

Understanding the impact of an intergenerational arts and health project: A study into the psychological wellbeing of participants, carers, and artists

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Abstract

Objectives: There is growing interest in arts practices in relation to public health, including their potential to support psychological wellbeing. This study sought to understand the impact of *Hear and Now*, an intergenerational arts and health project, upon indicators of psychological wellbeing among all groups involved: young people, older people with a diagnosis of dementia and their carers and partners, and the project's artistic team.

Study design: This was a descriptive exploratory qualitative study, employing focus groups and observation as data collection methods.

Methods: Study participants were 65 people representing the four groups participating in the 2019 *Hear and Now* project: older adults living with a diagnosis of dementia, their carers and partners, young people, and a team of professional artists and facilitators. Of these, 27 participated in one or more of seven focus groups. Participants were asked about their previous engagement with music and dance, thoughts about the intergenerational element of the project, and other aspects of their experiences that related to indicators of wellbeing. In order to investigate the project's impact on participants' wellbeing, Seligman's PERMA model was adopted, which sets out five indicators of wellbeing: positive emotions, engagement, positive relationships, meaning and achievement/accomplishment.

Results: Experiences relating to all five areas of the PERMA model were evidenced by all groups in relation to their involvement in the project. Additional health benefits were also cited by some, as well as enhanced perceptions of other members of the project cohort.

Conclusions: The findings support existing literature that intergenerational and arts activities can be beneficial for individuals' psychological health. Experiences relating to all five dimensions of the PERMA model of wellbeing (positive emotion, engagement, positive relationships, meaning, achievement/accomplishment) were cited by the four participant groups, which suggests examining the impact of such projects on all project collaborators is worthy of further study. Understanding the impact these projects can have upon the various groups involved will enable artistic and healthcare communities to better collaborate and value each other's practices.

Keywords: intergenerational; dementia; dance; music; wellbeing; PERMA

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Introduction

There is growing interest in arts practices in relation to health and wellbeing, and their potential to support healthcare in the context of public health.¹⁻⁵ The aim of this study was to understand the impact of *Hear and Now*, an intergenerational arts and health project, upon indicators of wellbeing among its participants, including the carers, partners and artistic team engaged in the project.

Hear and Now is an annual intergenerational arts and health project led by the Philharmonia Orchestra, and co-produced with Orchestras Live.⁶ It involved several Bedford-based community music groups, including Tibbs Dementia Foundation's Music 4 Memory (a singing group for people living with dementia with their carers and partners) and Fusion Youth Singing (a teenage vocal/instrumental ensemble) as performers. Professional musicians and dancers from the Philharmonia Orchestra and University of Bedfordshire facilitated the project and performed alongside them. Over four weeks, these groups collaborated to devise a music and dance piece performed at the University theatre. The term 'participants' refers to all those considered in the study (i.e. older adults, young people, carers, partners and artists); the study does not focus on outcomes related to specific health concerns (such as dementia).

Intergenerational practice aims to unite different generations in 'purposeful, mutually beneficial activities, which promote greater understanding and respect' between them and encompasses activities situated in educational, community and healthcare contexts.⁷ Evidenced benefits include enhanced social capital,⁸ reduced loneliness,⁹ increased confidence and self-esteem,¹⁰ and improved mutual understanding of and attitudes towards others.^{11,12} Similarly, arts engagement can positively impact physiological, psychological and social wellbeing, addressing issues such as falls prevention,¹³ social isolation,^{14,15} wellbeing,^{15,16} and diseases such as Parkinson's disease and dementia.^{17,18} For people with dementia, broader benefits include improvements in communication and autobiographical memory.¹

However, intergenerational interaction is decreasing in social and family contexts¹⁹; furthermore, both older and younger generations experience barriers to accessing cultural activity. As people age, they engage less in the arts^{20,21} and can face geographical, social, financial and health-related barriers to accessing them.²² For young people, barriers can include economic disadvantage and psychological factors such as anxiety and low self-confidence.^{23,24} Loneliness and lack of social support are also widespread among older groups²⁵ and young people.²⁶ With loneliness having been strongly associated with low personal wellbeing, social wellbeing is an increasing public health concern.²⁷ Taken together, it appears that those who will garner the greatest value from intergenerational arts activities are the same groups who find it hard to access them.

Whilst there is evidence suggesting shared arts experiences yield benefits for both carers and the cared-for^{5,28-30}, previous research on the impact of intergenerational arts practice has tended to focus on the 'end users' of projects. However, it is important to examine those in supporting roles (i.e. carers and facilitators) in relation to the growing discourse around arts

and health to understand the wider impact such practice could have on wellbeing. For example, reports reveal that unpaid caring roles (i.e. informal caring for friends or family members) can negatively affect physical and mental health, and that those providing high levels of care are more than twice as likely to experience poor health than those who are not.³¹⁻³⁶ There are also reported psychological challenges associated with freelance arts careers³⁷ and so these projects could help address the health concerns faced by individuals because of their caregiving or professional roles. For example, artistic facilitators may engage in supportive and altruistic behaviours, which have been associated with enhanced psychological wellbeing and life satisfaction.^{38,39}

Social and psychological wellbeing are increasingly recognised in Western societies as important contributors to public health and individuals' quality of life - often above more traditional objective measures, such as wealth and occupational status. Psychological wellbeing can be broadly defined as a global construct that not only represents absence of illbeing, but a person's perception of various aspects of their life, including meaningful relationships, autonomy, purpose, personal growth, and self-acceptance.⁴⁰⁻⁴² To measure wellbeing in this study, Seligman's multi-dimensional PERMA model was adopted.⁴² Based in positive psychology, the model conceptualises wellbeing as a composite of five key measurable elements, which enable individuals to flourish: positive emotions, engagement, positive relationships, meaning and achievement/accomplishment. PERMA has been applied across arts contexts as an effective framework within which to examine wellbeing and motivation in community, educational and professional populations.⁴³⁻⁴⁶ In these studies, all dimensions of PERMA were cited by participants in relation to their respective arts-based activities, with the prevalence of each varying across settings.

By examining experiences of all groups involved in *Hear and Now*, this study highlights the holistic impact of intergenerational arts and its ability to create a sense of wellbeing and belonging that unites different sectors of the community, and, importantly, addresses challenges relating to the broader domain of public health.

Methods

The researchers employed two qualitative data collection methods: focus groups and observations. The first author observed several workshops to gain an overall sense of the project's process and facilitation, observe the nature of engagement of and interaction between participants, and provide contextual underpinning for the focus group data analysis. Seven focus groups took place at mid and end points of the project. The mid-point focus groups allowed questions to be piloted and captured responses from some of the older adults living with a diagnosis of dementia who may have found it difficult to reflect back by the end of the process.

Participants

Participants were 65 people representing all four groups involved in the 2019 *Hear and Now* project: older adults with a diagnosis of dementia, their carers and partners, young people, and a team of professional artists and facilitators. Of these, 27 participated in focus groups, (17 female and 10 male). Focus group participants were recruited via an open call, and one older adult and one young person volunteered twice. Table 1 provides a breakdown of focus group participants. For the purposes of this study, 'older adults' refers to people living with a diagnosis of dementia or cognitive impairment.

[Table 1 near here]

Ethics

Researchers sought ethical approval from the University of Bedfordshire's Research Institute of Media, Arts and Performance, and attended dementia awareness training before the project launched. Procedures were developed in consultation with the dementia charity involved in the project, and included measures to support the obtaining of informed consent: study information was provided in print and verbally on multiple occasions. Participants (or a parent/guardian/carer on their behalf, where appropriate) completed consent forms, which confirmed the anonymity and confidentiality of their answers, and the option to withdraw from the research at any time without giving reason. Verbal reminders of the above were given at the start of each focus group, with encouragement to speak honestly and freely.

Procedure

Seven rehearsal days, held over four weekends, culminated in a public performance. During early rehearsals, the researcher took a participatory role to gain an ethnographic understanding of participants' experiences.⁴⁷ This established trust and familiarity with participants, which, importantly, helped provide a relaxed and friendly environment for the focus groups. Later rehearsals were observed from the auditorium.

Focus groups took place on campus during rehearsal days and were coordinated with the Project Manager's support. They lasted between 30:10 and 50:01 minutes, and recordings were later transcribed verbatim. A semi-structured approach was employed, which provided suitable flexibility for the exploratory nature of the study.⁴⁷ Participants were asked about their previous engagement with music and dance, thoughts about the intergenerational element of the project, and other aspects of their experiences that related to PERMA's five indicators of wellbeing: positive emotion, engagement, positive relationships, meaning, achievement/accomplishment.⁴²

To improve accessibility for the older adults, the researchers held smaller, shorter sessions with these participants accompanied by an additional facilitator from the dementia charity who supported discussions. Several partners and carers were also present (two in the first focus group and one each in the second and third), but are not represented in Table 1; they attended to support only and questions were not addressed to them. Presence of carers and the additional facilitator was also important in case participants became agitated.

Analysis

Focus group transcripts were first content analysed using an inductive approach by the first author who organised and coded the relevant data into higher and then lower order themes (that is, broader and narrower thematic categories, respectively), which were refined through multiple readings of the text.⁴⁷ A second level of analysis utilised a deductive approach to examine these categories against the five dimensions of PERMA. This process was carried out for each group and then overall across all groups. The second and third researchers independently checked the coding of the data to enhance trustworthiness and ensure consensus across the team.⁴⁸ Whilst observation notes were not formally analysed, they supported the overall understanding of the project and aided the interpretation and rich description of the focus group data.

To heighten trustworthiness further, the research findings were shared at a public launch event, at which several participants from each group were present. This acted as a form of member checking; participants contributed to the sharing of project outcomes and answered questions from event attendees as a 'participant panel'.⁴⁸

Results and discussion

The following section outlines and discusses the results of the study in relation to the five areas of PERMA: positive emotion, engagement, positive relationships, meaning, achievement/accomplishment.⁴² Examination of responses across all groups revealed experiences relating to all five areas.

Positive emotions

Participants reported numerous positive emotions, including happiness, inspiration, pride and excitement. These emotions related to various experiences including participation in the project as a whole, positive interactions with others, performing, potential future collaborations and acts of altruism. For example, a young person explained: "It feels good because Music 4 Memory is a community to help older people remember things by music. So I feel happy helping them". Similarly, an older adult stated: "I like to make people happy because, quite frankly, I get a buzz from it". Participants felt excited about attending the workshops, seeing professionals rehearse, performing and becoming part of the project's community: "I was really excited to get asked if I could do the whole thing" (Artist/Facilitator). Feeling inspired related to learning about older participants' experiences, working with professionals and potential future performances and collaborations: "it's great working with [the professional musicians]. It's quite inspiring actually, because obviously they're really good and it inspires me to work harder" (Young person). Pride was experienced in relation to participants' own achievements in the project, as well as the progress made by others: "It makes you proud of them, because you see them as the person they were before dementia" (Partner/Carer). These glimpses into an 'old self' have been cited in previous research suggesting arts activity can improve relationships between older adults and their carers.²⁹

Positive emotional experiences such as these have also been linked to longer-lasting benefits such as increased psychological resilience, overall happiness and personal development.^{45,49}

Engagement

Participants described feelings that illustrated their engagement and absorption in artistic activities, such as excitement about taking part, feeling free, being focused and experiencing a sense of "flow" (Artist/Facilitator): an optimal state of engagement described in positive psychology⁵⁰. An older adult described being in the moment: "I just enjoy the dancing, to be quite honest. I'm not thinking about what's really, in a way, out there". These experiences also extended to opportunities to be stimulated mentally and being able to escape from the outside world and negative emotions: "it takes my mind off feeling depressed, because I've got to concentrate on something else. It gives you a really good sense of wellbeing afterwards. You feel like you've achieved something" (Partner/Carer).

Positive relationships

Experiences of support, positive relationships and making new connections were described by all groups and were vital to the positive affective responses, value and creativity of the

project. This was an encouraging outcome for the older participants, carers, partners and young people, for whom loneliness and lack of social support can be an issue.^{25,26,31}

Participants felt part of the project community, described positive collaborative experiences, and had both given and received support. They referenced kindness, mutual respect, feeling relaxed with others and a sense of exchange when mixing with people from other ages or groups in the project.

Participants also observed supportive behaviour and positive exchanges between others, across groups and ages, and it was suggested that this owed in part to the set-up of the sessions: “We've always been in a circle, always been encouraged to sit in different places and with other people[...]it's never been, ‘We're the dancers, you're the musicians, they're the older people, they're the younger people’” (Artist/Facilitator).

For some, the opportunity to make and maintain connections with others was cited as of particular importance in later life, such as when a partner had been lost: “If you're communicating with other people, and connecting with them, it's really part of carrying on living instead of deteriorating, keeping that connection” (Older adult).

Younger participants highlighted the opportunity to build trust, their enjoyment of meeting new people and, for returning participants, a feeling that “it's good to connect as a big community every year” (Young person). Additional benefits for the younger people, perceived by the adults, included enhanced levels of understanding and sensitivity towards working with the older participants, which they would not get the opportunity to do in their daily school settings: “There's definitely a higher sense of listening from them, I can sense that” (Artist/Facilitator).

Intergenerational exchanges often involved mutual learning and enjoyment: “[younger people] gain the experience from speaking to the older people, which gives the older people pleasure” (Older adult). Through mutually beneficial interactions, the project offered opportunity for perspectives of others to shift. Lack of regular interaction between older and younger generations is considered a key contributor to the perpetuation of ageism in the UK; activities like *Hear and Now* can help reduce negative attitudes to ageing that can start forming at a young age.⁵¹ There is also evidence that ageism adversely impacts older adults' physical and mental health.⁵²

Meaning

Participants' experiences during the project held meaning: they were of value at personal and professional levels, and allowed participants to feel part of a greater whole. Some found the project gave them purpose and placed value on their personal contributions. Others described it as “something to look forward to” (Older adult) that would get them out of the house. The artistic team cited the value of the project in relation to several other perceived benefits for other groups, such as freedom to move and self-express, and the importance of having ownership of the creative process. This is encouraging in light of the personal benefits associated with engaging in altruistic behaviours^{38,39} as well as previous PERMA-based research that suggests meaning is central to professional musicians' wellbeing.⁴³

Partners and carers reported feeling valued as people, which was important to this group because, “we're the persons that are often forgotten”. When talking about how they perceived their individual roles within the project, some cited their support of others – “it's shared

responsibility” (Partner/Carer) – as well as their individual artistic contribution during rehearsals.

Achievement/Accomplishment

Participants’ pride in their own and others’ involvement in the project, as well as in their development of skills and confidence, related to an overall sense of achievement.

The opportunity to learn and develop led to improved confidence and shedding of inhibitions for many participants. This occurred at situational levels, as a young participant explained: “[the professional artist] really guided me through it and I feel so much more confident”. It also happened at general levels: “[the facilitators] definitely build your confidence and take you out of your comfort zone” (Partner/Carer). For an older adult, this related to growth in confidence in social situations: “I used to be shy and I didn’t want to talk to anybody and that’s changed completely”. This was corroborated by her husband, who had also observed this positive change.

In addition to developing specific skills, many participants felt they had developed more broadly: “I’ve learnt such a lot through doing this” (Partner/Carer). Speaking about an older adult in her care, one participant said, “I can see the difference[...]She’s forgetting all her troubles” (Partner/Carer).

Additional benefits

Numerous extended benefits were identified, including a perceived impact on overall health, which was mentioned by the older adults and their partners and carers in particular. This related not only to the emotionally and mentally stimulating effect of engaging artistically and socially – “it’s caused me to realise that stimulating your brain is so important[...]I’ve got a challenge, which I’m enjoying” (Older adult) – but some physical benefits too, such as the opportunity to expand range of movement and exercise vocal chords. An older adult claimed that taking part in arts activity, “keeps us away from the doctors a lot, which is a good thing”. Whilst not verifiable, such statements could indicate improved self-perception of aging, which itself has been linked to better health.⁵³ Referring to their own capacity to offer good quality care, people in caring roles also noted the potential knock-on effect of their own health being supported: “if the people who are doing the caring are not well in themselves, then they can’t support their loved ones”.

By bringing visibility to the contributions of all groups, the project has a part to play in raising awareness of their potential. This was referenced in particular relation to the people living with a diagnosis of dementia, whose capabilities are often stereotyped: “I think it’ll be a catalyst as well for other projects[...]a lot of people have a stereotype vision of somebody with dementia, and you couldn’t possibly involve them in things” (Partner/Carer). Therefore, along with this awareness-raising came the opportunity to challenge such assumptions and stereotypes.

Overall, the above supports existing literature suggesting that intergenerational arts activities are beneficial for individuals’ psychological wellbeing.^{9,10,54} It also reflects the findings of PERMA-related studies in which all five dimensions were experienced by participants of varying ages, artform settings and engagement levels, but with different volumes of evidence for each component and to varying degrees of importance for each group.⁴³⁻⁴⁶ For example, in the current study, younger people cited acts of altruism, social connection and the

development of new skills as key positives, whilst carers highlighted the importance of shared responsibility.

In addition to the numerous positive outcomes described by participants, the overall health benefits could also help to relieve pressure on health services, and on those in unpaid caring roles whose lives can be greatly impacted by these responsibilities. The research also highlighted the importance of involving the partners and carers of people with long-term health conditions in these kinds of projects so they can access the benefits of shared responsibility for their loved ones and opportunity to develop and feel valued as individuals. Carers' comments around the importance of personal wellbeing when providing care for others also links to calls in the literature for carers to be better supported in their roles.³³

A final broader benefit was the project's provision of access to a rare opportunity to connect with high-profile professional artists. This is significant, in light of the inequality of access to publicly funded arts activity among young people (for example, for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, attending schools with low cultural offers, or experiencing psychological barriers to engaging)⁵⁵⁻⁵⁷ and older people.²⁰⁻²¹ With its myriad benefits in mind, this research demonstrates the value and wide-ranging impact work of this nature can have.

Limitations

The necessarily small sample sizes meant that results are not generalisable beyond this study. Furthermore, two participants' additional opportunity to contribute to discussion may have resulted in disproportionate representation within their respective groups. Participants reported benefits (i.e. fewer doctor visits) that could not be substantiated within the scope of the study; future studies could consider following up on such claims to strengthen reliability of results. Whilst developing familiarity with participants was considered important for the focus groups, a reduced sense of anonymity may have increased tendencies to give socially acceptable responses.

Conclusion

The findings of this research suggest that continued support for intergenerational arts projects could help to address ongoing public health concerns around wellbeing and social inclusion, and support communities to become more meaningfully connected. This includes the potential of such projects to provide valuable opportunity to challenge negative perceptions of ageing. Moreover, experiences relating to all five dimensions of the PERMA model of wellbeing (positive emotion, engagement, positive relationships, meaning, achievement/accomplishment) were cited by the four participant groups, which suggests examining the impact of such projects on all project collaborators is worthy of further study. Understanding the multifaceted positive impact that these projects can have upon the various groups involved will enable artistic and healthcare communities to better collaborate and value each other's practices.

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Authors' declaration:

The first author conducted observations and focus groups, and drafted the report. All authors contributed to study design, analysis of results, and the editing and approval of the manuscript.

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Competing interests:

None declared.

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Tables and figures

Table 1. Focus group participants

Group	When	Mean age (yrs)	Male	Female	Total
Young People (1 of 2)	Mid-way	11.5	2	2	4
Young people (2 of 2)	End-point	13.4	3	2	5
Older adults (1 of 3)	Mid-way	82.3	1	2	3
Older adults (2 of 3)	End-point	83.5	2	2	4
Older adults (3 of 3)	End-point	86.5	1	1	2
Partners and carers	End-point	67.3	-	4	4
Artists/facilitators	End-point	45	3	4	7

Note: The second session for young people and the third session for older adults each featured one returning participant.