

The potential of creative participation to enhance health and wellbeing: an ethnographic study of experiences within community arts groups

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Background: Creative community activities are currently of interest in health research due to the introduction of the social prescribing model. This model signposts people to community organisations, preventing the over-medicalisation of social problems such as loneliness. Existing research in this field predominantly focusses on final wellbeing outcomes, overlooking ongoing creative experience in context.

Aims

To examine creative community activities and the role they play in the context of people's lives, health and wellbeing.

Methods

This ethnographic study was conducted in Stoke-on-Trent, an area with high deprivation and poor health statistics. Ethnography involves immersion and participation during fieldwork, enabling flexible and varied data collection methods. Over 12 months I participated within a women's craft group and a men's creative project and collected data through:

- Immersive fieldwork/participant observation
- In-depth interviews
- Participant diaries

During the first 6 months of fieldwork, I crafted, sang, attempted comedy improvisation and shared meals with these creative communities. When the COVID-19 restrictions were introduced, this ethnography moved online for a further 6 months. All data were analysed thematically.



'It is belonging...but you can be individual. The space to be yourself but in a group of people who are so different that you're almost all very similar' – Colin

Preliminary findings

Features of the communities

- Shared purpose and goals
- Inclusivity
- Reciprocal behaviour
- Trust
- Flexibility
- A safe space

Reasons for attendance

- Wellbeing. An alternative to medication
- Place of company and belonging
- Routine/stability/purpose
- Creative interest
- Accessible: free and local

Wellbeing influences

- Shared experience: past/present
- Ability to be oneself
- Re-engagement with society
- Sense of achievement
- Creative/social confidence
- Peer support and connection

'We're all in there together. There's no teachers and students, there's no them and us, there's no gender' – June

Implications: Social prescribing models are still in their infancy. This study increases the knowledge of the ways in which creative community experience is intertwined with social and cultural conditions. A richer understanding will serve to enhance the development of future creative health initiatives.