

An Evidence Review of the Impact of Participatory Arts on Older People:



<http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/evidence-review-participatory-arts-older-people>

(The Mental Health Foundation, October 2011)

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Executive summary:

The UK has an ageing population. Many older people in the UK experience multiple disadvantages relating to health, deprivation, isolation and ageism. Such disadvantages are not only debilitating in themselves, but can also act as barriers to participating in those social and creative activities that protect good health and wellbeing.

There is a growing evidence base which verifies the positive impact participative arts can have on the health and wellbeing of older people, but to date there is no published review that synthesises evidence of the impact of participatory arts on older people. The Baring Foundation has commissioned this review to address this gap and provide evidence to funders about the benefits accrued through art activities and to support arts organisations to improve their work.

Methodology:

The literature search followed a stepwise methodology to identify the highest quality research available (literature reviews and primary research). Searches were made for evidence about the impact of participative art engagement for older people published in English between the years of 2001 and 2011. A total of 511 articles were identified and following a systematic screening and data extraction process, 24 peer reviewed¹ articles (one review and 23 primary studies) were selected for inclusion in this review, including one literature review. In addition a search for good quality grey literature (unpublished and/or non-peer reviewed) to cover identified gaps in the peer reviewed evidence base was also undertaken via an internet search and a request for publications from the Baring Foundation's extensive contacts. Seventy two publications were retrieved through this process, of which seven have been included in the review. All studies selected for inclusion in the review were subjected to assessments of their quality and relevance to the UK.

Results:

This review includes 31 studies and 2,040 participants (based on the 26 of 31 studies that did state the number of participants). Most of the studies were based in the UK (n=17), seven were from USA, three were Australian, and one each from Canada, Spain and Sweden. The literature review did not provide information about the countries of origin of the research articles reviewed. All of the studies were considered to be relevant to the UK context.

The studies all included populations of people over the age of 60 years. The age range for this review is 60 to 96 years. Eleven of the studies include participants that were primarily female the rest were mixed and the gender balance was not reported. Whilst most of the studies were of older people who were in generally good health, six of the studies involved people with dementia, usually in a residential or day care setting.

The included studies cover the following art forms:

- Music (n=7)
- Singing (n=7)
- Drama (n=5)
- Visual arts (n=5)
- Dance (n=4)
- Storytelling (n=1)
- Festivals (n=1)
- Mixed art forms (1)

Fifteen of the studies employed qualitative methodologies to research impact (interviews, focus groups, observation etc.), seven quantitative (standardised measures, surveys etc.) and three used both qualitative and quantitative methods.

Most of the studies (n=29) consider the impact of participatory arts at an individual level (for example biological, psychological and behavioural). Mental health and emotional impacts found often included increased self-esteem and confidence. Positive feedback received from family, friends and communities in response to performances, exhibitions and productions appeared to offer a particularly powerful boost to emotional wellbeing. This was a common finding across all the different art forms.

The key impacts that the evidence in this review indicate are summarised below. The strength of the existing evidence should be considered in the context of its many limitations. Participatory art is a new and emerging research field, with little available high quality research to draw evidence from; this makes drawing conclusions from the cumulative effect of a number of studies, or comparing the impacts of one art form against another difficult.

“ I really never thought I had any art talent to develop and now I hope to further what I’ve learnt.”

(Harper & Hamblin, 2010)

Impact on the Individual:

Mental wellbeing:

- **Increased confidence and self-esteem** amongst participants were perceived benefits of participatory art engagement.
- There appears to be added value gained from performing to an audience across all art forms in terms of participants’ **feelings of accomplishment** and the amount of positive feedback they receive.
- Through participatory art, older adults can **embrace new and positive aspects to their identity and life role**.
- Involvement in community arts initiatives may be particularly important in **counterbalancing the mental wellbeing difficulties associated with periods of loss** which can increase the risk of low mood, anxiety and social isolation.
- For older adults with dementia, participatory art can help **improve cognitive functioning, communication, self-esteem, musical skills, pleasure, enjoyment of life, memory and creative thinking**.
- Becoming involved in art activities can however cause **frustration when individuals find that they are not able to meet their own expectations** (or what they perceive to be others’ expectations) of achieving a desired but unobtainable standard of artistic expression or skill.
- Through participatory art **many individuals exceed their personal expectations about what they could achieve**, which enhances their mental wellbeing.

Physical wellbeing:

- Particular art forms may lend themselves more than others to significant **physical health improvements (such as cardiovascular, joint mobility and breathing control)**, including dance, singing and playing musical instruments.
- The absorption of the creative processes involved in engaging with participatory arts that are not obviously physically exerting can lead to an **increase in the levels of general daily activity that older people undertake** which should have a positive effect on their physical wellbeing.

Communities:

Some of the studies in this review provided evidence of the impacts that participatory art for older people could have on the wider community.

- There is clear evidence that participatory arts programmes provide **opportunities for meaningful social contact, friendship and support** within the art groups themselves as well as improving relationships between those living in care homes and prisons.
- Altruism, experienced through participatory art when it is used as a means of **‘giving something back’ to the community can have a positive impact on community beneficiaries as well as for the individuals participating in the art.**
- Participatory art that involves people with dementia accessing their community or interacting with professionals **serves to address age discrimination by raising awareness and expectations within the wider community** and can help to **break down stereotypes and reduce stigmatising attitudes and behaviour.**
- Participatory art that involves those with dementia along with their informal carers has proved to be an effective way of breaking down barriers in the relationship between those two groups. **Increased fellowship and raised expectations about the depth and quality of the care relationship can be achieved** and then reinforced in other areas of life.
- In day and residential care settings participatory art can **foster a better sense of social cohesion and community for those with dementia.**

Society:

- Large scale, high profile festivals have the potential to **positively transform attitudes to older people**; particularly when intergenerational events are included in the festival.
- Participatory art is a powerful tool that **can contribute towards challenging and breaking down both the self and external stigmas of being older** that pervade popular societal culture.
- Participatory art can be used to **bring people together in a way that helps individuals in marginalised groups mitigate the negative effects of stigma and self-doubt on their wellbeing.**

Given the above, the studies in this review suggest that it is evident that engaging with participatory art can improve the wellbeing of older people and mediate against the negative effects of becoming older.

Conclusions and recommendations:

The beneficial impact of participatory art in terms of mental and physical wellbeing is evident at the individual, community and societal levels. Although the evidence base is relatively weak, it suggests that there is tremendous potential for participatory art to improve the quality of life of older people in general as well as those older people who are most excluded including those with dementia, those who are socially and economically disadvantaged, LGBT groups and prisoners. However, the needs of older people and the potential benefits of participatory art in promoting wellbeing amongst older people continue to be generally overlooked in policy and service provision.

It is recommended that:

- Access to participatory art projects for older people should be more actively supported by local health and mental health improvement agencies and organisations;
- Specialist health and social care planners and providers should consider ways in which they can improve access to participatory arts for more vulnerable older adults. Day and residential care services should explore the skilling up of day and residential care home staff to undertake participatory art with older people;
- To maximise engagement, participatory arts projects need to actively facilitate initial and sustained participation by older people, taking account of the health and social inequalities that older people face and the consequent barriers that later life can impose on their motivation or ability to attend;
- Participatory art projects for older people should challenge the potential for low expectations and over-emphasis of the limitations of old age on the ability of older people to participate and create;
- Local authorities, national government, arts and community commissioners who fund participatory arts projects should ensure that tenders, funding applications, and funding agreements are “age proofed”. This should ensure that they reach out, are accessible, and are used by older people.

Commissioners of older people need to take account of older people with mental health problems, long term conditions such as dementia and other disabilities, and older people who are ‘hard to reach’, such as people living alone, living in care homes, and from ‘hard to reach’ groups e.g. Black, Asian and ethnic minorities.

- Those commissioning and funding participatory art projects should recognise the importance of evaluation.

– Further good quality research and evaluation of participatory arts activities is needed. Larger samples and longitudinal impact studies are required to provide better strength of evidence. There is also a need for a forum for the sharing of research findings amongst practitioners and policy makers to prevent duplication and promote learning.

– Further research is also required to provide more detail about the key elements of the participatory art activity processes. This would produce a better understanding of what makes the successful projects work well as well as what impedes them and what advances the possibility of replication and the spread of innovations.

This summary has been produced by Creative Hertfordshire to promote the benefits of culture on wellbeing across the county.

See <http://www.creativehertfordshire.com/resources/culture-and-health> for more.

