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**'I don't think they knew we could do these sorts of things':
Social representations of community and participation in
community arts by older people**

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Abstract:	As people age the character of their social relationships change. There is evidence that older people who reside in disadvantaged communities often experience social isolation which in turn has been found to be associated with a variety of health problems. This paper reports the initial findings from a participatory arts project with a group of older residents of a disadvantaged urban community. It describes the how the older residents represented their community and how they perceived the community arts intervention.

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Bio

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A common feature of western society is increased life expectancy, the increasing proportion

of older people, and the increasing number of older people living alone (Office of National

Statistics, 2005). These demographic changes raise a host of new questions for both policy

makers and for researchers, including health psychologists, regarding older people's quality

of life and opportunities for participation in society. The character of social interaction

enjoyed by older people is dependent upon the settings in which they reside. A large number

of older people reside in neighbourhoods characterised by multiple disadvantages, e.g.

limited local amenities and service provision, a lack of adequate transport infrastructure, poor

housing quality and design, high levels of crime and a low economic base. These factors

combine to increase marginalisation and exclusion of older people (Phillipson, 2007; Scharf

et al, 2005).

A series of studies of older people has established that engaging in a range of social

activities is positively associated with physical and mental health and well being (e.g., Glass,

Mendes de Leon, Marottoli, & Berkham, 1999; Wang, Karp, Winblad, & Fratiglioni, 2002).

Indeed, older people have identified 'social activity' and 'social relations' as being associated

with self-rated quality of life (Gabriel & Bowling 2004) and it has been found to be an

important component of baby boomers' social representations of health (Murray, Pullman &

Rodgers, 2004). One strategy that has been suggested to address this decline in social

interaction is to provide greater local opportunities for older people in the communities where

they reside.

Community arts is one such means for promoting local opportunities for social

engagement. Community art is not defined by art form. Rather it is the use of multiple forms

of creative arts activities in community settings, e.g. housing estates, community centres. It

involves the active participation and ongoing dialogue with individuals and groups and is

characterized by its experimental and inclusive nature. Most importantly, it is aware of the

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broader socio-political context within which such action is located and the role of the broader

social determinants that impact on the health and well being of individuals and communities

(Webster, 1997). Realising these contextual factors community art aims to respond to the

particular social and cultural environment in which it is situated (Putland 2008). It aims to not

only promote greater social interaction among participants but to draw attention to social

inequalities and to promote action for broader social change (Murray & Tilley, 2004).

A review of some of the key literature suggests investment in community arts can add

greatly to the quality of lives of individuals (Matarasso, 1997) and strengthen communities

through opening channels for communication. At an individual level people derive great

pleasure from being involved in arts activities; it creates excitement, offers opportunities for

self expression and skill development and contributes to an individual's self-confidence,

personal growth and a sense of wellbeing (Waits, 1996). At a community level the

collaborative and socially engaging nature of community arts activity creates an opportunity

for people to come together, share ideas and communicate their views (Gorjanicyn, 2007).

As such, community arts can be both personally and socially transformative. There is

a need to not only describe in detail its processes and impact in different settings and with

different participants and also to begin to theorise these processes. The aim of this paper is

explore the connection between social representations of community and involvement in

community arts activities by older residents in a disadvantaged urban community. It reports

some of the initial findings from the larger CALL-ME project which in turn is nested within

the extensive UK New Dynamics of Ageing research programme

(http://www.newdynamics.group.shef.ac.uk).

The CALL-ME project (Murray, Scharf, Maslin-Prothero, & Beech, 2007) is an

interdisciplinary participatory action research project concerned with investigating different

ways of promoting social interaction among older people in disadvantaged neighbourhoods

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of a large city in Britain. It has four sub-projects, each working in a different neighbourhood and each investigating different forms of social intervention. The four neighbourhoods were allocated to the research team by city officials on the basis of their high levels of disadvantage according to various social indicators.

The part of the CALL-ME project detailed in this paper was concerned with how community arts activities could connect with both the material and psychosocial worlds of the older people and offer opportunities for transformation. In this paper we focus on how the older people defined themselves with reference to others and how this changed during the early stages of the project. We were guided by several social psychological theories, especially social representation theory and narrative theory (Murray, 2002). Social representation theory is concerned with the shared meanings of a particular phenomenon developed within any particular group or society. In her work in New Zealand, Stephens (2007a) identified five categories in shared social representations of communities. These included a location for support and succour, a place in need of assistance from outside, a site for competition for resources, a forum for action, a place of identity, and a site for integration of identified groups. She noted that people draw on these different social representations at different time and places. She also noted how particular social representations could be used in a rhetorical manner in everyday conversation.

We can consider not only the social representations of our own community but also our perceptions of other people's representations of our community. It is this overlap of representations that not only helps define a community but how the members distinguish themselves from another community and the character of their relationships with each other. Howarth (2006), in her work on ethnic identity referred to how children learn their social identity through this process of grasping different social representations of ethnicity. We can

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also consider the narrative character of social representations of communities. While social

representations are especially concerned with the contemporary nature of a phenomenon,

narrative is concerned with its temporal or historical character (Murray, 2002). Thus an

understanding of the narrative content of social representations can help explain how lay

people develop an understanding of change within communities. In this arts project we were

concerned with the character of the perceived social representations of the community in

which older people resided and how these changed during participation in a community arts

project.

Methodology

The research adopted the traditional cyclical process of action research, i.e. plan – act –

observe – reflect, followed by a repetition of this cycle (Brydon-Miller, 2004). Throughout

the study the research team facilitated reflective action for and with the older individuals who

participated in this project. In the first phase of the study the aim of the research was to

introduce and facilitate a community arts project in collaboration with a group of older

residents living in a disadvantaged community setting, where opportunities for social

engagement and activity were limited. At the close of the project the participants had the

opportunity to present their artistic representations and experiences through an exhibition to

other local residents.

The arts project was formally located in one administrative district within the city. After

repeated visits to the district it became apparent that the residents defined it in terms of a

number of geographically defined neighbourhoods. It was decided to locate the project

within one particular neighbourhood which we will call Westside. This neighbourhood

consisted almost entirely of public sector housing that had been rebuilt as part of urban

redevelopment in the 1970s and consisted of about 600 housing units largely of terraced

housing and three small tower blocks. It was close to the centre of the city and was bounded

on two sides by busy main roads and on the other two sides by railway lines which clearly physically defined the district. The total population was about 2000 of which about 25% were aged 50 years and older according to local authority figures. In terms of ethnic composition, over 85% of the older residents were White compared with about 60% of the area as a whole. A high proportion of the residents were not in employment and a low proportion had formal educational qualifications.

Identifying participants and convening the initial meeting of older residents involved a snowballing technique that relied primarily on 'door knocking' and word of mouth conducted over a six week period. The key resident who we initially contacted agreed to direct or introduce us to other older residents in the locality. During the initial one-on-one contact the residents were told that we were interested in establishing a local community arts group as part of a larger research project. They were advised that the project's aim was to increase opportunities for social activity and community participation among residents aged 50+ years. We also attended a resident's association meeting where we introduced the project and distributed flyers and our contact details. During this period we identified a suitable meeting facility near the centre of the community, in a small row of shops.   In addition, we identified a community arts worker who was prepared to work with the older residents for a three month period.

In total we made contact with 21 older residents of which eleven - 4 males and 7 females participated in the community arts activity. All participants were of white British origin and aged between 51yrs and 83yrs. Of the male participants, two had never married and were living alone, one had recently been widowed and was living alone and one was married and living with his partner. Of the females, three were married and living with their partners, three were widows and living alone, and one was divorced and living alone. All but two of the participants were long term residents of the area; none were in full-time employment and

all were claiming some form of government benefit; two were members of local residents'
associations, and three reported using the local working men's social club. Whilst the age
range of the participants was broad, they voiced a shared concern about the limited social
contact and the lack of opportunity in the neighbourhood (see below). This would confirm
the previous research highlighting the extent of social isolation among older residents in
disadvantaged communities (e.g., Scharf et al, 20025). Although the sample size was small, it
became apparent over the course of the project through increased contact with a larger
number of residents, that the participants were not untypical of older residents in the
neighbourhood.

The project involved weekly meetings of the participants in the community rooms. The
meetings lasted about two hours during which they participated in a range of arts activities
including pottery, painting, glass engraving and writing. These were conducted in an
informal atmosphere with time for cups of tea and conversation. In addition, there was an
attempt by the community artist to link the participants with the actors involved in a theatre in
the city centre. Part of this involved organising a visit to the theatre. After the three month
period there was an exhibition of the art works created by the participants. This exhibition
was held in the community rooms and local residents were invited to the event (Fig 1).

Fig 1

Throughout the project ethnographic type data was collected on an ongoing basis.
This involved regular conversations with all of the participants, field notes from all meetings,
semi-formal interviews with a sub-set of the participants, and focus group discussions at the
close of the project. In addition, after each session the participants were encouraged to write
down their impressions of the project. Some of these comments were included in the

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exhibition. All of the interviews that were audio-taped were transcribed. These transcripts

were added to the larger corpus of data which was reviewed by the authors.   We adopted a

critical approach in reading the interviews such that we could consider how certain social

representations were used by the older people (Stephens, 2007a).

Findings

Community representations and narratives

The community was socially represented by the older people in terms of its physical location,

as a place of identity, as distinct from other areas and as a place in need of resources.

Physically, the community was considered in terms of a small number of streets with which

the older people clearly identified. The older people were able to define the physical

boundaries of their community within which they spent most days. As one woman said:

> *"See, we're a separate community. It's a political thing that's lumped us all together
> as part of a ward but really we're our own community and we have been since this
> estate was built." (Female, 64yrs)*

The older people separated themselves from others who lived only a short distance away in

similar housing. This sense of distinction included their unwillingness to access services in

nearby districts and conversely drew attention to their own lack of resources. The same

woman continued:

> *"I know they have things going on in other centres further down but we don't belong
> to them, really those things are for them that live there." (Female, 64yrs)*

This community identity was expanded in the stories the participants told about their

neighbourhood. Most had lived in the area since it was built and recalled memories of the

district in those early days. The stories they told about their neighbourhood were ones of

decline. They recalled extensive local and wider social interaction when they first moved

into the area. People had jobs and income and the local shopkeepers were very proactive in

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offering services. They also commented on the role of the local clergy who had previously

been central to organising a range of local social activities. There were several nearby

churches which have since been demolished or converted for other usage. Conversely, the

neighbourhood today was described in terms of limited social opportunities, little social

interaction with newer residents and no local facilities for social engagement. They explicitly

referred to a loss of a 'sense of community'. As one participant said:

> *"It's all changed since we first came, we used to have all the shops leading down, dry*
>
> *cleaners, butcher, grocery and clothes shop and the churches, they've all gone now."*

The larger supermarkets which had more recently been built outside the area were less

inviting. The women referred to the way local shops used to welcome them and the local

clergy organised events:

> *"When we first moved we had cards from most of the shops welcoming us and we had*
>
> *the minister up from the church to see us. He asked me and my husband if we would*
>
> *help set up a club for the pensioners, brew up and help out like, so that's what we did.*
>
> *We used to go down and we would have raffles, potato pie supper. We would go on*
>
> *outings to different places … See, everybody helped out. If you were asked to help out*
>
> *and you could, well you did … not just us; lots of people helped each other. They*
>
> *don't seem to bother nowadays." (Female, 83yrs).*

The men referred to the loss of the local public house [bar] which was considered the centre

of their social world:

> *"I mean in the good old days you had the local pub, everybody had their own little*
>
> *local - the pub was the hub of the community. That's where all the socialising,*
>
> *arguing, etc., was done. I mean, don't forget there was a fire in every pub and when*
>
> *the lads got in, the cards started. And then the televisions went in and I think that*
>
> *changed it - the conversation, arguments, joking. And then we had the slum*
>
> *clearance, that's when communities were lost. And then we got the drugs, don't get*
>
> *me wrong we always had drugs but in my day hard drugs were a rich man's habit, the*
>
> *working class couldn't afford drugs, now they're on every street corner. Yes, it was*

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the loss of the local pub and the drugs that destroyed the traditional working class communities." (Male, 71yrs).

This perception of material disadvantage was heightened by the city plans to demolish the houses and to rebuild them. One woman commented "*The houses have only been here for 40 years"*, and continued:

"When we first moved here in 1969 they were still building this estate, and we got plans for what they were going to build and it all looked smashing, green patches with forms for old people to sit on, ten shops lower down … then they took them plans and come back with some more and we were getting nothing. We never got the green patch with the forms and we never got ten shops. That was the first time they did the work, 40 years ago now they're at it again. It's ridiculous really, because they never give you what they promise and I don't think we will be any better off when they finish." (Female, 64 yrs.).

This social representation of a distinct and under-resourced community was further strengthened by the negative social representation they felt others had of their community. While they accepted that there were a few anti-social individuals in their community the older people felt that outsiders focused on these individuals to the detriment of the whole community. One man said:

"There's some good people on this estate, but you see over the years we've been stigmatised – 'them up there, they're this and that' - but it's a minority that cause the trouble and people seem to forget that."

Thus, while the community might be materially disadvantaged the older people felt that it still had lots of positive qualities which were often ignored by outsiders. This was also evident in the rejection of the label 'deprived'. For example, one woman recalled her reaction to a regeneration worker who had been collecting information on housing quality in the district. She said:

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"They came here with one of these tick box sheets, and when he'd finished, I said 'well what's the verdict' and do you know what he said, he said 'I was deprived'. Have you ever heard such rubbish, all of this [indicating garden] and he said I was deprived." (Female, 64 yrs.).

Combining this narrative of decline with a perceived negative social representation led to a range of reactions. On the one hand there was a limited acceptance of the outside stigmatisation. This was particularly applied to certain sub-groups within the community. For example one woman said:

"It seems to me that people round here don't really care anymore; they don't seem interested in getting together and making a shape. These young ones want everything done for them."

On the other hand there were various forms of rejection of this stigmatisation. One form *was frustration* or repressed anger at being ignored by officialdom. One man said

"We're a forgotten area and always have been. When you get the newsletter it's all about that end, there's never anything about us. I think it's happened because they give us nothing, well that how it seems to me…We have nothing as far as activities or opportunities for older people on this estate …we're very much a forgotten area, what you might call [us] the poor relation in comparison to other areas in this ward " (Male, 54yrs).

Once again, the community was being contrasted with neighbouring communities who were perceived as being unfairly advantaged. Another man added:

"Well you've been round, you've seen what we've got, bugger all (laughing). This area, and it's been the same since I moved in, has been forgotten by the powers that be. Ask the others when you go round, they built this estate and then forgot about it (Male, 67yrs)

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Another form of rejection of the stigmatisation was evident in the hostility shown to local officials and councillors. As one man said:

> *"You only see the councillors at election time - then they come banging on your door wanting your vote, never see hide nor hair of them in between. Don't ask me what they do in between because they have done nothing on this estate from what I can tell you." (Male 67yrs).*

Overall, the older people represented their community as having many positive features and they strongly identified with it. However, when compared with neighbouring communities they felt that they were lacking in services and they felt they were ignored by officialdom.

Reasons for participation

The primary reason given for participation in the community arts group was the opportunity it provided for social interaction which it was felt was generally lacking. Frequently, the participants referred to the limited opportunity for social interaction. For example, one woman said:

> *"I just sit in this flat staring at the television or the walls. You get to a point where you think I can't cope; I mean, you think what's the point being stuck in this flat day in day out." (Female, 51yrs).*

Another who lived in the tower block said:

> *"They're (flats) like prisons, you shut the door of that flat - you see no one. If it weren't for my carer I could go days without seeing a living soul." (Female, 66yrs).*

Among the participants a frequent complaint was that they had 'nothing to do'. For example, one woman said:

> *"I would like to get out more and join in but there's nothing going on. I couldn't tell of any club round here for the old* people." (Female 83yrs).

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Another woman added:

> *"I only go out for shopping, my son's girlfriend comes round to see me, otherwise I just sit in the house."* (Female, 51yrs).

In addition, a minority in the group of participants were particularly attracted by the opportunity to participate in artwork. These people had some previous involvement in artwork either recently or when they were younger. The group provided an opportunity to share that interest with others. For example, one woman said;

> *"I've always liked anything arts and crafts. I like writing poems and making cards but you don't seem to see do it on your own…if we got some going, a group of us I'd really enjoy it, a couple of hours each week to do something, something a bit different from sitting, cleaning, cooking." (Female, 53yrs)*

Perceived impact

At the end of the project, the older people were very enthusiastic and wanted to continue with the art class and to formally establish a community arts group. Several benefits at an individual level were identified including sense of achievement (e.g. *"I have achieved something that I didn't know I could do. Other people would enjoy this as well; it should be for everybody every week. This sort of activity will go far with people."* Female, 61yrs) and feeling of creativity (e.g. *"I did things I didn't think I could do – produced a beautiful piece of art. Very pleased ... makes you use your imagination."* Female, 57 years)

However, it was the social benefits of the art project to which they most frequently referred. They talked about the increased opportunity for social interaction and forming new friendships e.g. *"Very pleased with everything that's happened and everyone's so friendly ... seems to be getting people together."* Another added *"Very much enjoy the social interaction which does prove beneficial and gets people out of their homes and adds lightness to life."* Some of them referred back to their early days in the area and felt that the project was contributing to community building, e.g. *"It seems to be getting people together."*

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Another added *"I'm very pleased with everything that's happening for the community."* The project created a sense of identity and belonging. As one woman said *"I really feel I belong to something and this is time for me".*

Several of the participants referred to the wider impact of the project on the community. Their comments connected with their earlier narrative accounts of a community in decline. As one man said:

> *'this social experiment is a success … We're trying to rebuild our community. I'm doubtful that we will ever get back what we used to have - that's not going to happen but we are trying…'.*

Others felt that their project was a challenge to the outside negative social representations of their community. This was evident in this comment by one of the women:

> *Everybody's talking about what we've been doing. Even the councillors when they came to the meetings. See I don't think they knew we could do these sorts of things, but then we've never had it before, people coming and showing us and giving us a chance.*

Despite their enthusiasm for the project this did not extend to connecting with the actors in the theatre. During the course of the project there was discussion about the theatre and an agreement that the participants would visit the theatre. A mini-bus was hired to transport them there and many of them turned out on the day. However, only a minority actually got on the bus and went to the theatre while the others claimed to have more pressing engagements.

Discussion

Although this project only lasted for three months it is apparent that the participants were very enthusiastic about it. While it is intended to extend the project it is still important at this stage to reflect upon the early achievements.

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The original aim of this project was to provide opportunities for social interaction for older residents of a particular neighbourhood. It quickly became apparent that while the residents were aware of the larger administrative district they identified strongly with a sub-district that consisted largely of about 200 dwellings. Participation in activities outside this district was limited. There was a certain anxiety about outside activities as was illustrated in their reluctance to visit the theatre.

The study emphasised the importance of understanding the residents' social representations of their community. Most of those who participated in the study had been resident in the community for many years. For them, the community was not just defined in terms of location but also in terms of its history which was expressed through their narrative accounts of decline. Rogaly and Taylor (2009) in their ethnographic study of a working class community in Eastern England found its residents had a similar close identification with it which they argued was 'often based on self-distancing from another' (p. 5). The older people in our study clearly separated their community from a neighbouring community which they felt was unfairly advantaged.   This would suggest that interventions must recognise these different understandings of community.

Stephen's (2007b) in her study talked about how social identity is located in everyday social interaction such that people do not just identify with their neighbourhood but with a range of groups. However, in this study there was limited opportunity to identify with other groups. The physical character of the district which was clearly bounded by main roads and railway lines separated the districts from nearby districts. In addition, in view of their age and limited resources the older residents were restricted in engaging in activities outside the immediate district. Thus, the community was their primary source of identification and it was within it that the community arts project had to be located if it was to connect with the older residents.

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The participants described everyday historical experiences of disadvantage including

both limited resources but also feelings of rejection, separation, frustration and anger. In

their study Rogaly and Taylor (2009) noted that 'one of the consistent ways in which external

representations are mediated by residents of an area themselves is through the taking on, and

importantly, adapting, outsiders' narratives of the elative 'respectability' and/or roughness of

a place' (p. 18). By attributing unfair advantage to other neighbourhoods the residents in our

study could assert some power over their condition. Their participation in the community

arts project was another means of asserting their power and challenging the external negative

social representations.

These findings can also be interpreted within the social capital framework (e.g. Dolan,

2007). The residents felt that there had been a decline in social capital in their community

and that while the project had been beneficial they did not expect a return to the old days.

The social capital of today was one that characterised their immediate relationships with

other older people in their neighbourhood – a form of 'bonding' social capital. Conversely,

the social capital of the past also included relationships that extended beyond the immediate

community and is similar to 'bridging' social capital. The loss of this bridging social capital

was due to their age and the changing social and political situation which meant lesser

involvement outside their neighbourhood. Similarly, Dolan (2007) found that working class

men in his study were sceptical of the role of regeneration schemes that did not address the

issue of jobs and material resources which, in turn, would enhance opportunities for bridging

social capital.

The majority of the participants in the study were women. Previous research (e.g.

Davidson, Daley, & Arber, 2003) has found that women are generally more active in

community social activities leading to the so-called 'feminisation' of public community space

(Dolan, 2007). The men who participated had some previous involvement in community

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activity. It would seem that the older men were more apprehensive about organised social

activity. The reference to the loss of the pub indicated a preference for a more informal

approach and a setting over which they historically had more control. Dolan (2007) in his

study of two English working class communities found that men did not join formal

community activities.

While the men enjoyed the art work it did not mesh with the more instrumental

activities that are more important in male working class culture. Sixsmith and Boneham

(2002) in their study of male working class culture suggested that this withdrawal of men

from social activities reflected a greater stoicism and separateness which would discourage

them seeking support for health and other problems.

Overall, the initial findings from this project centred on the importance of social

representations of community. The older people felt ignored and forgotten by outsiders. The

arts project not only provided them with an opportunity for social interaction but through

working together they felt that they were challenging the negative outsider social

representation of their community. This project is similar to the many community-based

health promotion programmes that have been developed and which have met with varying

degrees of success. These interventions complement the larger macro-level interventions. As

Williams (2007) has stressed: 'strategies for tackling health inequalities cannot work without

some kind of intervention in neighbourhoods to tackle the local expressions and

manifestations of the structural inequalities that produce poor health and inequalities in

health' (p. 16). However, these projects must connect not only with the material

disadvantage in the communities but also the residents' understanding of their community

and of its history if they are to succeed.

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Figure 1. Sample of art work displayed at end of project