

Arts, identity & recovery

Community arts as a transformative activity enabling identity change in recovery from serious mental illness: A realist review

University of
HUDDERSFIELD
Inspiring global professionals



Authors

Louisa Peters, PhD Psychology Researcher, University of Huddersfield
Dr Tim Gomerall, Senior Lecturer in Psychology, University of Huddersfield
Prof. Andrew Booth, Professor in Evidence Synthesis, University of Sheffield
Prof. Mike Lucock, Professor of Clinical Psychology, University of Huddersfield

Affiliations

Thank you to the panel of experts who inputted into this research including Becky Smyllie, Debs Teale, Kate Binnie, Jo G, Julia Edmunds, Julie Morrison, Neil, Phil Walters, Sara Rose, Shahedah Masood, Stacey Coughlin. Plus the charities Creative Minds, Cartwheel Arts and MAECare.

Introduction

Community group interventions are effective in enabling identity change¹, which is an established recovery process from serious mental illness (SMI)². However, evidence indicates numerous potential mechanisms are involved in both community interventions and SMI recovery, making it difficult to determine what works and for whom³.

Research aim

To generate theory to explain how, why, and in what context community-based arts interventions enable the identity change recovery process from SMI.

Methodology

A realist literature review⁴ was conducted between January – September 2021. 42 iterative searches were conducted on 9 databases, resulting in 22 articles and reports contributing to theory development. Extracted data was synthesised using realist logic. An expert panel was consulted to ensure theory salience.

Findings

Analysis revealed that three key mechanisms of change may be activated through a community group art activity that enables transformative learning to occur:

1. Using creative arts for self-expression (resource) develops new coping strategies (response)
2. A shared experience of creating art (resource) facilitates connection to others (response)
3. Developing new skills (resource) provides a challenge that is overcome (response)

These mechanisms develop self-awareness, that allows an individual to redefine their identity beyond illness.

Programme theory (in brief)



If you live with SMI and feel stuck and isolated (context),



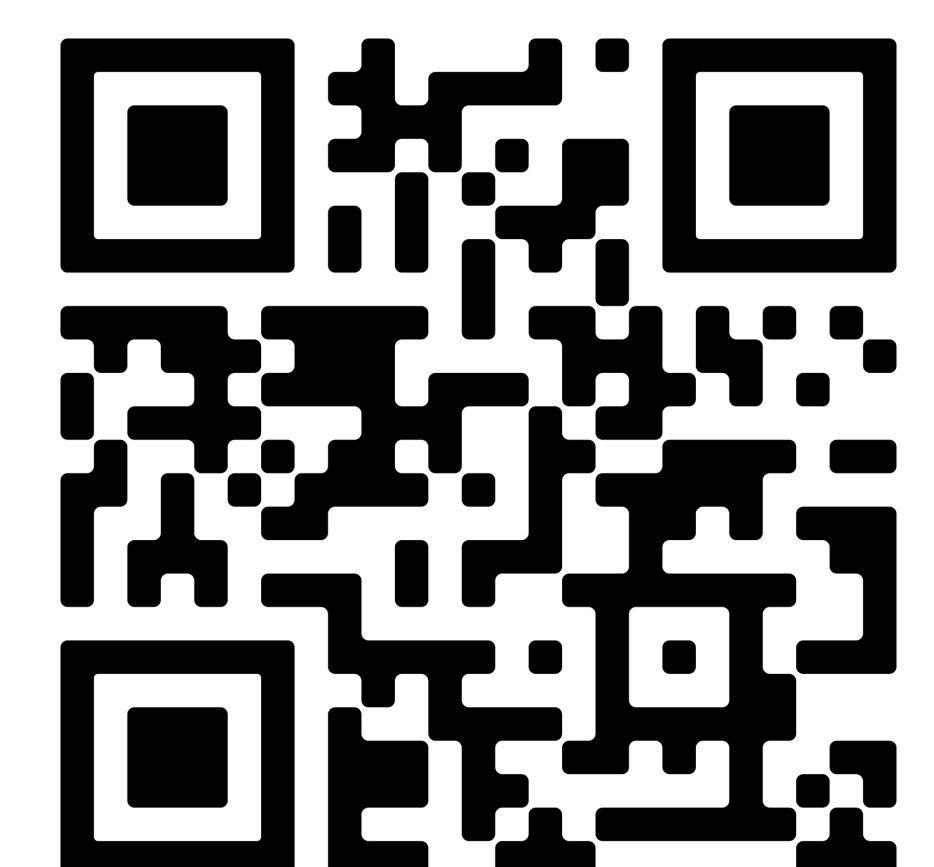
...then a safe and empowering arts for mental health community group (intervention context) enables (the mechanisms)

1. coping with illness
2. connecting to others
3. overcoming personal challenges.



This develops positive self-awareness (mechanism 4), which allows you to redefine yourself beyond illness (outcome).

Scan here to explore the programme theory further



References

1. Haslam, C., Jetten, J., Cruwys, T., Dingle, G. A., & Haslam, S. A. (2018). *The New Psychology of Health: Unlocking the Social Cure*. Routledge.
doi: 10.4324/9781315648569
2. Leamy et al. (2011). Conceptual framework for personal recovery in mental health: Systematic review and narrative synthesis. *Br J Psychiatry*, 199(6), 445–452.
doi: 10.1192/bjp.bp.110.083733
3. Fancourt et al. (2021). How leisure activities affect health: A narrative review and multi-level theoretical framework of mechanisms of action. *Lancet Psychiatry*, 8(4), 329–339. doi: 10.1016/S2215-0366(20)30384-9
4. Pawson, R., & Tilley, N. (1997). *Realistic evaluation*. Sage.
5. Boyd, R. D. (1994). *Personal Transformations in Small Groups: A Jungian Perspective*. Routledge.
6. Montgomery et al. (2008). A Developmental Intervention Science Outreach Research Approach to Promoting Youth Development: Theoretical, Methodological, and Meta-Theoretical Challenges. *J Adolesc Res*, 23(3), 268–290.
doi: 10.1177/0743558408314376

Conclusion

Transformative activities can enhance the identity change process within community group interventions, with creative arts particularly effective within SMI recovery.^{5,6}

Several key points can be drawn from the findings of this review:

1. A safe and empowering context is essential to activate mechanisms of change by addressing the disempowering health inequalities faced by people living with SMI.
2. The mechanisms identified link to transformative learning, that has been found to develop self-awareness and identity change.
3. Creative arts activities may be a particularly effective transformative activity within SMI recovery.