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Being well, being musical: music composition as a resource and occupation for older people

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Key words:

Arts-based research, arts-in-health, community music, ageing.

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Introduction: Participatory music making for older people has tended to focus on singing and performance. In a community music project undertaken by Manchester Camerata (a chamber orchestra), Blacon Community Trust and a small group of older adults, participants were given the opportunity to compose individual pieces of music interactively with professional musicians. This paper reports the findings of research into the project.

Method: An arts-based research method was adopted and incorporated action research and interpretive interactionism to articulate the experiences and perceptions of participants. Participants and Manchester Camerata musicians also worked together to represent the thematic findings of the research in a group composition.

Findings: The findings demonstrate that individual and group music composition contributed to a sense of wellbeing through control over musical materials, opportunities for creativity and identity making, validation of life experience and social engagement with other participants and professional musicians.

Conclusion: The results emphasised occupation as essential to health and wellbeing in the later stages of life. The findings also highlight the particularly innovative aspects of this research: (i) the use of music composition as a viable arts-in-health occupation for older people and (ii) the arts-based research method of group composition.

Introduction

It is widely recognised that people are generally living longer and healthier lives. Life expectancy significantly increased during the last century (World Health Organization [WHO] 2011a) such that, compared to life expectancies in 1900, a gain of approximately 30 years has been estimated in Europe, the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand (Christiansen et al 2009). While increasing longevity may bring benefits from ongoing occupational engagement and more opportunities for life experiences, maintaining the health and wellbeing of the ageing population is also one of the biggest challenges facing contemporary healthcare providers and policy makers (Department of Health 2011). Many bodies are working to respond to these challenges, including national and local government, charities, arts organisations and educational institutions.

Coventry University is just one education provider whose research goals include a focus on wellbeing and social inclusion for older people (Coventry University 2010). For this project, the university researched a project led by Manchester Camerata, an orchestra that seeks to address just such issues of wellbeing and inclusion through participatory music making. The orchestra works closely with Manchester City Council, which itself helped Manchester to become the first city in the United Kingdom (UK) designated as 'age friendly' by the WHO in 2010. Age-friendly cities are part of WHO's aim to create age-friendly environments that 'encourage active ageing by optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age' (WHO 2011b). The WHO's aim to ameliorate occupational imbalance in older people and to engage

them in creative occupation also aligns closely with the strategic planning of the Occupational Therapy profession (BAOT/COT 2008).

Literature review

Occupation in later life

Challenges that face the ageing population include poor motivation in self care (Mussi et al 2002), dissociative states that include depression and in some cases suicidal ideation (Rubin and Hewstone 1998, De Leo et al 2001), loneliness (Bruce et al 2007), emotional distress (Scott et al 2001) and impaired quality of life (Hassell et al 2006). Such challenges indicate the more negative outcomes arising from the enormous social transformation that an ageing population may experience upon entering a later stage of life.

Many theorists present concepts of occupation and activity to help understand health in older adulthood (Cohen 2009, Law and McColl 2010, Peppin and Deutscher 2011). Although there has been discussion within the occupational therapy literature concerning terminology (Golledge 1998a, 1998b, Pierce 2001), the term 'occupation' as used in this paper refers specifically to the occupation of 'musicking', defined as: 'to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practising, by providing material for performance' (Small 1998, p9). Wilcock describes occupations as 'purposeful and meaningful daily activities that fill a person's time' (2006, p696) and in this project participants engaged in all the activities listed by Small (1998), except performing.

Berger's description of life as a dynamic system of multi-directional change is argued within this paper as being influenced by engagement in occupations (Berger 2005, p18). The life span perspective may therefore be used as a means of understanding those occupations that are meaningful to individuals, even though — as in this project — they may initially appear unrepresentative of their life stage. Erikson et al (1986) put forward eight psychosocial themes of old age. These include 'identity versus identity confusion', which relates to the continued search for identity as well as the re-experiencing and re-evaluation of identity according to changed abilities and circumstances. This theme, along with 'integrity versus despair' points to some of the existential concerns of old age and the importance of occupation for validating previous and current 'selves'.

Whiteford and Townsend (2011) highlight the role of engagement in occupation and its centrality in health and wellbeing. Law and McColl (2010) and COT (2006) support Wilcock who suggests that 'enabl[ing] people to participate in occupation will improve their experience of health and wellbeing' (2003:53). Carey (2011) found that older people in a residential setting often viewed the 'real world' as being outside and were not engaged in occupations within the setting. The issues of occupational imbalance and potential deprivation (Christiansen and Townsend 2004) are implicit within this study.

Relevant to this research are the attitudes of older people towards occupation. With regard to retirees in general, Wilcock (2006) identified that older people in the early stages of retirement chose to engage in cognitively stimulating occupations that were challenging. For people within residential settings, Carey (2011) found that occupations, particularly those that involved cognition through reminiscence, were valued very highly and that such processes of identity-realisation not only enabled people to feel more linked to their environment but also reinforced their sense of self. Similarly, Reed et al (2010) note that identity is directly influenced by meanings gained from occupational engagement and the influence of the cultural environment.

Participatory music making

There is widespread activity within UK health and social care that uses creative media to enhance quality of life and wellbeing. The potential of such arts-in-health initiatives was recognised at a national level in 2007 with the publication of three significant reports (Arts Council England and Department of Health 2007, Arts Council England 2007, Department of Health 2007). Such initiatives often include participatory music making and are sometimes classed under the heading of community music. During the last decade, the field of community music has focused attention on lifelong learning (Dabback 2008, Southcott 2009) and, in a similar vein, arts-in-health provision has seen an expansion of interest in music projects for older people (Cutler 2009, Hallam et al 2011).

Research helps to evaluate such participatory work, often in collaborative and transdisciplinary ways (Clift et al 2009, Hallam et al 2011). Approaches to research into music, health and wellbeing are very varied and include disciplinary perspectives that range from social and health psychology (Murray and Lamont 2012) and music therapy (Aldridge 1996, Stige 2012), to biology (Koelsch and Stegemann 2012) and neuroscience (Koelsch et al 2010, Zatorre et al 2007). As a result, the putative mechanisms underlying music-related changes to health and wellbeing are also varied. They include, on the one hand, chemical changes in the brain that correlate with positive effects on the immune system (Koelsch and Siebel 2005) and, on the other, psychological impacts (such as changes in, or maintenance of, self-concept or identity) that correlate with vital and enjoyable musical experiences, opportunities for exercising agency and the expression of creativity (DeNora 2007, Murray and Lamont 2012).

Regarding older people's engagement in participatory music making, research has often highlighted the emotional, cognitive, physical and social benefits of singing, playing instruments and music appreciation (Cohen et al 2006, Cohen et al 2007, Cohen 2009, Bungay et al 2010, Skingley and Bungay 2010, Hallam et al 2011). However, while the knowledge base with regard to music making is established, and developing, the knowledge base relating to the impact of music composition as an occupation is more limited; it is this latter perspective that the Manchester Camerata project sought to address. The project detailed below had both a social dimension that sought actively to involve older adults

from the local community in the arts and a research dimension that researched the use of composition with this population. In the initial project stages Manchester Camerata worked with older adults from a residential care home and from the local community. Later project stages involved a research team working collaboratively with both the musicians and older adults to explore these experiences and support the participants in the expression of their experiences in words and music.

The aims of the research were:

- To explore and document participants' experience of a music composition project.
- To explore how music composition might become an occupation and resource that provides benefits to older people in later life stages.

Method

The participatory and collaborative nature of both the initial project and the research into the work done by Manchester Camerata had many links with participatory action research principles and stages (Roth and Esdaile 2001, Wimpenny 2010) and this initially provided a methodological framework. However, the primary emphasis on the continued use of music as a means to explore experience within the research was felt by the research team to have a stronger resonance with the principles of performance ethnography (Denzin 2001). Arts-based inquiry is a relatively new and expanding area of qualitative research in which terminology may be used with subtle differences in meaning by different authors (Knowles and Cole 2008). For the purposes of this study, we use McNiff's definition of arts-based research:

... the systematic use of the artistic process ... as a primary way of understanding and examining experience by both researchers and the people that they involve in their studies (McNiff 2008, p29).

This definition is broad and may fit with a number of different qualitative research methodologies. Given that this study explored the experiences of a particular cultural group, ethnography was selected as the research methodology as this gave the team the opportunity to utilize the work of Denzin. Denzin's interpretive interactionism analytical framework makes explicit links between ethnography and performance. It may support researchers to work collaboratively with participants to effect change, challenge potential social injustice and to present findings in creative formats (Denzin 2001), thus combining the action research principles and creative ideas that the team had originally envisaged.

The sample and ethical considerations

The research received ethical approval from Coventry University Ethics Committee. Recruitment for the Manchester Camerata music composition project was carried out by Blacon Community Trust through posters in community venues, snowball sampling (a non-probability sampling technique

whereby participants recruit other participants from their acquaintances) and by approaching a local residential care home. All individuals who took part in the music composition project were informed prior to participation that the work was linked to a research project and that researchers would therefore be present during some of the later sessions. It was made clear to the group members that they were neither required to take part in the research element nor would a decision not to be involved in any way affect their right to work with the musicians on individual compositions. All those who participated received a participant information sheet and had the capacity to understand the information that they received, so could make an informed decision to consent. The sample was purposive in that all participants had extensive experience of older adulthood and taking part in music composition. The participants were three older people from the local community and three from the residential setting where the music project and the data collection were conducted; all wished to be identified by name (see Table 1).

Table 1. Participants' backgrounds in relation to the music project

Name	Location	Previous experience with music/arts
Edna	Community	Learned the piano as a child. Never thought of herself as creative. Parents and brother artistic.
Eric	Residential home	Lifelong interest in music. Connected music to his happiest period in life. His son is a musician.
Bob	Residential home	Did not view himself as being creative although he enjoyed music.
Brian	Residential home	Enjoyed writing at school. Wrote a book about his work experiences but never completed it due to ill health. Listened to music prior to project.
Barbara	Community	Sings in a choir, excellent singer.
Louisa	Community	Has always associated music with life experience. Links music with different aspects of her day and life events.

Composing with Manchester Camerata

The group of older people composed music through working directly with a string quartet drawn from the ensemble and a professional composer (or 'facilitator') with experience in community music work and therapeutic music making. The activity was a collaborative learning experience that focused on creative process rather than striving for polished outcomes (Small 1998). This music project took place on 6 individual day-long sessions over a period of 2 months. The facilitator encouraged the participants to discover a motivation to compose music. The participants chose to use their life stories as the basis for composition, revealing them through conversation, poetry reading, discussion and writing. In particular, participants were asked to consider aural memories and to link sentiment with sound (Knowles and Cole 2008).

The participants, or scribes working with them, used several creative media (prose, poetry and drawings) to make storyboards, which then became improvising scores for the musicians. These scores detailed experiences, memories and narratives. The string quartet improvised around these stimuli and, along with help from the facilitator, transformed them into musical structures. When listening to live or recorded performances, the participants voiced their views and demanded varying degrees of alteration, thus confirming the collaborative nature of the project. The facilitator notated the results of the workshops so that the musicians could reliably perform the pieces. The participants were also involved in designing and writing programme notes for the concert at the end of the project. (Audio recordings of the compositions are available at: <http://www.manchestercamerata.co.uk/news/quartet-inventions>)

Six key research stages

Interpretive interactionism consists of six key stages. These stages, listed below, are based on Denzin (2001, p70). Unusually, in the case of this research, these criteria are largely embedded in the music composition itself, so their application may be difficult to evaluate for readers unused to arts-based research methods. Readers may therefore find it helpful to apply traditional frameworks relating to quality when reading this article, but are nonetheless invited to consider the limitations that doing so may impose on research of this nature.

1. **Framing the research question:** The research team and Manchester Camerata developed the project and research questions prior to meeting potential participants. Approval was granted by Coventry University Ethics Committee. The creative output was this academic paper.
2. **Deconstructing and analysing prior conceptions:** A literature review was undertaken by the research team. Team members reflected upon their conceptions relating to the research throughout the project. Particular themes for reflection included conceptions of older adults, occupation, music and how the researchers' actions affected the collaborative working with participants. The output was this academic paper and the researchers' reflective diaries.
3. **Capturing the phenomena and situating it in the natural world:** The natural world for this project was the residential care home in which the group created music compositions. Researchers continued to use the range of creative media that participants had used during the project (art, prose, sounds and music) as well as semi-structured interviews to explore participant experiences of taking part in music composition. Each participant worked with one allocated researcher to create an individual picture of their time on the project. Interviews were videoed and audio recorded. Creative outputs included the individual 'storyboards' created by participants and pieces of artwork, interviews, sound snippets and prose, worked were worked into individual compositions by the participants, facilitator and Manchester Camerata musicians.

4. **Reducing the phenomena to their essential elements and discovering essential structures:** The individual experiences of the participants were initially examined by the researcher who had collected the data. Each researcher identified themes that were unique to the participant. Having determined individual themes, the researchers then met to propose tentative common themes and structures. The output was this paper.
5. **Constructing the phenomena — reconstituting the parts:** The research team met with the participants in a group to share their interpretations of the findings, which had been merged into three key themes (see Findings section). The output was a group composition, working these interpretations into a piece that represented the findings in musical form, performed by Manchester Camerata.
6. **Contextualising the phenomena — relocating new insights in the natural social world:** The natural social world of the participants was the residential home and local community, and that of Manchester Camerata was a musical environment. Insights captured in music were located in these locations through: (i) sending recordings, scores and 'plain English' summaries to participants and (ii) in the musicians' ongoing development of community music skills in other Manchester Camerata projects. The composition was performed by Manchester Camerata, and the original audience included participants, care staff and research team. The piece was recorded and filmed and has been shown in the community and at three conferences. Academic outputs also include this academic paper.

Data analysis

Transcripts were read iteratively and the visual materials or sounds that participants had linked to their interviews were examined to develop familiarity with the content, which was then deconstructed using Denzin's stages of interpretive interactionism (Denzin 2001). Initial ideas and reflections were noted, coded and stored in an Excel database. Individual themes for each participant were developed. At this stage, themes were identified which referred solely to actions and events that related to individuals. The researchers then met and jointly constructed tentative group themes. The researchers kept reflective diaries throughout this process to explore their influence upon the research process. A research mentor with experience of using arts-based research techniques and interpretive interactionism liaised with the research team to help explore the issues that the analysis and reflections raised.

The research team, the facilitator and the Manchester Camerata musicians then met with participants to share and refine their findings. For example, a participant wanted to clarify further the confusion and uncertainty she felt at the onset of the project. The musicians explored ways to perform those feelings on their instruments until the participant approved, thus capturing lived experience in a non-verbal medium. The facilitator made clear to the participants that any of the musical material generated during this stage

could be, if they wished, incorporated into a group composition but could remain within an individual piece if that was the participant's preference, and there was no obligation to share individual findings within the group piece. In practice, participants negotiated how their individual work would sound within the group piece and all decided to include their material in this context.

Quality of the research

Denzin argues that traditional norms for measuring the quality of qualitative research (such as trustworthiness) are based upon quantitative criteria and are therefore inappropriate as a means of judging this methodology (Denzin 2009). Using this line of argument, the researchers considered the work of Van Niekerk and Savin-Baden (2010), who suggest that criteria such as the degree to which the research methods represent and legitimate the experiences of the participants may be applied to qualitative research. Unusually, in the case of this research, these criteria are largely embedded in the music composition itself, so their application may be difficult to evaluate for readers unused to arts-based research methods. Readers may, therefore, find it helpful to apply traditional frameworks relating to quality when reading this article but are nonetheless invited to consider the limitations that doing so may impose on research of this nature.

Findings

On initial analysis, first order themes included the power that music had in evoking emotions and memories from the past and the potential that this had to reconnect participants with earlier identities of themselves as occupational beings. People who were living in their own homes used music to acknowledge their fears for the future, which included the likelihood of needing institutional care. People within the residential care home setting, however, started to recognise themselves as individuals who still had value and the ability to be creative in new ways — this despite the fact that generally they had more limited access to occupations, due to both the environment and increasing physical limitations. Composing together enabled fears to be challenged and new skills to be recognized, in the group. These led to three second order themes, described below.

An incomplete book: challenging fear of the future and discovering new creative skills

This theme draws its metaphor from a participant's mention of having started to write a book, which had lain unfinished since an accident. Taking this metaphor further, one might say that participants used music both to explore the chapters of their lives that had already been experienced ('written') and consider the future — the pages as yet blank, but with potential to be shaped in new ways — that the musical composition could help them to articulate.

The starting point for thinking about 'chapters' was the 'present page'. Participants expressed a number of fears: those

from the local community felt tentative about being in a residential care home, which represented their possible future and an anticipated loss of independence; participants already living in the residential setting were generally fearful of an increasing loss of independence and regard from their 'significant others' — indeed, they already felt that their identity had been devalued, particularly from their own perspective. Most of the participants, irrespective of living arrangements, were fearful of the process of composing: it was an unfamiliar activity, despite all of them having had an established and often lifelong interest in music. Exploring the past through music helped them to map 'chapters' from their earlier life, while recognising that they had the skills to develop a new occupation helped participants to consider future chapters in new ways, as indicated by Bob, below.

Bob talked about his past, identifying the loss of identity he felt when he retired and entered the residential setting. He associated this intermingling of memory and self-reflection with the sounds of a quarry near to where he lived as a child. A recreation of this sound was incorporated into both an individual and group composition:

There was a great clanging sound always when I worked. This cylinder that never stopped ... after you stop being a cylinder you become silent.

The process of composing appeared to enhance the ability of participants to reflect upon life stages and review potential futures, in ways that challenged their views of ageing as something associated with inevitable loss of skill. Thus, their resource base for reflecting on older adulthood was enriched.

A lark ascending: composing as confusion leading to triumph and a means of validating the experience

This theme illustrates the emotional impact of engaging in composition, and the practical skills that were gained or rehearsed during the process. These skills included decision making and a sense of personal 'ownership' of skills and creativity. The theme's title comes from Barbara, who identified with the eponymous bird in Ralph Vaughan Williams' famous piece for violin and orchestra, *The Lark Ascending*. The emotions that she felt during this time were liberating, exhilarating and a heady experience — in fact, as she acknowledged, just like those we associate with a bird rising on the air:

I feel like the lark (Barbara).

However, participants said that they found the initial stages of the composition work surprising and sometimes confusing. The project challenged their perceptions of how composers worked, and therefore of how they could use their skills to complement the skills of the musicians. The process required active collaboration with unfamiliar musicians, who translated their life events and feelings into sound and, while it provided a rich source for creative work and reward, also contained the potential for conflict.

It took time for Edna to recognise that she had ability and skills that were needed as part of the composition process. In doing so she stated that disability was not important. Instead, she came to value the ability of individuals to contribute at their optimum levels, and provided this evocative description of her experience of composing:

I helped [to compose] ... you can dream emotions ...
[Composing] was something different ... wonderful ...
[Composing was] chaotic [and] triumphant ... [we] make
the most of what we have ...

Composing evoked a wide range of emotions, which some participants felt had cathartic effect. Participants also started to acknowledge their skill and to take more ownership of the compositional process as their apparent confidence in their skills increased.

Constructing a musical edifice: working cooperatively to weave strands into a coherent whole

The last theme embraces the sense of belonging that was quickly established. This arose from working together and also links with the desire for continuation. Eric (a resident) said:

... [the experience was] quite refreshing ... fun times ... It's become more of the music side of me, a new part ... the musicians have been inspirational, and having people interested in my ideas ... I'm in the autumn of my life now; I must do something before I go. You must continue [in life and with the project]. You can't just leave it there.

Some participants expressed a wish for the association between each other, and between themselves and the musicians, to continue after the formal project. It offered the basis for future friendships between residents in the residential care home and those in the outside community, something residents may not have had before. Finally, a sense of openness to new possibilities, both creative and personal, was also reported by participants who lived in the community:

I feel like a window's been opened (Barbara).

Discussion and implications

Some significant factors indicated by our findings include music's evocative power, its relevance and potential for work with people in older life stages and the need for further consideration of the use of music and creative arts within a wider context. For the purposes of this paper the discussion is grouped in the following areas: Music, emotion and identity; Music as a vehicle for creativity for older people; Development of personal resources and The future and funding.

Music, emotion and identity

The findings from this project suggest that the process of composing music (involving imagining, listening, critiquing, discussing and helping to rehearse and refine) evoked powerful

emotions in the participants, for whom reflecting on life and re-establishing knowledge of identities helped to frame both their current and their idea of possible future identities. This acted as a catharsis that appears to have enabled participants to reconsider future possibilities and to challenge anticipatory fears, instigating the formulation of new perspectives for what was yet to come. For some, this process was emancipatory and showed the potential for using the creative arts in facilitating the 'reviewing' of life challenges. The originality of the project — its focus on music composition — was an enabling resource for the participants as it offered them 'a building material of self-identity' (DeNora 2000, p62). This is particularly pertinent for older people who may find entering and being in later life stages an emotional and challenging stage, with the anticipation that their world, capacity and choices will shrink and diminish along with their roles, purpose and identity. DeNora (2000, p63) highlights further:

Music can be used as a device for the reflexive process of remembering/constructing who one is, a technology for spinning the apparently continuous tale of who one is.

In addition, engagement in creative and productive occupations can reinforce participants' self-identity and self-esteem (Reed et al 2010, Kielhofner 2002), as seems to have been the case in this project.

The project may also have enabled individuals to identify and rehearse past skills, whilst acquiring new skills, preparing them to face the challenges of ongoing skills development. Carey (2011) and Wilcock (2006) both identified that adults in later life sought out and benefited from engaging in challenging occupations that stimulated cognition, enabling skills development alongside raising confidence and building identity, so contributing to health and wellbeing. Law (2010) acknowledges that engagement in occupations creates feelings that enable individuals to gain an understanding of themselves, equipping them to engage in and cope with their environment. This is not limited to individual experience but can also be experienced collaboratively, contributing to community purpose (Reed et al 2010).

Music as a vehicle for creativity for older people

Individual and collaborative music composition highlights the opportunities for creativity in arts-based interventions. Arts-in-health initiatives are an increasingly common feature within healthcare services in the UK and, while there are still critics of the field (noted in Clift et al 2009), arts projects reveal that community arts may be capable of transformative work (Murray and Lamont 2012). Reports on the positive impact of the use of music include, for example, service users who, when discussing the future of occupational therapy, spoke of music as an occupation. They reported that 'music or singing ... [left them] feeling invigorated' (College of Occupational Therapists [COT] 2006, page v). Furthermore, Koelsch and Stegemann note that 'making music, dancing, and even simply listening to music activates a multitude of

brain structures involved in cognitive, sensorimotor, and emotional processing' (Koelsch and Stegemann 2012, p436). Both individuals and society may view later life stages as a time when occupational engagement could diminish in both engagement time and variety, with the possible outcomes of occupational imbalance, deprivation and alienation (Christiansen and Townsend 2004). It has been recognised that when deprived of, or having limited, occupations, health and wellbeing will be affected detrimentally (COT 2006). As people enter later life stages they may lose the opportunity to engage in some occupations and the creative arts may offer sustained accessible interventions for older people to continue to engage in a range of occupations.

Development of personal resources

Offering opportunities for creativity through music may be empowering, enabling people in later stages of life to begin to realise new and differing personal resources within accessible occupations, such as the creative expression through the arts. This project strengthened participants' personal resources, as they confronted beliefs and faced challenging situations. Positive self-regard was experienced across the group, which Reed et al (2010) have identified as contributing to the creation of friendships, renewal of old ones and the recognition of abilities.

The participants' engagement in the project confirmed pre-existing research findings that show similar benefits of arts-in-health initiatives for older people, namely 'a heightened sense of control, efficacy or mastery' and 'meaningful social engagement and interchange' (Cohen 2009, p49). Peppin and Deutscher (2011) identified that older adults want to make choices about occupations, and for them to match their interests. Engagement in occupation, as in this project, may provide individuals with occupational roles and help to construct and maintain identity. The collaborative nature of community arts projects are of significance and may be positively linked to health and wellbeing. Macnaughton, White and Stacy note 'good relationships are a major determinant of health' (2005, p334).

The future and funding

Globally, society is facing an unprecedented growth in the number of older people, with many countries identifying the needs of older people as 'grand challenges' (WHO 2011a, BAOT/COT 2008). Copolla (2011, p5) describes older people as potentially 'facing extreme challenges and injustice' and quotes Wilcock's (2006) proposal that occupational therapy practice should focus on enabling 'active ageing', and goes on to identify occupations as 'powerful solutions' to isolation and being alone.

In 2001 the Department of Health suggested three stages of ageing to assist when considering the diverse needs of older people: entering old age, transitional phase and frail older people. The need, then, is to engage people entering old age at an early stage so as to assist with ensuring transitions, maintaining health and wellbeing by providing appropriate challenges through occupation and occupational choice.

As identified by Mackey (2007), occupational therapists need to identify and develop new ways of working, and this will become especially the case in the current economic climate, in the UK, with services experiencing significant change (BAOT/COT 2008).

This arts-based project has demonstrated the possible benefits of composing as an occupation for older people. After the project, the participants requested ongoing continuation of the engagement but, as recognized by Murray and Lamont (2012), sustainability remains a great challenge for many community arts ventures in terms of cost, and other factors. In future projects participants may express a wish to continue, as they did in this one, but there may be ethical implications, such as the emotional impact of removing the benefits of the project with little or no transition for the participants. Arts and health organisations need to consider this as part of their duty of care towards service users. Maintaining an activity also has implications for planning in terms of follow-up contact and sustaining project continuation.

The long-term effects of these briefer interventions have not been established in this case, but it must be considered that the duration was insufficient to promote prolonged change in participants. This is particularly the case for those participants within a residential setting, where a return to a narrowing of occupational repertoires and experiences of occupational imbalance and deprivation may occur, contributing to deterioration in health and wellbeing; this poses a challenge to maintain health and wellbeing nationally and globally (COT 2006, BAOT/COT 2008, Department of Health 2011, WHO 2011a).

While arts-in-health initiatives are an increasingly common feature in the provision of healthcare services in the UK, cuts in Arts Council funding and in health and social care may mean that innovative projects like this are vulnerable. This project followed best practice in arts-in-health provision (Clift et al 2009) as it was based on a partnership model. Similar projects would require comparable partnership working between several professional communities — such as occupational therapy, community music, music therapists (Pavlicevic and Ansdell 2004) and arts organisations.

Limitations

The study was limited to a very small sample size. All participants were living in the UK and came from similar demographic backgrounds. Further research could take account of these limitations in an attempt to make wider predictions about the effectiveness of creative music composition for older people. Furthermore, the approaches taken by the facilitator and musicians were dependent on levels of expertise, creativity and empathy that are hard to quantify and replicate.

Conclusion

This project was a positive event for participants as well as the facilitator, musicians and researchers. The findings indicate that it not only enabled participants to engage in creative

occupation beyond their everyday experience but also added significant meaning to their sense of identity, with effects that included a widening of participants' occupational range and, for the duration of the project, a more robust self-belief. Composing music also developed participants' sense of themselves as learners and contributors to a creative medium. This was a role that they had previously not considered an option at this point in their lives.

The project facilitated community engagement and relationship building. All the participants wished the project to continue and were eager for ongoing input. The opportunity to compose music was empowering for participants and appears to have contributed to participants' wellbeing and quality of life, at least in the short term. It also met current wider contextual and political agendas.

Key findings

- Creative music composition enhanced a sense of identity for a group of older people.
- Music composition can be used to represent service users' feelings and biographies.

What the study has added

Music composition, facilitated by appropriate staff, is a worthwhile addition to current arts-based occupations. When combined with other research methods, music composition can also be used in arts-based research.

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