 2001; Breton, 1990; Middleman, 1981). In reviewing this history and responding to critiques lamenting the loss of activity in social work with groups, Ruth Middleman, a staunch advocate of the use of activity and program in group work noted, "Program is our Phoenix. It did not really die despite our neglect" (1981, p. 5). Breton (1990) stressed the need to highlight the use of activity and advocated for the inclusion of "creative use of leisure-time activities and recreation" (p. 26) in social work practice with groups. Delgado (2000) supports Breton's assertion by advocating for the development of art and music-based programs in community social work practice with urban youth. These historical accounts and calls to action are grounded in the idea that participation in art and music-based activities is beneficial for young people and provides them with an opportunity to engage their strengths, a sentiment echoed by scholars in related fields, such as arts education (Moorefield-Lang, 2010).

Lang (2016) prioritizes the use of activity in nondeliberative practice in her theoretical and practice informed scholarship. She defines nondeliberative practice as, "A problem-solving modality employing intuitive, *actional* (italics added) processes, nondeliberative in nature; and having mechanisms other than cognitive for problem solving" (p. 6). Lang goes on to describe nondeliberative practice as a model that promotes and adheres to a "do, *then think* (italics in original)" (p. 6) means of practice, one which promotes a balanced approach, incorporating cognitive and conative methods of engagement. In previous work (see Kelly & Doherty, 2016), we review the use of activity in social work practice with groups, specifically recreational, art, and music-based activities. We position the use of these activities throughout the history of

social group work practice as a demonstration of Lang's (2016) theory of nondeliberative practice. While Lang (2016) may not explicitly address the use of art and music-based activities with young people as a means to engage their strengths, her work does address the clear connection between nondeliberative group work practice and art and music-based activities. She notes how helping modalities within nondeliberative models of practice prioritize non-verbal modes of problem solving, including art, music, and other forms of creative and recreational play. Art and music-based activities offer "actional ways of thinking and problem solving" (p. 5) and these modes of practice are of particular benefit to young people who may prefer activity-based and expressive forms of group work practice.

This paper adds to the body of scholarship reviewing the use of activity in social work with groups. It provides a historical overview of the use of art and music-based activities in social group work with young people. It examines empirical and theoretical literature exploring the use and effectiveness of these activities in the recreation movement and group work practice from the late 19<sup>th</sup> to mid-20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Hull House settlement in Chicago from the late 19<sup>th</sup> to mid-20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and in recent group practice in social work and related fields. Findings from reviews of the three bodies of literature suggest the use of art and music-based activities encourages and facilitates nondeliberative group work practice, and allows for important opportunities to engage young people's strengths.

### **The Recreation Movement and Group Work**

Reid (1981) identified the opening of the Boston Sand Garden in 1885 as the beginning of the recreation movement in the United States. Several antecedents led up to this moment, including the development of kindergartens for small children, the establishment of parks for public relaxation, and increased national interest in sporting activities for youth and adults. The

marked difference in these antecedents, barring the establishment of kindergartens, was the lack of formal organization for and supervision of recreation, relaxation, and civic participation. Over time several other cities including New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago followed Boston's lead and established free and public play areas for children.

Opportunities for recreation and leisure continued to develop throughout the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and became important topics at the forefront of social thinking. Pangburn's (1924) analysis of the growth of sites dedicated to recreation and leisure in the U. S. stressed the benefits of this growth and the subsequent positive effects of recreation and leisure on the American populace. He noted "that what a quarter century ago was practically a summer playground movement for children is now a broad leisure time movement for year round recreation of both physical and cultural types for persons of all ages and of every social and economic group" (p. 112). In discussing the proliferation of community and neighborhood sites for public recreation, he went on to describe the "non-controversial nature of recreation" and the proliferation of parks for recreation as a sign of "the acceptance by the cities of responsibilities for preventing juvenile delinquency" (p. 109).

Meyer's (1934) review of several books on recreation and leisure extends Pangburn's (1924) description of recreation as a form of juvenile delinquency prevention, arguing, "A full expression of creative activity will diminish crime and other negative social forces" (p. 598). He goes on to describe creative activities as skill, craft, and art-based activities, such as music and drama. Pangburn (1924) also supported the use of creative activities, such as art and music, in city play programs, citing these activities as a means to engage youths' minds and curb youth delinquency.

By mid-century the recreation movement had grown, and recreation and leisure activities were further integrated into individual, family, and community life. Specialized recreation workers were employed in various settings including religiously affiliated institutions such as the YMCA and the YWCA, neighborhood and community centers, and local park districts. Reflecting on this growth, social group worker Grace Coyle noted the “increasing acceptance by the public of the essential character of constructive leisure-time activities” (Coyle, 1948, p. 5), particularly for young people. Her sentiment was supported by several other prominent social group work practitioners and scholars of the time (see Dimock & Trecker, 1949; Kindelsperger, 1955). In fact, group work partially developed out of the expanded national interest in recreation and community-oriented forms of social work practice (Andrews, 2001).

While some mid-century social workers were supportive of incorporating recreational activities into their group work practice with young people, others were reluctant to do so. Many social workers oriented to casework were unwilling to accept a philosophy that promoted nondeliberative practice through recreational, art, and music-based activities and instead chose to rely on deliberative practice and more cognitive forms of group work, such as group therapy (Konopka, 1963). While the activity-based and nondeliberative nature of the recreation movement and related forms of group work may have fallen out of favor in the increasingly more popular casework and cognitively-oriented forms of social group work with young people in the 1960s, a review of the Hull House archive presents a strong commitment to nondeliberative practice and art and music-based activities with young people at the Chicago-based settlement house well into the late 1960s.

### **Art and Music-based Activities at Hull House**

Jane Addams, co-founder of the Hull House settlement in Chicago, IL, felt particularly strong about youth exposure to recreation. “To fail to provide for the recreation of youth, is to not only deprive all of them of their natural form of expression, but is certain to subject some of them to the overwhelming temptation of illicit and soul-destroying pleasures” (Addams, 1909, p. 101). Addams was particularly concerned about the potential for urban youths’ engagement in vice (e.g., gambling, drinking, and crime) and felt exposure to healthy forms of recreation offered an alternative to the temptations of the street. Hull House yearbooks (Hull House Publishers, 1907; Hull House Publishers, 1910; Hull House Publishers, 1921) describe recreational activities for area youth, including a 1000 member strong boys club run out of its own building on the Hull House campus. The building was equipped with bowling alleys, billiard tables, athletic facilities, and shops for work in iron, wood and printing. It also housed a library, a study room, a game room, and classrooms for academic and non-academic interests. The yearbooks also highlight Hull House staff’s dedication to art and music-based activities for youth, specifically through the establishment of the Hull House Theatre, the Hull House Music School, the Hull House Art School, and the Hull House Arts and Music Camp.

Established around the turn of the century, the Hull House Theatre offered area youth an opportunity to engage with dance, drama, and film. The theatre staged plays in a variety of languages including Bohemian, Greek, Hungarian, Italian, Lithuanian, Russian, and Yiddish and allowed youth an opportunity to experiment with acting and scene design (Hull House Publishers, 1910). Hull House offered dance classes for youth in a variety of forms and the theatre offered dance class participants an opportunity to perform (Hull House Publishers, 1907). The Hull House Theatre also briefly housed a five-cent nickelodeon for area youth (Hull House

Publishers, 1907), which although short-lived due to intense heat, was a huge success, attracting full houses of area youth each day. While Addams (1909) was openly critical of public nickelodeons for their detriment to youths' moral development, she also noted the potential benefits of nickelodeons as a healthy escape for youth. Hull House staff chose moving pictures that allowed for healthy fantastical escape from the challenges of urban living and that projected safe forms of adventure that promoted health, well-being, and sound, moral living (Hull House Publishers, 1907; Lindstrom, 1999).

Established prior to the turn of the century, the Hull House Music School was designed to “give a thorough musical instruction to a limited number of children” (Hull House Publishers, 1907, p. 32). By the 1930s the school had grown, incorporating classes and instruction for all those who cared to participate. A Hull House Music School brochure from circa 1936 notes “The school is designed to give thorough musical instruction to those children showing the greatest aptitude, and to foster in a much larger group the cultural aspects of a musical education” (Hull House Publishers, ca. 1936, no page). The brochure describes individual instruction in singing, violin, and violoncello, ensemble classes and recitals, and orchestra concerts. The Hull House Art School was established around the same time as the Hull House Music School. It offered youth both individual and group instruction in studio classes such as arts ceramics and shop-based skills (e.g., weaving, woodwork, and metal work) (Hull House Publishers, 1907). Both schools and the Hull House Theatre became longstanding and essential components of the array of art and music-based activities Hull House offered young people in the community.

An annual report from 1949 (Hull House Publishers, 1949) describes Hull House's ongoing commitment to provide youth with opportunities to engage in art and music-based activities well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The report describes ongoing youth participation in the



theatre where youth had the opportunity to engage in the “the closest kind of cooperation” that can later translate into “effective family and community service” (p. 13). The report describes ongoing youth involvement in the music school where youth had an opportunity to participate in individual and group instruction, and by doing so gain “new social understandings” that “contribute new harmonies to living” (p. 12). The report also describes ongoing youth engagement in the art school where youth had an opportunity to participate in activities that foster a “kind of camaraderie” that “seems to develop as they work out personal interpretations from a basic common study” (p. 11). This ongoing commitment to art and music-based activities eventually led to the establishment of Hull House Art and Music Camp.

A brochure from circa 1969 describes Hull House Art and Music Camp as “America’s most unique experiment involving ALL [*sic*] the arts on one campus” and as “An interdisciplinary program stressing creativity at all levels with heavy emphasis on performance” (Hull House Publishers, ca. 1969, no page). Situated in rural southeastern Wisconsin, the camp offered group and individual instruction in dance, drama, studio arts, creative writing, filmmaking, and music. This camp appears to be the full realization of Addams and Hull House staff’s intention to provide urban youth with opportunities to engage in, as the brochure describes it, “An in-depth cross pollenization of the arts where . . . at the end of six weeks the youngsters emerge with a sense of unity and an understanding of the arts as the finest record of man’s existence” (Hull House Publishers, ca. 1969, no page). Unfortunately the camp’s last season was in 1969. The camp was closed for financial reasons and the director’s assessment that the camp was not meeting the needs of enough inner-city youth (Bishop, 1969).

Based on this review of original documents from the Hull House archive, it is evident that Addams and Hull House staff were committed to providing young people with access to art and

music-based activities at the settlement house. These often non-verbal and actional forms of social group work practice created and facilitated spaces for young people to engage their strengths. Whether rehearsing for a dance recital, a play, or a musical performance in the theatre or painting, sculpting, or woodworking in one of the many art studios, young people brought their talents and interests to bear on these activities. In doing so, they engaged and further developed their strengths, which may have had an impact on their lives outside the theatre and/or studio. In addition, by prioritizing art and music-based activities and nondeliberative practice, Hull House and other settlements furthered the actional, intuitive, and non-cognitive tenets of the recreation movement and built a foundation for art and music-based activities and nondeliberative practice in social work practice with groups, a foundation that extends well into the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

### **Current Uses of Art and Music-based Activities**

Art and music-based activities continue to be used in social group work with young people. Some qualitative researchers have explored the use of art-based activities with young people who identified as either experiencing trauma or living with post-traumatic stress disorder. Coholic, Loughheed, and Cadell (2009) conducted a grounded theory study examining art-based activities, such as painting, drawing, working with clay, and guided imagery, in group therapy sessions with children living in foster care. The researchers operationally defined living in foster care as a form of traumatic experience. Findings from group session notes, post group interviews, and interviews with foster parents and childcare workers suggest the children enjoyed the group, sought to extend its tenure, and were able to express their feelings, thoughts, and behaviors through the art-based activities. In addition, the children, foster parents, and childcare workers witnessed improved levels of self-esteem and self-awareness during and after

engagement in the arts-based group therapy sessions. In a pair of related studies using the same sample, Coholic, Lougheed, and Lebreton (2009) found that the arts-based group therapy sessions offered the children a more holistic approach to group therapy, one that considered mindfulness and spiritually-based approaches, while Coholic, Fraser, Robinson, and Lougheed (2012) found that the sessions promoted children's resilience.

Some researchers have examined the use of art-based activities with youth involved in the juvenile justice system. Ezell and Levy (2003) conducted a three-year multiple method evaluation of an art program for incarcerated adolescents, which included workshops in creative writing, visual arts, wood sculpture, murals, music, drama, and photography. The researchers found over half of the 184 youth in their sample ( $n = 112$ , 61%) acquired concrete vocational skills and close to three quarters of the youth ( $n = 129$ , 70%) experienced a sense of goal satisfaction as a result of engagement with the art program. Findings suggest participation in the art workshops may have had long term effects on the youth as evidenced by relatively low recidivism rates for workshop participants. Findings also suggest through the nondeliberative and actional nature of the activities, young people were more inclined to share their feelings and personal issues through the activity-based workshops.

In a grounded theory study exploring understandings of mental illness and juvenile justice system involvement, Watson, Kelly, and Vidalon (2009) interviewed nine youth-parent dyads and found that some youth were engaged in art-based activities as a result of their involvement with the juvenile justice system. These youth and their parents reported engagement in these activities as a beneficial and important part of the youths' treatment plan. Findings from these studies suggest that participation in art-based activities offered young people opportunities to express themselves through verbal and non-verbal forms of communication. In doing so they

gained a sense of satisfaction from these elements of their rehabilitation and treatment, which may have important implications for their future development.

Other researchers and practitioners have reported the successful use of a variety of other art-based activities with young people as a means to engage their strengths. Researchers and practitioners have reported the successful use of photography in group work with young women (Darrow & Lynch, 1983), photovoice in community engagement efforts with older youths (Estrella, 2012; Gant et al., 2009), and video production in health promotion literacy campaigns with indigenous young people (Stewart, Riecken, Scott, Tanaka, & Riecken, 2008) as well as video production in developing collaborative projects that explore African American adolescents' interests in academics and positive peer relationships (Baker, Staiano, & Calvert, 2011).

Researchers and practitioners have also reported on the successful use of theatre and drama techniques in group work with pre-teens around decision making (Dutton, 2001), in assisting young immigrants and refugees with social adjustment (Rousseau et al., 2007), and in assisting children in an acute inpatient psychiatric treatment setting with expression of challenging topics (Reynolds, 2011). These nondeliberative techniques allow young people an opportunity to experience a phenomenon, such as decision making, social adjustment, or expression of challenging topics, and rehearse their responses in a spontaneous and safe setting, allowing for opportunities to work through potentially challenging situations and experience growth as a result of working through the challenge. In a reflective piece, Malekoff (2006) reported on the successful use of poetry groups with young children as a way to engage their strengths and facilitate their ownership of the group. In his text on group work with adolescents, Malekoff (2004) supports the use of art-based activities in all group work with youth as a means

to invite the whole young person into the group work process, thereby avoiding a deficits-based approach and employing a strengths perspective.

Several scholars have explored the use of music-based activities in social work with groups and related fields. In a recent exploratory study, MacMilan, Maschi, and Tseng (2012) examined the relationship between recreational drumming and well-being. A sample of 73 social work graduate students participated in a two-hour recreational group that used drumming. The group was followed by the administration of a measure of intrapersonal and interpersonal well-being. Results suggest that respondents experienced recreational drumming as a way to express themselves and to improve their well-being while gaining an increased sense of connectedness and empowerment.

Nicholson, Berthelsen, Abad, Williams, and Bradley (2008) evaluated a music therapy program for parents and their young children. The program used music-based activities as a means to create a non-threatening context in which parent and child could have quality interactions, which the researchers describe as enhanced parental responsiveness to children's behavioral, social, and communication skills. The researchers found that engagement in the music therapy program yielded significant improvements in parenting behaviors and child outcomes, including enhanced communication, play skills, and social participation. These findings suggest that the use of nondeliberative, music-based activities allow participants important opportunities for a sense of connection with self and others. In a reflective essay on the use of music-based activities in social work practice with children, Lefevre (2004) outlines how she has used music-based activities to explore therapeutic relationships with children and their communication methods. She argues that music-based activities allow for actional and experiential forms of communication that extend beyond solely verbal means.

Coulter (2000) tested the effect of a song-writing group as a means to reduce posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms for children who have experienced abuse and found no significant differences between the experimental condition (i.e., song writing) and the control condition (i.e., recreation music). She does report that “participants of the song-writing condition sense of personal safety improved more than the recreational music condition” and that the “combination of talking group sessions, recreational therapy sessions, and music therapy sessions (within the overall program) may be particularly effective in helping victims combat self-blame and acquire feelings of safety” (p. 202). In a reflective piece on the utilization of various music-based activities in group work with young people, McFerran-Skewes (2005) contends that song writing, although a complex task, offers young people an opportunity for “honest and authentic sharing within a group” (p. 156). This suggests that the nondeliberative, actional process of songwriting allows young people opportunities to explore content and experiences they may otherwise struggle to discuss in the group.

Some research has noted the potential for music-based activities as a way to explore young people’s strengths. Tyson and Baffour (2004) explored “self-defined arts-based strengths identified by adolescents at an acute-care psychiatric hospital” (p. 217). The researchers found that of the 108 youth in the sample, 30 youth (30%) identified listening to music and 10 youth (9%) identified singing or playing an instrument as their primary method of coping with their struggles. They assert “Many youth have a tendency to use arts-based methods of coping with the struggles in their daily lives. Arts-based methods described by youth in this study were self-identified and thus were interpreted as youth strengths” (p. 223). In another recent study examining the use of a music program that focused on rapping and music composition in a juvenile detention center, Baker and Homan (2007) found that young people’s self-esteem was

reinforced by “engaging in musical composition and the playing of instruments” (p. 469), and that the program provided young people with “a sense of agency and achievement” (p. 471).

Findings from these studies suggest that the actional, intuitive, and nondeliberative elements of music-based activities offer young people opportunities to engage their strengths and experience a sense of empowerment.

A recent report commissioned by the Weill Music Institute, Carnegie Hall, explores the potential for music-based activities in the juvenile justice system to engage young people’s strengths (Wolf & Wolf, 2012). The authors note the potential of music-based activities in the changing and expanding landscape of the juvenile justice system, particularly in light of calls for more humane solutions framed from a positive youth development model. In his theoretical writing on incorporating the arts in social work practice, Delgado (2000) argues that music-based activities offer an important opportunity to engage young people’s strengths. He asserts that music-based activities hold, “promise for engaging and teaching urban youths a variety of skills” (pp. 119-120), including music composition and production. Building on Delgado’s theoretical work, Kelly (2015) facilitated a co-constructed audio documentary group with young people experiencing homelessness that explored whether their involvement in music-based activities engaged their strengths. Findings demonstrate that young people’s participation in music-based activities, including the co-constructed audio documentary group, was effective in engaging their music composition and production strengths and skills.

Additional literature has explored the actional, intuitive, and spontaneous elements of hip-hop and rap music with young people. Olson-McBride and Page (2012) evaluated the use of hip-hop and rap music in poetry groups with young people as a means of promoting a therapeutic dialogue. Group facilitators selected songs for group sessions. Young people were then invited to

listen to the songs and work together to write a reflective poem followed by time for group sharing about the process and to provide feedback. Content analysis of transcribed videotapes of the group sessions revealed that participants demonstrated increased levels of self-disclosure and vulnerability during group sharing, which led members to form more meaningful relationships with each other.

In another study, DeCarlo and Hockman (2004) explored the use of culturally relevant hip-hop and rap music to promote prosocial skills in group work with African American male adolescents. Findings suggest that young people favored music-based activities over standard psychoeducational group therapy and that the groups that utilized the actional, intuitive, and spontaneous elements of hip-hop and rap music demonstrated increased levels of prosocial skills, including anger management and impulse control. In their theoretical work, Travis Jr. and Deepak (2011) and Travis Jr. (2013) position hip-hop culture, including hip-hop and rap music, as a means to engage young people in reflexive, culturally relevant discourse on their own lifespan development as well as opportunities to engage in positive youth development. Finally, in their theoretical and practice informed work, Olcon and Beno (2016) provide an analysis of the cultural and spiritual relevance of musical interventions in social work with groups (e.g., listening, lyrical analysis, singing, and song writing) and their inherently nondeliberative nature.

### **Art and Music-based Activities, Nondeliberative Practice, and Strengths**

Art and music-based activities have been used in social work with groups and related fields throughout the history of the discipline. Recreation workers and social group workers of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> centuries shared a common interest in using art and music-based activities to engage young people in healthy forms of leisure, play, and recreation. Settlement house workers, such as Jane Addams and the Hull House staff, were invested in promoting art and music-based activities for area youth from the 19<sup>th</sup> century well in to the late



1960s. They believed that participation in these activities was essential to young people's healthy, holistic development. Art and music-based activities continue to be used in social work and related fields today. The empirical and theoretical work reviewed throughout this paper demonstrates the effectiveness of these activities and nondeliberative practice in engaging young people's strengths.

This review of historical and current uses of art and music-based activities demonstrates how group work practitioners employ a variety of nondeliberative methods to assist young people in accomplishing their goals, while engaging their strengths throughout the process. As Lang (2016) notes, nondeliberative practice incorporates verbal, non-verbal, actional, intuitive, and spontaneous elements in group work that are designed and operationalized to assist members in working toward individual and group goals through experiential forms of problem-solving. Art and music-based activities incorporate verbal, non-verbal, actional, intuitive, and spontaneous elements that allow young members to focus on the activity at hand (e.g., drawing, listening to music, performing). In doing so young people benefit from the process of engagement in the activity (e.g., developing skills through drawing, gaining a sense of connection with self and others through listening to music and sharing the experience, rehearsing a difficult decision or life situation through performance). Young people are then able to use the experience analogically in their lives outside of group (e.g., by connecting through listening to music and sharing the experience in group the young person may be able to connect with others in a similar fashion outside of the group), thereby furthering their intra and interpersonal growth and development.

As a form of nondeliberative practice, art and music-based activities employ actional and analogic solutions that seek to encourage young people to concurrently engage their cognitive

and conative problem solving skills. In addition, this approach highlights a holistic frame to working with young people, one where they are invited to explore problems and solutions as well as strengths and areas for improvement. In a truly strengths-based fashion, it invites and welcomes the whole young person, more than just their troubled parts (Saleebey, 2012).

### **Limitations**

This review does not attempt to explore the large literature on art or music therapy. Rather, it focuses on the “*unique methodological procedure* (italics in original)” (Lang, 2016, p. 5) that results from incorporating art and music-based activities and social group work. While the authors attempted to address the breadth of the literature, there may be gaps in our work. While the review may lack in breadth in some areas, it provides an in-depth review of the use of art and music-based activities as forms of nondeliberative practice to engage young people’s strengths at various times throughout the history of social work practice with groups.

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