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Subjective experiences of participatory arts engagement of healthy older people and explorations of creative ageing



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ABSTRACT

Objectives: The aim of this article was to report findings from a qualitative focus group study conducted to understand the subjective experiences of community-dwelling healthy older people engaging in a range of participatory arts activities. The article also uses the participants' voices to consider nuances and interconnections of themes to unpack the complexities of 'participatory arts' engagement and support a conceptualisation of 'creative ageing'.

Study design: This study involved qualitative focus group interviews.

Methods: Focus group interviews were conducted with five groups of healthy older people (aged ≥ 50 years) living in the community (i.e. not in residential care settings). Participants were recruited through self-selected sampling, and on the basis of self-reporting, no diagnosis of ill-health. Focus group interviews were digitally recorded and analysed using thematic analysis. Themes developed from a systematic review of participatory arts for promoting well-being in later life conducted previously by the author were used as the stimulus for conversation in the focus groups. Interviews were not transcribed, rather pseudonymised quotations are used to support the themes. The study also explored barriers to participation, although these findings are not reported here.

Results: Subjective experiences of participatory arts engagement of healthy older people focused on everyday creativity and reflections on the term 'participation', which challenge the traditional focus of arts and health research on the effects of active engagement. Healthy older people experienced a sense of achievement and 'flow' through creative engagement, which led to opportunities for social interaction and developing a sense of purpose. Through transitions of ageing, older people found creative ways of rediscovering their identity in later life, which supported resilience and highlighted a connection between body, mind and soul.

Conclusions: Findings suggest that participation in everyday creative experiences can lead to a sense of achievement and purpose, which provides support and structure in the construction of changing identity in later life. Participatory arts engagement is particularly instrumental during transitions of ageing. This study provides a conceptualisation of 'creative ageing' which challenges traditional ideas of 'participatory arts' and audience engagement by focusing on subjectivities of the participant voice. The framework moves debate beyond a focus on the efficacy of arts engagement to consider the relevance of subjective experiences of everyday creativity in later life.

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Introduction

The changing demography of our society has major implications for public health, social policy and health care systems, requiring us to consider alternative ways of maintaining the health and well-being of our communities throughout the life course.¹ Creative and cultural activities have been shown to contribute most to well-

being in later life and may even support cognitive function in older adults.^{2,3} Existing research focuses on the role of music in the lives of older people,⁴ including people living with dementia;^{5,6} and participatory arts in residential care.^{7,8} Although this emerging corpus of evidence highlights interest in creative engagement for older people with specific health conditions, this study addresses a research gap by exploring subjective experiences of participatory arts engagement of healthy older adults living in the community.

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Definitions of ‘participatory arts’ and levels of engagement invite divergent interpretations and understandings, meaning the concept has become highly contested and politicised.⁹ Although the term is often associated with ‘active’ making or artistic production, it has been argued that it is the ‘expressive’ nature, which makes the arts ‘participatory’.¹⁰ Further distinctions are made between ‘participatory arts programmes’, often targeted at specific patient groups; and ‘everyday arts and cultural engagement’, focused more on enjoyment than improving health and well-being.^{11,12} However, ‘participatory’ can also imply user-led activity, where the locus of control is on the participants, rather than the facilitator. This dichotomy is evident in much writing on this concept, and the lines of distinction remain blurred, with connotations that authors may or may not intend.

This study adopted a very broad definition of ‘participatory arts’ primarily to enable participants to explore their own understandings of the term and different levels of creative engagement. Arts engagement has been described as a categorisation of art forms, with activities such as visiting an art gallery or attending a concert referred to as ‘receptive’ or ‘cultural’ engagement.^{13,14} By contrast, some consider audience membership to be ‘active’ participation, although it could be argued that this conflates ‘participatory arts’ with ‘cultural participation’. Thus, connotations around distinctions remain in a state of flux.

The inclusion of a broad range of creative activities is a distinguishing feature of the burgeoning field of creative ageing. Sitting at the intersection of arts and health and social gerontology, creative ageing encapsulates a diverse understanding of creativity, extending beyond ‘traditional boundaries’.¹⁵ Activities such as gardening and popular culture are included within creative ageing practice, focusing on social and creative engagement and challenging perceptions of ageing.^{16,17} Moreover, evidence demonstrating the maintenance of cognitive focus and improved well-being through creative engagement supports a connection between participatory arts and creative ageing.

Methods

This two-stage study involved five focus group interviews. Participants were recruited through self-selected sampling if they met the inclusion criteria: aged ≥ 50 years, living at home (not in a residential care setting), and considered themselves to be healthy (i.e. self-reported to have no physical, mental or age-related illness or disease). Focus group interviews were chosen as a method of generating data through social interaction, which mimics the social element of participatory arts groups and cannot be achieved through individual interviews.^{18–20} The peer environment also encouraged participants to provide more sensitive disclosures than they might in an individual interview, supporting the study’s focus on gathering subjective experiences of participatory arts engagement.²¹

Ethical approval was granted through the relevant ethics committee, and participants provided informed consent. Interviews were digitally recorded and analysed using thematic analysis. Themes developed by the author in an earlier systematic review (unpublished doctoral thesis) were used to stimulate discussion. Thus, the analysis was structured around these themes, with additional concepts being added as appropriate. Transcription was not considered to be necessary because of the aim of contextualising previous research findings.²² However, verbatim quotations using pseudonyms are used in the article to illustrate the themes and represent participant voices.²³

Results

Twenty-two people (aged ≥ 50 years) participated in Stage 1 of the study, comprising three groups, with basic demographic data

collected. Stage 2 involved 11 people comprising two groups, with additional data on socio-economic and educational status collected. (The aim of Stage 2 of the focus group study was to recruit a more diverse sample and to explore barriers to participation. The findings relating to barriers to participation are not reported in this article, which presents participants’ subjective experiences of participatory arts engagement from both stages of the study.) Occupations included administrative roles, nursing, cleaning and teaching. No differences based on education or employment in relation to participants’ participatory arts experiences were observed. Demographic data are presented in [Table 1](#).

Exploring understandings of ‘participatory arts’ and ‘creative ageing’

Most participants’ experiences involved visual arts activities at home and in community arts groups. Craft was the most popular group activity, with craft and photography the most common home-based activities. Participants were all regularly engaged in more ‘receptive’ levels of engagement, such as visiting an art gallery. Participants considered a broad range of activities to be ‘creative’ including cooking, gardening, software design and philosophical thinking. Overall, participants felt that ‘participatory arts’ could be either solitary or in a group.

participatory when you go and look at pictures. [Jane]

Something that we are involved in a creative pursuit with an end product really. To take part for me [...] so you’re involved in it rather than just having a transmission of information to you. [Wendy]

Rather than being a passive observer, it’s an activity, whether it’s a mental activity, or physical, or both. You are being active when you do it. [Ellen]

Emphasis was placed on the connection between the individual or group and the art, using terms such as *concentrating*, *involvement* and *connecting* to describe their participatory arts engagement. Understandings of ‘creative ageing’ focused around everyday creativity, opportunities afforded in later life and challenging assumptions of older people’s engagement:

The juxtaposition of creative and ageing is interesting, because you can be creative before you’re ageing, and you can age without being creative. Put together, creativity is helping you stay mentally active as you age...age with grace. [Matt]

I think that people do have lots of latent possibilities that maybe they, for whatever reason, miss out on earlier in life. [Keith]

I think when I first heard the term creative ageing, my reaction was, oh my God, it’s going to be one of those things with lots of little old ladies with plastic maracas playing music and sticking things on bits of paper! But when I stopped and thought about it, no, it’s a whole lot more than that. But that was my initial reaction, you know, that you are pigeon-holed into this idea of sitting around, you know, not being...not very much expected of you. [Jemima]

Creative ageing concepts

Participants’ subjective experiences were discussed in relation to themes the author had developed in an earlier systematic review and expanded to incorporate new perspectives ([Table 2](#)). Themes are neither hierarchical nor linear in their content but may be viewed instead as interwoven and fluid, similar to a kaleidoscope. The following sections explore key aspects of four central themes: making and creating; connections and community; identity; and body, mind and soul.

Table 1
Demographic data.

Demographic data (Stages 1 and 2)	(n = 33)
Age (years)	
50–59	18%
60–69	15%
70–79	49%
80+	18%
Gender	
Female	67%
Male	33%
Ethnicity	
White British	94%
White European	6%
Employment status	
Employed	18%
Retired	82%
Additional demographic data (Stage 2)	(n = 11)
Education	
GCSE (or equivalent)	27%
A-level (or equivalent)	37%
Degree	18%
Postgraduate (or above)	18%

Making and creating

This theme encompassed a broad range of different dimensions relating to the significance older people placed on their engagement in the creative process. This section highlights two key aspects of this theme, sense of achievement and flow. Participants often associated participatory arts engagement with feelings of personal satisfaction, pride and accomplishment, especially through perseverance in learning a new creative technique and recognition of their own creative abilities.

...so the satisfaction you would get from [painting] would be feeling that you'd created something worthwhile, err, and that you're expressing something, you know, important to you. [Keith]

it injects energy and positivity to the entire day or week...[it's] a special experience, a real incentive to continue and improve...a sense of achievement. [Gloria]

...that has given me the chance to do, you know, something arty! And actually, when you produce something that's vaguely recognisable, it's great! You know, it's a real achievement! [Jemima]

For some, accomplishment was felt through receiving recognition and support from others, 'it helps having affirmation' (Jane). For others, pride came through creating or engaging in something for themselves. David described the sense of 'self-fulfilment' he felt when drawing or painting, both of which he had taken up in retirement. Significantly, he found art appreciation just as fulfilling.

[It] doesn't need to be someone else who affirms [rather] self-satisfaction [comes from being] a little bit creative. [David]

Table 2
Creative ageing themes.

Theme	Subthemes
Making and creating	Accomplishment & grit; Absorption, expression & imagination; Catalyst for curiosity
The 'feel good' factor	More fun than bingo!; Just 'cos!; Pick me up; Emotion and engagement
Connections and community	Interaction, learning & inspiration; Renewed sense of purpose; Cameraderie, communitas & companionship
Identity	(Re)discovering & (re)connection; Inherent in my being; Leaving a legacy; Young at heart
Transitions of ageing	Crafting a new future; Creative resilience; Cross-generational creativity
Body, mind and soul	Cathartic, restorative & transformative; Realising & celebrating ability; Beats the heck out of jogging!; Keeps the brain sharp; Spiritual resonance; Engagement as ritual; Ikigai

Another aspect of 'making and creating' was absorption, or *flow*. This was regularly experienced by the older people, with participants describing feelings of being 'in the moment' (Linda) or 'in the zone' (Beatrice). For some, the creative state went beyond a level of flow, described as a transformative experience, connecting with the theme of 'body, mind and soul'.

It blocks out all your other problems...you have to concentrate. When you're painting, you're concentrating on what you're doing and that's it. And if you go to a good concert, you're actually concentrating on the music. If it's not so good, your mind does wander. [Jane]

I just can switch off and forget about all the problems and everything else going on around me. I can just lose myself in it. I think actually it brings some thinking [...] yeah, it helps. [Jasmine]

Arts lifts you; it opens a different dimension, you forget about everything...beauty of life / creativity...you go home in a better frame of mind. [Gloria]

Absorption also led to participants feeling inspired to express themselves and unleash their creative imagination. Patricia spoke at length about her father's encouragement to read stories and comic books during her childhood and how this had led to her developing a 'terrific imagination' in later life. Jasmine's face lit up as she described everyday creative engagements, including painting with acrylics and watercolours, as well as sand and scratch art.

Connections and community

Participants valued the *social interactions* and sense of purpose that developed through creating with other people. For some participants, the social element was equally, if not more important, with the art simply providing a reason to come together with others. Participants placed meaning on interacting *with* and being inspired *by* other members of the group. This led to a sense of companionship and social connectedness, particularly during challenging times:

Jane, Sylvia and I, we've been together for many years and we really feel like a family. Because we have that meeting every week, we've been involved in each others' hospitalisations, problems, loss of partners maybe, so it's a wonderful group to belong to...and, um, I find that two hours that we have on a Tuesday morning just literally flies by. [Grace]

Interestingly, Beatrice valued social interactions with other audience members at performances, 'even if they're strangers', often choosing to attend by herself so not be distracted by a friend and could become fully absorbed. For others, the *social interactions* within participatory arts groups provided a *renewed sense of purpose* and opportunity to get out of the house:

[The] craft stuff could be the thing that gives you purpose but can also be the thing you use to analyse what your purpose might be. [Matt]

If I didn't go and do that once a week, the art, I mean I wouldn't do it. I mean, I keep thinking I'll do a bit more at home, but I don't do it at home [...] So, I have to go there and do it, and I do it...and I love it! [Jane]

Several participants described themselves as community doers, organisers or 'the entry' point for inspiring others (Keith), giving them a *sense of purpose* in their local community. Indeed, participating in arts groups helped people to feel part of a creative community, inciting a sense of purpose and connecting with the theme of 'identity'.

I think my making changes me and almost I become more myself, so I have new communities, new connections...I have changed because of my creativity, my identity is now very different, and I continue to grow...growth and learning and accomplishment and grit...it's a very personal thing...changed in a positive way, a very positive way. [Laura]

Identity

This concept appeared throughout conversations and links to the theme of *transitions of ageing*. As people aged, they experienced a changing sense of identity, and for many, arts engagement had enabled them to think differently about themselves. Ellen described how her identity was 'wrapped around' her creative engagement. Transitional periods including children leaving home or retirement afforded people more time to explore their creative selves:

[finding] new things to do, joining new groups, taking up something...creative. [Eugene]

You've got to find a slightly new identity in a way. And, it's by, I guess joining groups and particularly because my interest is in art not science [...] doing more of this is how I'm hopefully forging, really a new identity. [Ellen]

Arts engagement seemed to be linked with a more positive and creative approach to ageing, which unleashed a sense of positive well-being and enabled them to explore perceptions of the self. This reveals an alternative view of well-being, which is intrinsically linked with reimagining identity through transitions of ageing.

It's the literature and the books that feed my good feelings [...] the reading makes me a nicer, kinder, better person...and poetry particularly. [Jane]

For many, engaging in participatory arts activities also provided the opportunity of *leaving a legacy* for their children and grandchildren, through the artefacts they created, connecting to the sense of achievement described previously.

especially having grandchildren...what I'm doing creatively...not masterpieces [but] it's an element of me which my grandchildren will, perhaps, remember in their lifetime, throughout their lifetime and I think the art is important to me...a little bit of memory of me when I've gone, to my grandchildren and their children, perhaps, one of the things that drives me. [David]

Through participation in the arts, older people seemed to be developing a sense of creative resilience and curiosity through allowing themselves to experiment and play. For a couple of female participants, this was related to them having been widowed.

...50% of us will be widowed and at that point in your life you have to be incredibly creative to survive. Because you've built a life where you're just half of a partnership and then suddenly that life is no longer sustainable. And you have to find a creative way to continue. [Wendy]

Another participant described how creativity had helped her to feel less lonely following the death of her husband, developing a creative toolkit to help her cope with life on her own. As such, rather than viewing emotional well-being as an impact of participatory arts engagement, this study positions well-being as a process that is an integral part of identity construction.

Body, mind and soul

Although 'body, mind and soul' are often viewed separately, they are intimately connected. If we experience physical pain, this has implications for how we feel emotionally and vice versa. However, participants had not previously considered the relationship between their arts engagement and personal sense of well-being.

Our generation is still learning the connection between physical wellbeing and mental wellbeing – my children are already aware. Creative ageing needs to start earlier...certainly I've lived in my head and forgotten my body. It has more impact than I'd given it credit for. [Charlie]

In Stage 2 of the study, conversations explored spirituality and religion in relation to older people's participatory arts engagement and the theme of 'body, mind and soul', including consideration of non-western cultures and the potential impact culture may have on one's engagement:

...the soul or the spirit would come before body and mind, because we would be nurturing our soul or our spirit [through our creative engagement], rather than body and mind first. [Wendy]

Participants also described the ritualistic element of collectively coming together, combined with the spiritual element which could be experienced through participatory arts engagement. Beatrice even described the arts as 'civilising' and a 'dimension of my life I couldn't live without'. Interestingly, spirituality and transcendence were even experienced by participants who described themselves as atheists.

There's a couple of hymns that emotionally polax me. Why is that? Has this got anything to do with body, mind and soul? [Bruce]

It doesn't matter if it's a background to a hymn, or a rock piece, or whatever, jazz...I think sometimes it can be very physical, the reaction [...] Oh gosh yes, it's the tingling spine element. [Jemima]

Some participants felt a synergy with the Japanese concept of *Ikigai*, which translates as 'reason for being'. Used in everyday

Japanese culture as a model for exploring one's purpose in life, participants gravitated towards the concept as a method of connecting their creative values, aspirations and curiosity, 'we need to be surprised, break assumptions' (Maisie). For Maisie, the ritualistic element of participatory arts engagement is about 'seeing things differently'.

Discussion

This article provides new insights to the conception of 'participatory arts' and what it means in the context of later life. The themes identified are used to support a conceptualisation of 'creative ageing', moving beyond earlier models, which focus on the effects of arts engagement, to focus on the everyday creative experience. A strength of this study is that it does not use a restricted definition of 'participatory arts', allowing participants' subjective experiences to contribute to the debate. However, the study did not include a representative group of 'healthy' older people, noted as a limitation. Future studies are encouraged to explore experiences of older adults living in the community who are not actively engaged in participatory arts.

The findings highlight the myriad of 'everyday' creative activities, which provide opportunities for meaningful engagement, social interaction, and well-being outcomes in later life.^{24,25} Although an earlier model of creative ageing²⁶ posited that it is the intersection between the creative and social aspects of participatory arts activities that leads to lasting personal benefits, this study positions well-being as a process within the construction of identity in later life. Everyday creative experiences contribute to flourishing in later life, conceptualised through arts engagement, social interaction and development of resilience.²⁷

The study demonstrated a connection between participatory arts engagement and the spiritual and ritualistic elements participation can foster. Whilst often associated with religious practice, the ritualistic character of creative engagement intersects with contemplation and learning, with venues including arts museums being described as ritualistic sites.²⁸ This expands on traditional conceptions of 'participatory arts', which view audience participation as 'receptive', with participants valuing social interactions with other audience members.²⁹

Conclusion

Participatory arts can provide social and emotional support through transitions of ageing, facilitating a sense of purpose and social connectedness. The themes identified in this study support a conceptualisation of 'creative ageing', which highlights the complexity of participatory arts engagement in later life. Subjective experiences of everyday creative engagement have provided new insights into the conception of 'participatory arts' and the role of creative engagement in identity construction in later life.

Author statements

Ethical approval

Ethical approval was awarded by the University of Derby's College of Health and Social Care Ethics Committee, and all participants provided informed consent.

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Competing interests

None declared.

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