



Review

Creativity in later life

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ABSTRACT

The ageing population presents significant challenges for the provision of social and health services. Strategies are needed to enable older people to cope within a society ill prepared for the impacts of these demographic changes. The ability to be creative may be one such strategy. This review outlines the relevant literature and examines current public health policy related to creativity in old age with the aim of highlighting some important issues. As well as looking at the benefits and negative aspects of creative activity in later life they are considered in the context of the theory of “successful ageing”.

Creative activity plays an important role in the lives of older people promoting social interaction, providing cognitive stimulation and giving a sense of self-worth. Furthermore, it is shown to be useful as a tool in the multi-disciplinary treatment of health problems common in later life such as depression and dementia. There are a number of initiatives to encourage older people to participate in creative activities such as arts-based projects which may range from visual arts to dance to music to intergenerational initiatives. However, participation shows geographical variation and often the responsibility of provision falls to voluntary organisations.

Overall, the literature presented suggests that creative activity could be a useful tool for individuals and society. However, further research is needed to establish the key factors which contribute to patterns of improved health and well-being, as well as to explore ways to improve access to services.

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1. Introduction

In 2010, the number of older people, over the age of 65, in the United Kingdom was estimated to be 10 million and is predicted to double by 2050 [1]. This presents a number of challenges for resource allocation and welfare provision. With many now surviving into their eighth decade, adaption of lifestyle to accommodate for ageing bodies and minds is vital within a society ill prepared for the impacts of these demographic changes. This transforms older people's roles within society, the community and families as well as the services available for older people [2]. Through creativity, older people could potentially explore new endeavours, develop their sense of identity and cope better with the process of ageing [3]. Therefore, creative activity is one proposed coping mechanism for ageing individuals and populations.

Creativity is defined as “the use of imagination or original ideas to create something” and has been considered by many well-renowned thinkers, such as Aristotle and Einstein, to be an essential and innate part of human development [4]. Moreover, accessibility to art and cultural activities as part of a community is now considered a human right [5]. Creative activities should therefore be available for all ages to support health and well-being, as not only a natural part of human activity or as a way of developing and achieving, but as a basic human right.

The definition of creative activity used here is taken from Kaufman & Sternburg [6] which states that creative activities should have three elements: innovation, valuable quality and appropriateness for the situation. Additional factors which will be taken into account include the notion that creative activities vary greatly between individuals, cultures and groups within society [7]; therefore creativity in old age should be considered by taking into account the diversity of the older population.

The objectives of this review are: to explore the perspectives and participation of older people taking part in creative activities, to explore why different types of creative activity are beneficial for older people, and to examine society's views on the use of creative activity in later life as a way of facilitating successful ageing.

2. Method

This study is based on the literature. The inclusion criteria were articles published from 1980 to 2012 counting titles relevant to creative activity or creativities in participants mainly over the age of 65. All studies were included which met the inclusion criteria. Analysis of the grey literature was also reviewed including: policy documents, online literature and information leaflets. This review of the literature includes a variety of quantitative and qualitative studies in order to understand creativity in old age holistically. A systematic review of studies from a variety of journals was included, using the search terms listed below.

Creativity in later life, creativity in old age, creative activity in later life, creative activity in old age, old age and creativity, activity in later life.

Traditional methods of measuring the creative thought processes such as divergent thinking tests are criticised for lending only a brief idea of the cognitive processes involved in creative thinking. Whereas, the use of convergent thinking strategies to test creativity combine anecdotal evidence with laboratory experiments to gain a more representative measure of creative processing [8]. The studies considered here use a variety of these methods to understand the level of creativity individual participants have. Since there is no universal measure of creativity within research, the results of

evidence are not precisely comparable and this must be considered when drawing conclusions from the evidence presented.

3. Discussion

3.1. Theories of ageing and creativity

The older population is diverse with the needs for older people ranging widely from active, well older people to those who are frail. Creativity as an activity is beneficial because it involves a broad range of interests and can be encouraged in those with all functional abilities. Due to these diversities society views of older people can impact on participation and availability of activities, therefore exploration of how we perceive ageing is necessary.

Activity theory states that older people must remain active into retirement in order to maintain life satisfaction and resist declining health [9]. Evidence shows that older people can remain productive to society, providing they maintain good health and can access the resources needed to engage in daily activities [10]. Since the development of this theory, extensive research has shown the importance of activity in later life. The development of the hypothesis named successful ageing has also grown from this research into *activity theory*. *Successful ageing* is defined as: “low probability of disease and disease-related disability, high cognitive and physical functional capacity, and active engagement with life” [11]. This holistic view of ageing encourages older people to contribute to society and as a result gains medical and social benefits. However, this theory could also have a negative impact on older people from the exertion of pressure on them to resist social withdrawal, which can naturally occur with age. Activity theory and successful ageing theory can explain the benefits of creative activity for older people and are being used within policy to encourage participation in the community.

Critical gerontology suggests that conflicts exist within successful ageing theories which can be seen by examining the origins of what is considered successful within society. The seemingly inevitable decline in functional ability and life satisfaction, which participation in activity can in theory prevent, is feared by many people as they grow older due to society's idealisation of the young. If older people could age in the way they wish without the pressures of society we may see the positive sides of ageing more clearly. In this way, creativity could be a method of drawing out the positive aspects of ageing and encouraging older people to deal with ageing itself, instead of suggesting they appear younger through participation in activity [12]. On the other hand, creativity is an activity in itself and may help older people interpret and cope with ageing [13]. These healthy theoretical debates drive research into activity in later life, providing the evidence for the development of potentially beneficial policy and initiatives within the community.

3.2. The benefits of creative activity in later life

The positive impact of activity in later life for health and well-being is well established within research. A comparative study of 300 American participants showed that community based arts increased general health, reduced the amount of doctors' visits and reduced the need for additional medication [13]. In addition to health improvements, social activities are linked to improved well-being and life satisfaction [14]. However, the specific aspects of activity which are responsible for these improvements are less clear.

The literature suggests that social engagement plays a key role in reducing loneliness, maintaining life satisfaction and improving health outcomes [15]. In this way, regular activities can increase social networks and communication for those isolated in the

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