Stories of Creative Ageing

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Abstract

**Purpose –** The purpose of this paperis to highlight some of the benefits and issues relating to arts participation in later life.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper draws on literature relating to older people’s arts participation, and also includes discussion of the author’s doctoral research into arts and ageing. The research was a qualitative study, influenced by narrative approaches and life-course perspectives. It involved interviews with 24 participants who have connections with a case-study town in the English Midlands.

**Findings**  - The paper focuses on the findings from six participants belonging to a male voice choir. The themes that are discussed include the importance of continuity; issues of identity; mutual support; impact of ill health and the sustainability of group activities.

**Research limitations/implications -** This is a small-scale study, based in one case study town. Care should therefore be taken in generalising to different populations and areas. Potential for future research includes:

* Other geographical locations, including larger urban areas.
* Specific focus on choir participation, or other art form.
* Involving people from a wider range of ethnic backgrounds.

**Social implications –** This study adds to a growing body of evidence about the value of arts and culture to society.

**Originality/value –** This study is original in adopting life-course perspectives to understand later life arts participation. It also offers original insights into the nature of arts-generated social capital and how this may be viewed within a wider context of resourceful ageing.

**Keywords –** Ageing well, arts, social capital, singing, narratives, creativity

**Paper type –** Research paper.

Introduction

In recent years there has been a growth of interest in older people’s arts participation, from both researchers and arts practitioners. The emphasis has frequently been on the health benefits of participation. Gene Cohen, a US-based psychiatrist, published extensively on the subject of creativity and ageing before his death in 2009. His research focused on understanding the physiological and psychological effects of arts participation on older people. In a 2009 study for example, he discussed theories for the underlying mechanisms that explain the positive role of music and art in relation to health with ageing (Cohen 2009).

It is also increasingly recognised that arts approaches may have a particular value in work with people with dementia, and there is various research that seeks to better understand and demonstrate such value. In an Evidence Review of the Impact of Participatory Arts on Older People, the Mental Health Foundation (2011) identify a range of positive benefits from participatory art that involves people with dementia accessing their community or interacting with professionals (such as social workers or art students). Such benefits included addressing age discrimination by raising awareness and expectations among the wider community; breaking down stereotypes, and reducing negative attitudes and behaviour (MHF 2011). On-going research in this area includes a major three-year interdisciplinary research project called Dementia and Imagination, led by Dr Gill Windle at Bangor University. The project is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council Connected Communities Programme and it explores the role of creative activities within dementia supportive communities (Dementia and Imagination 2014).

The Baring Foundation has been highly influential in funding arts work with older people, since launching a new funding programme in 2009 to support arts organisations working in a participative way with older people in the UK. The funding programme was initially informed by a report by David Cutler (2009), which analyses 120 case studies of arts organisations working with older people. It also highlights the value of arts participation for older people, in terms of two inter-related dimensions of health (mental and physical), and personal and community relations. The report concludes that despite the benefits, older people’s arts participation tends to be overlooked in policy and service provision. A further report by Cutler et al. (2011) turned the spotlight on the ways in which arts practices in residential care settings can enhance quality of life. The ‘Arts and Older People in Care’ programme, jointly funded by the Baring Foundation and Arts Council England, was launched in 2013, with the aim of offering older people in residential homes access to quality arts experiences. A website called ‘Age of Creativity’ was commissioned by the Baring Foundation, providing a UK-wide site ‘to share, celebrate and inspire work in the field of arts and older people’ (Age of Creativity 2014).

Singing in Choirs

One dimension of the increasing interest in arts and ageing has been a focus on the benefits of singing in a group. There has been a general revival of interest in choirs, partly due to television programmes such as Gareth Malone’s The Choir, which follows the London Symphony Orchestra choirmaster as he trains groups to perform as choirs. A number of studies involving singing projects with older people have identified social benefits to participants. Findings have suggested that people experienced an increased quality of life as a result of their participation, and that it helped combat potentially negative experiences of ageing, including the challenges of bereavement, widowhood, declining health and isolation (Hillman 2002). Singing in a group has also been found to ‘have an equalizing effect and to inspire confidence and to reduce isolation’ (Bungay and Skingley 2008:6). Clift et al. (2008) also suggested that singing in a group offered distinctive social benefits, in the sense of a feeling of ‘connection’ with the whole choir (see also MHF 2011).

Stories and Ageing

Alongside the interest in the benefits of later life arts participation for health and quality of life, researchers in arts and ageing have emphasised the significance of stories in describing and understanding the process of ageing. Some of the research in this area is brought together in a publication containing some of the findings of the New Dynamics of Ageing (NDA) Programme (Murray et al. 2014). The NDA programme was the UK’s largest research programme in ageing: a pioneering multi-disciplinary research programme, involving the five UK Research Councils. It introduced a new focus on arts and ageing, as it included projects addressing a range of different art forms and types of participation. In introducing their analysis of the ways in which the arts can help us to understand and transform ageing, Murray et al. (2014:77) note that:

*“We hear and tell stories about growing old; we read and watch published and filmed stories about older people; we are surrounded by images of ageing with their implicit narratives. Such stories permeate our social world and shape our expectations about older people and about growing old ourselves.”*

This quote encapsulates the personal motivation that I felt, back in 2007, to undertake doctoral research into arts and ageing. I was inspired by my own grandmother, who spent her life juggling working and caring responsibilities, and only in much later life had the opportunity to develop her arts practice. She was a talented artist, who gained a GCSE and then an ‘A’ Level in Art at the age of 73. As someone who had been required to leave school to work in a factory at the age of fourteen, with no qualifications, this was hugely significant: she was a genuine lifelong learner, who took advantage of later life opportunities to gain self-fulfilment through her arts participation, despite ill health, limited mobility and resources, and not being a car driver.

In Western culture, we often focus on narratives of decline and dependency when we talk about ageing. In contrast, highlighting people’s later life arts participation emphasises opportunities for development, creativity, learning and perhaps enhanced self-identities and sense of belonging. In my research, I was interested in the factors that shaped people’s later-life arts participation, and so I adopted a life course perspective. This approach recognises the value of looking at people’s later life experiences in the context of the rest of their lives, rather than looking at old age in isolation.

Methodology

The overall aim of this doctoral research was to explore the meanings that older people attach to their participation in group arts activities throughout their lives. It was a qualitative study, influenced by narrative methodologies, and involving in-depth interviews with 24 participants aged 60-87 in a case study town in the English Midlands. Participants were recruited through arts groups that took place in the town; these included choirs, dancing and an amateur dramatics group, along with groups for painting and various crafts activities. The main fieldwork was undertaken during 2008, and the PhD was awarded in 2011.

Findings

For the purposes of this paper, I will highlight some of the key findings from my doctoral research, with reference to interview data from six of the participants, all of whom were members of a male voice choir. Those six participants are Derek (aged 60); Jack (aged 69); Stan (aged 70); Philip (aged 73); Leonard (aged 77), and Tony (aged 80).[[1]](#footnote-1) The stories that emerged from these participants were particularly rich: they illustrate the findings well, and give us valuable insights into the ways in which group arts activities can strengthen the social networks of older men: this is important in the context of concerns over older people’s loneliness, and the ways in which men and women are affected differently (Ferguson 2011).

* ***Importance of Continuity***

In interviewing participants, I asked them to tell me the story of their arts participation throughout their lives. As one might expect, many participants began at the beginning, with their childhood experiences, and one of the key findings of that emerged was the key role that such experiences at home, school and church had played in shaping people’s later life arts engagement:

*“I started when I was about five in the arts if you can call singing in the church choir…I was a probationer at five y’see and when you start that young, music gets into you doesn’t it?”* *(Leonard)*

Whilst the influence of home and school may be a generally predictable finding, the role of the church was perhaps a distinctive aspect for people in this cohort. Some of the participants had experienced relatively deprived childhoods, but churches had offered them arts and cultural opportunities including singing, drama and crafts.

Three of the choristers: Philip, Tony and Leonard, had also served in the Armed Forces, which had led to opportunities for singing and performance – thus providing a further element of continuity. Overall, the research found that it was unusual for someone to have started an arts activity that was completely new to him or her, in later life. Most people’s stories followed a logical, coherent narrative, with their later life arts engagement being in some way a continuation or progression of earlier activities. Even when an activity was new to someone, they tended to try to explain it as a logical progression, perhaps by suggesting that they were ‘following in the footsteps’ of a family member.

* ***Issues of Identity***

People’s arts participation was thus in many ways an important aspect of their self-identity, and indeed a key research finding was the way in which later life arts participation could contribute to positive ageing identities. The male voice choir in particular had a certain status attached to it, due to its semi-professional nature:

*“We have a good time but our concert coming up…that is the serious one; that is our concert, that is our money earner so we’re taking it extremely seriously – well we do take music extremely seriously anyway…in a semi-professional organisation you’ve got to have some sort of standard…*” *(Derek)*

Derek goes on to talk about his love of performing and the ‘buzz’ that he gets from it:

*“I don’t mind performing, you know- I love it. There’s a certain element of buzz for me in it you know it’s a buzz when I’ve done it. It takes me a little while to come down after the concert”*

As well as the pride in the performance, Jack also talked about his pride in wearing the uniform of the choir, and other aspects of the group’s identity:

 *“You can tell when the audience have liked something – straight away, as soon as you’ve done it, so there’s that feeling of you’re doing something worthwhile, you know? We do an awful lot of work for charities…you name it we do it, and then this strengthens the sense of purpose y’see that you make the effort. And it’s [long pause] quite a pride to wear the uniform…so you feel quite important and then again there’s a comfort of being in a crowd…” (Jack)*

The final point in Jack’s quote also introduces another key finding: that of the nature of the mutual support that could be seen in the choir.

* ***Mutual Support***

As well as the findings relating to the serious and semi-professional aspects of the choir, there were also many stories about the high levels of practical and emotional support and the sense of ‘family’. This was a strong finding throughout the research, and the community of the male voice choir was certainly no exception. Stan, for example, had noted during the interview that he was struggling to find the motivation to continue his involvement in the choir. When I asked him what it was that kept him going, his response was immediate and unequivocal:

*“Comradeship. Comradeship and being together. There’s a lot of feeling in the choir, I mean if anybody’s bad everybody mucks in…They’re always there for you. If you wanted anything they’re always there for you.” (Stan)*

Similarly, Leonard recalled an unusual hospital visit by a large number of fellow choristers:

*“And I was in [place name] Hospital. And I had 16 or 18 around me bed one afternoon. Now that showed whether they cared didn’t it? Hey, and they all started singing…” (Leonard)*

The strong culture of mutual support and inter-dependency (a theme throughout the research findings), challenged stereotypical notions of dependency in later life, and contributed to new insights about the nature of arts-generated social capital and how it is experienced by people. Such findings led me to consider the nature of community that exists in choirs. In the first place, it is significant that singing in a group involves inherent mutual support. Moreover, I was very struck by this quote from Stan:

*“And you know everybody in the choir, and they know you... Yeah, cos you stand by them people all the time y’see. Your first tenors, second tenors, second bass, first bass see. I mean there’s four of us [names them] who always stand together and you get to know your cordon.”*

The quote is very evocative of the way that people refer to communities of days gone by when ‘everyone knew everyone else in the street’. It highlights a distinctive form of community that can be seen to exist in choirs, in which the very act of singing becomes a metaphor for community itself.

* ***Impact of Ill-Health***

However, alongside the positive stories of engagement in a close and supportive community, there also existed threats to involvement in that community – and one of these was the impact of people’s health. Generally speaking in the research, there were numerous examples of ways in which people’s arts participation was a positive strategy for dealing with their health issues.

Sometimes, even when people were in extremely poor health and with very limited mobility, they were able to continue to engage in group arts activities.

However, in some cases their health became a barrier. This was the case for Phillip, who had recently stopped attending the choir, as he could no longer stand for the performances. This part of his story begins when he retires from a job he loved as a flight attendant manager and moved to a new area:

*“…in the meantime the male voice choir saved me. When I left flying…in 1995, there was a very good choir here and I’d heard them on one of the old 33 rev vinyl records…I found one track on there that I played over and over and over till midnight and I thought oh, I’m going to join that lot and I had to – and I did. And I stuck with it until this stick – it made my walking difficult and it really did hurt and I couldn’t really carry it on – but I did nearly ten years of it and the taking part was that lovely sound, oh it filled the gap of not writing many poems again, but that was basically what it was and so now I’ve got the memory of the choir, many friends still in it…*

Phillip was clearly struggling with a sense of loss. He had not yet been able to bring himself to return his blazer, noting that he would ‘hate to lose it’. His story reveals the importance of the choir in his life and clearly illustrates why he was struggling so much with having to give it up.

***Sustainability of Group Activities***

As well as Phillip’s individual story of having to cease his involvement in the choir, there were more general concerns about the sustainability of a wide range of the activities that people took part in. This was demonstrated nowhere more strongly than in relation to the male voice choir:

*“The other thing that’s affecting the type of stuff that we do in the choir I suppose is the fact that many of the absolute stalwarts of the choir are getting on a bit and some of them have left to go to different areas. They’ve left because they’re too old or they’re now singing in a far better place- you know, they’ve left us altogether…”* *(Derek).*

Various other reasons were offered for the concerns over the sustainability of the choir and some of the other groups, including financial issues; the age and health status of existing members; the ability to attract group leaders, and a lack of on-going interest from younger cohorts. This lack of interest was linked to changing social norms: people used to progress to a male voice choir from a church choir, and there were also strong links to local industries, such as coal mining. However, in some cases, people were showing greater interest and joining the choir, as they got older. This begs the question of whether people who are now middle aged will end up liking some of the same activities as their parents do now, or whether the landscape of later life arts participation will change drastically as that cohort grows older. What will future stories of creative ageing be?

Discussion

Based on these findings, there are three key issues to discuss in a little more depth, focusing on self-identity, social capital and resourceful ageing.

Positive Self-Identities

Maintaining a sense of self-identity as we age may be seen as a challenge of negotiating continuity and change. The need to identify a sense of coherence in one’s life story is seen as being particularly challenging due to the effects of globalisation, which can be seen to undermine the role of local culture and to offer instead a potentially bewildering range of possibilities around which people can develop their identity (Woodward 2002). The evidence from this research study suggests that people’s arts engagement may address this challenge by enabling people to preserve a sense of identity based in part upon long-standing participation in activities that connect with people’s cultural traditions, and often require no special equipment or technology. Participation in male voice choirs was found to be a particularly striking example of this: in some cases, singing had provided a sense of continuity throughout their entire lives, and this was also linked to the history of the male voice choir within local working class culture.

Social capital

In addressing the social relationships that were formed through people’s group arts participation, the concept of social capital was used as a key basis for analysing people’s narratives. Social capital is used to describe social networks and the reciprocal exchanges that arise from such networks, and Robert Putnam (2000) is often credited with initiating a growth of interest in the concept, both academically and politically. Putnam was concerned with declining levels of social capital in the United States since the 1950’s and the impact of this on people’s civic engagement.

This research project found that group arts activities (including singing in choirs), continue to play a significant role in generating social capital. Moreover, the research identifies a number of distinctive aspects of art-generated social capital. In particular, some of the activities (including singing) involve intrinsic mutual support, and a wide range of both practical and emotional support could also be seen to stem from group arts activities. This supports Paulson’s (2011) work on dance groups for older people which, she argued, functioned as ‘therapeutic communities’ due to the ways in which they offered social support and exhibited concern for sick members. In addition, the passing on of skills to each other within the social context of group arts activities can be seen as a further distinctive aspect of arts generated social capital.

The notion of the choir as functioning as a community in both a literal and a metaphorical sense supports the findings of Cooper and Thomas (2002), in relation to the sense of community in dance groups. They similarly suggested that the collective act of dancing became a metaphor for community. They interpreted this as ‘communitas’, which is used to describe an intense community spirit, characterized by social equality, solidarity and togetherness. A particularly important aspect of the findings in relation to social capital is that they highlight some of the dynamics of mutual support and reciprocity that can be seen in the lives of older people: this challenges a focus in existing literature on older people as consumers of social capital, rather than on their capacity for producing and investing social capital. This, in turn, challenges ageist views based on the perceived dependency of older people.

Resourceful Ageing

Interest in positive aspects of ageing has led to the development of concepts such as ‘active ageing’ and ‘successful ageing’. However, such concepts are problematic in that they are influenced by bio-medical perspectives on ageing and are increasingly seen as prescriptive (Holstein & Minkler 2007). An alternative perspective is offered by a United Nations document (UN, 1999), which was designed to facilitate movement towards ‘a society for all ages’. The strategy was based on the notion of ‘resourceful ageing’, and offered a framework that included four types of resources: human capital; social/cultural capital; economic capital and environmental capital. The report emphasises the importance of ‘investing’ in people’s capital throughout their lives if they are to develop resources that they can draw upon in later life.

My research study identifies numerous ways in which people’s arts engagement during their lives may be linked to the development of such resources, particularly human, social and cultural capital. Moreover, the concept of resourceful ageing has a wider application for anyone working with older people. It recognises that older people do not operate on a level playing field, all equally able to make decisions that enable them to age ‘successfully’. Rather, they are affected by their life-course experiences and by a range of structural factors, which in turn are influenced by policy decisions. It would be easy to adopt an uncritically upbeat and positive portrayal of ageing when addressing arts and creativity in relation to older people. However, considering people’s participation in terms of the resources (of all types) that they might have access to, allows us to take a more balanced approach that recognises the impact of inequalities and other challenges that may be faced.

Conclusion and Implications for Practice

This article has highlighted research and practice around older people’s arts participation in recent years, and some of the benefits of such activities. It has also presented findings from a small-scale doctoral study that explored the meanings that older people attach to their participation in group arts activities throughout their lives. The findings have offered qualitative understandings of the ways in which older people experience and invest social capital through their group arts engagement. This has been linked to the wider concept of ‘resourceful ageing’, which, in turn, contributes to greater understanding of the ways in which life-course experiences can impact on later life opportunities and challenges.

For those who are working with older people, I would suggest three key issues for consideration in the light of this research:

* The importance of making links to people’s life course experiences and thus to their sense of identity as a starting point for their involvement in arts opportunities.
* Greater recognition of the value of the contribution that older people make to sustaining arts and cultural activities, and the ways in which they generate and invest social capital, thus challenging notions of later life dependency.
* The concept of resourceful ageing is one that is transferable to a wide range of contexts, including older people’s arts participation. It encourages a life-course perspective and challenges the tendency to look at issues for older people in isolation from the rest of their lives.

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1. All names are pseudonyms [↑](#footnote-ref-1)