

'Well I'm still the Diva!' Enabling people with dementia to express their identity through graffiti arts: Innovative Practice

Abstract

This article reports on a pilot study that investigated the use of graffiti arts as a medium for promoting self-expression in people with dementia. Two people with dementia attended a series of workshops with a graffiti artist where they explored their feelings of changing identity following their dementia diagnoses. As part of the workshops, they were encouraged to develop a personal 'tag' or signature to portray their sense of identity and a piece of street art to express 'their message'. These completed art-works were displayed in a public space in Bournemouth, UK.

Keywords

Dementia, identity, self, graffiti, art

Background to Project

When a person receives a diagnosis of dementia it can adversely impact their lives and well-being. For instance, research has demonstrated that people with dementia are often regarded as a homogeneous population defined predominantly by their condition (Hulko, 2009). Consequently people living with dementia can lose their sense of individual identity and self-worth (Sabat, 2014). Furthermore, public misconceptions and fear of dementia can result in the stigmatisation and discrimination of those living with the condition (ADI, 2012; McParland, Kelly & Innes, 2016), as well as their marginalisation within their communities (Alzheimer's Society, 2013).

Ecopsychosocial initiatives are regarded as a vital addition to pharmacological approaches when addressing the challenges faced in supporting people to live well with dementia (Zeisel, Reisberg, Whitehouse, Woods, & Verheul, 2016). These initiatives can be used to promote engagement, well-being and identity, thus reducing the risk of dependency, further health deterioration and social exclusion (Innes, 2009; Moniz-Cook, Vernooij-Dassen, Woods, & Orrell, 2011). Ecopsychosocial initiatives containing art activities have recently received much attention, with researchers highlighting their potential to positively contribute to the lives of people with dementia and their care partners throughout their 'dementia journey' (Cowl & Gaugler, 2014; Zeilig, Killick, & Fox, 2014).

Graffiti is a form of art, consisting of writings or drawings painted illicitly on walls or other surfaces, often in public view. Historically the art form has been misunderstood and perceived as problematic by communities, as something that is destructive and affiliated negatively with youth culture. However, recently graffiti has become more popular within the general media thanks to artists such as Banksy, who use the medium as a means to express social and political messages and challenge dominant ideologies. Furthermore, research has also demonstrated the benefits of graffiti for enabling marginalised populations to express their identity (Rodriguez-Valls, Kofford, & Morales, 2012; Watzlawik, 2014), as well as confronting stigma associated with mental health conditions (Welsh, Hall, Jose, & Leech, 2010). In Lisbon, Portugal, graffiti workshops have been delivered to senior citizens, teaching them to develop their own 'tags' (Lorenz, 2015). These 'tags' (personalised artistic signatures) were created by the participants to express their sense of identity and displayed on public walls to 'reclaim' an element of their community. This work has helped to dispute public misconceptions of who writes graffiti and for what purpose.

More recently, in Colorado, USA, street artists have engaged with people with dementia using graffiti in a program entitled, "Granny Does Graffiti." Although the project has not been evaluated, it aimed to challenge the negative stereotypes surrounding the capabilities of people with dementia. Furthermore, it sought to enable participants to develop personalised 'tags,' shapes and symbols to express their individual identity, as well as re-establish a sense of social inclusion by creating a mural in their local community (Jones, 2016). This work demonstrates how an often misconceived art form can be used to raise awareness of an often misunderstood population.

Drawing on this international work, this small pilot study sought to explore whether graffiti arts could be used within the UK, to enable people with dementia to learn new skills and to explore and portray their sense of individual identity.

The Research Process

Two female participants with a recent diagnosis of dementia were recruited via networks at Bournemouth University Ageing and Dementia Research Centre and through word-of-mouth. The participants attended two, three hour workshops that were led by an experienced graffiti artist and facilitated by three researchers from Bournemouth University. During the workshops, data was collected through ethnographic field-notes as well as end of session discussions with each participant. The resulting art work from the sessions was displayed along a busy public walkway outside Bournemouth train station.

This article predominantly draws on the ethnographic field-notes to outline the process of running the workshops. The participants have been provided with the pseudonyms 'June' and 'Rose' to preserve their anonymity. The study received ethical approval from Bournemouth University and all researchers followed the Process Consent procedure outlined by Dewing (2008) to ensure the participants provided their consent, and were willing to participate throughout the workshops.

Graffiti Workshops

Workshop 1: Developing the 'tag'

The graffiti artist began the first workshop by introducing the history of graffiti and the meaning it holds for individuals and society. Following this, both participants were encouraged to share their feelings of identity through discussion, writing, and drawing. This involved considering their changing roles in their private and professional lives, following the onset of dementia. During the discussions, participants were asked firstly to reflect on how they saw themselves and then on how they thought others perceived them. To facilitate this process the graffiti artist provided an array of magazines and encouraged the participants to cut out pictures and extracts of text to represent aspects of their character. These were displayed on a picture board to create a visual collage of each participant's individual sense of identity. The artist and facilitators were able to support this process by asking questions that encouraged the participants to re-connect with themselves and their individual characteristics and traits¹.

Initially, the participants concentrated solely on their dementia and their diminished capabilities that accompanied the condition. For instance, Rose placed a picture of a cartoon green monster extracted from a magazine, at the centre of her picture board and stated, "*this is my dementia, this*

¹ The artist and researchers also participated in these sessions: shared their perceptions of self, created a tag (session 1) and worked on a canvas example (session 2).

is me.” However, following discussions with the group, Rose was encouraged to explore her positive qualities and reflect on her value both at home with her family and at work with her colleagues. These conversations appeared to challenge her initial perceptions and consequently she re-positioned the green monster to the corner of her picture board, stating *‘it’s definitely still there but maybe it shouldn’t be so prominent.’* This highlights the **pertinent** role that dementia can play in an individual’s life and sense of identity. Only when people are encouraged to think over and above their diagnosis can dementia take a backseat, thereby enabling other characteristics and aspects of their self-identity to re-emerge.

Following this exercise, the participants were introduced to the concept of ‘tagging,’ with the graffiti artist explaining that these were personalised signatures often containing subtle or cryptic messages. Participants were then invited to design their own personalised ‘tag’ and encouraged to think creatively. To enable this, they experimented with different writing materials such as felt tip pens or crayons and a range of colours. June opted to use her own name as her ‘tag’ but instead jumble up the words to add an element of secrecy. Rose chose to use ‘DIVA’ as her ‘tag.’ This was an old nickname that had been given to her by a close friend when she was younger. She explained that it always made her smile and reminded her of the occasions when she had been a little bit *‘rebellious.’* To conclude the session, participants were shown a video of a warehouse that was covered in different styles of graffiti. This sought to provide inspiration for the following workshop when they would be developing their own piece of street art.

Workshop 2: Creating the street art

In the second workshop, the participants were encouraged to design a piece of street art that would highlight aspects of their self-identity. The weather was kind, and so the workshop was in an open space outdoors under a canopy, with the participants wearing protective masks and clothing. Pre-made stencils were also provided for the session, although participants were supported to make more, if they had a specific idea.

The graffiti artist began by introducing the spray-paints and the different types of nozzles, and providing instructions on how to use them safely. Following this, the participants practiced their spray painting skills on small canvas boards, whilst also engaging in group discussions on the individual messages they wished to portray. Once they were confident in their skills and the task at hand, they created their finalised piece of street art on a large wooden board. Once their art-board was completed the participants signed them with their ‘tag.’ To conclude the workshop, the participants engaged in a discussion with the researchers on the meaning of their boards and their overall experiences of the graffiti initiative. Figure 1 shows examples of the art-boards that were produced.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Figure 1: The art-boards produced by June and Rose in the second workshop.

The board on the left was created by June who felt that she wanted to make every day the best that it could be. With the support of the graffiti artist and workshop staff, she used stencils and some freehand painting to produce a piece of street-art that showed her *'perfect happy day.'* She added her 'tag' in small letters to the bottom of the canvas thereby sustaining this element of secrecy.

The board on the right was created by Rose. She started with the background using bright colours to highlight her more extravagant 'self.' Following this, she used stencils of skulls and stars to represent different aspects of her identity, some of these positive and others a *'little more naughty.'* Finally, and in contrast to June, she overlaid everything with her DIVA 'tag' to demonstrate that despite dementia, she could still be the Diva!

A separate board was also produced to display the 'tags' of all of the workshop attendees, including the participants, their care partners and volunteers. This is illustrated in Figure 2.

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

Figure 2: Art-board showing the tags of the workshop attendees

Official Opening of Display

The completed street art is currently displayed by Bournemouth train station and was officially opened on the 5th October 2016 by those involved in the workshops and local dignitaries. During the event participants were also invited to discuss the meaning of their completed art-boards to those in attendance.

Concluding thoughts and future work

Although this was a small pilot study, the workshops suggested that, in a similar way to previous work in Colorado (Jones, 2016), people with dementia can engage with the graffiti arts, and these initiatives may have the potential to enable people to learn new skills and explore, challenge and illustrate their sense of identity following a dementia diagnosis. Furthermore, displaying these 'tags' and pieces of street art within local communities may be a means to provide a creative 'voice' for people with dementia, through which they can tell their story and highlight their individual characteristics; thereby challenging the assumption that people with dementia are a homogenous population. This can contribute to raising dementia awareness amongst communities and ensuring inclusivity for people living with the condition; consistent with the UK Government's dementia policy (Alzheimer's Society, 2013). Finally, these creative initiatives can also help to challenge the misconceived assumptions associated with graffiti and raise awareness of the benefits they may have for marginalised people and communities.

Following the success of this pilot project, the British Psychological Society (BPS) has agreed to fund further workshops. As part of this, the scope of the project has been widened to include those with traumatic brain injuries as well as people with dementia.

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