Creativity in Later life: 
An explorative essay to examine the importance of Creativity in Old age

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Creativity in Later Life: Inspirational projects in the East end of London

The benefits of engaging in the arts, from music to painting to drama, are seen at all stages of the lifetime. Creativity for many aids escapism and is a source of fun throughout the whole life-course. Enabling equal access to the arts for older people could provide a means for society to tackle some of the new social challenges posed by an ageing population, and help individuals interpret and engage in the world we live in as they grow older.

From a personal perspective, volunteering with older people in social care and residential settings has highlighted how creativity is a valuable tool which can be used for entertainment as well as a platform for encouraging social interaction. Organising events and activity sessions for older people in the community of East-end London through a charity called the Griffin Community trust has given me the scope to see the importance of creativity to individual older people within the community. This charity utilises creative and cultural activities within voluntary projects to bring together students and older people and establish a functioning community which provides mutual benefit.

Moreover, charitable organisations such as “Magic Me” aim to bring generations together, the young and old, specifically through activities which are run by professional artists from all genres of creativity. From visiting these sessions it was clear that the environment was welcoming and accepting, and friendly relationships had been built between the facilitators and both the old and young people. The weekly project involved 10 primary age children and 10 older people from a local day centre and was run by 2 local professional singers and a facilitator. Creativity within this environment was certainly a medium for socialising, amusement and gaining achievements. Sessions included creative writing and singing about dreams for a show at a local theatre.

Older participants remarked that it was refreshing to have a weekly activity with younger people, with one participant remarking that the interactions “keep us young”. Others suggested that the benefits of creative programs for the older people included a chance to gain a sense of achievement or purpose in which there was an aim to work towards a common goal. Some people passionately expressed their love of the arts, stating that activities run by these charitable organisations enable older people to continue or expand creative activities they have developed over their lifetime. For some, creativity itself was a
less important factor; the opportunity to engage socially within the community was the key advantage alongside the encouragement to remain active in later life. Although these statements are purely anecdotal, they provide an interesting insight into some of the benefits of creativity in later life.

These experiences have sparked a personal interest in this topic, and it is topical given that there is an ageing population in the UK. By looking at the existing evidence and public health policies which encourage creativity in later life, it will become apparent whether or not society views this as an important method to facilitate successful ageing.

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**Charity information:**

- [www.magicme.co.uk](http://www.magicme.co.uk)
- [www.griffincommunitytrust.org](http://www.griffincommunitytrust.org)
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Introduction

The ageing population presents a number of challenges for resource allocation and welfare provision within the United Kingdom. With many people now surviving into their eighth decade; adaption of lifestyle to accommodate for ageing bodies and minds is vital within a society ill prepared for the impacts of these demographic changes. The term older people used within this essay means those over the age of 65; this is the traditional retirement age in the UK, however many now continue working beyond state pension age (Department of Work and Pensions, 2013). For individuals, creative activity is one proposed coping mechanism for ageing. Through creativity, older people could potentially explore new endeavours; develop their sense of identity and cope better with the process of ageing (Fisher, 2000). This essay is a non-systematic review the relevant literature which also looks at current public health policy related to creativity in old age. The aim is to highlight some important issues within this field. The objectives are: to explore perspectives and participation demographics of older people taking part in creative activities; to explore why different types of creative activity are beneficial for older people; and to examine society’s views on the use of creative activity in later life as a way of facilitating successful ageing.

What is Creativity?

Creativity is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary (2012) as “the use of imagination or original ideas to create something” and the process of creativity has been considered by many well-renowned thinkers, such as Aristotle or Einstein, to be an essential and innate part of human development. Moreover, access to creativity, the arts and cultural activities as part of a community is now considered a human right (United Nations, 2013). Countless examples of innovation in history demonstrate how great creativity can drive human progress, invention and adaption (Runco & Albert, 2010). Therefore, creativity can be seen as beneficial to individuals as well as the community. Creativity is also part of many leisure activities and employment which act as a source of income and enjoyment for the young and the old. With these thoughts in mind, in theory creative activities should be available for
all ages to support health and well-being, as not only a natural part of human activity or as a way of developing and achieving, but as a basic human right.

The definition of creative activity used for this essay was taken from Kaufman & Sternberg (2007) stating that creative activities should have three elements: innovation, valuable quality and appropriateness for the situation. Additional factors which will be taken into account include the notion that creative activities vary greatly between individuals, cultures and groups within society (Sawyer, 2006); therefore creativity in old age should be considered by taking into account the diversity of the older population.

**How do we measure creativity in old age?**

The measurement of creative activity in old age has presented many challenges for Gerontological research. For instance, solitary creative activities can only be measured through self-reported data collection for practical reasons, but this method introduces potential inaccuracy and bias. In order to understand the meaning of creativity to individuals’, qualitative evidence must be explored. However, the benefits of creative activity for health and well-being can only be measured objectively using quantitative methods which compare the effects of creative activity on outcomes. For these reasons, a variety of quantitative and qualitative studies will be considered in order to understand creativity in old age holistically.

Within quantitative research studies there are a number of ways of measuring the creativity of individuals. Traditional methods of measuring the creative thought processes such as divergent thinking tests are criticised for lending only a brief idea of the cognitive processes involved in creative thinking. Whereas, the use of convergent thinking strategies to test creativity combine anecdotal evidence with laboratory experiments to gain a more representative measure of creative processing (Ward, 2006). The studies considered here use a variety of these methods to understand level of creativity individual participants have. Since there is no universal measure of creativity within research, the results of evidence is not precisely comparable and this must be considered when drawing conclusions from the evidence presented.
The ageing population: What does this mean for creativity in later life?

In 2010, the number of people over the age of 65 was estimated to reach 10.3 million which accounts for 17% of the UK’s population; this percentage has been steadily increasing since 1985 and is estimated to increase into 2050 (Office of National Statistics, 2010). The ageing population, which has resulted from increased life expectancy and declining birth rates, has the potential to socially re-define old age. The way we view older people within society has become very topical within the literature and public policy as the population grows older.

The suggested divisions between the “young old” (age 65-80) and the “oldest old” (over 80 years) can be useful in separating the needs of older people within research. However, these divisions may not always sufficient for determining the needs the diverse older population. It could be said that age is just a number. The older population is diversifying with the needs for older people ranging hugely from active, well older people to the frail elderly, therefore the needs of older people are dependent on functional ability and health status, as oppose to age itself. However, these divisions begin to acknowledge the diversity within the older population leading to a society which can offer services more appropriate for an ageing population. Older people who retire can continue to contribute to society, communities, culture and the economy as they age; this notion is called the new old age. In this way, retirement, for some, can represent an exciting new era full of opportunity, participation and ambition. Older people will increasingly be encouraged to contribute to society throughout their whole life, especially as retirement age increases, and for these people creativity could be a way of relaxing, taking part in the community and remaining active to improve well-being in later life. This represents a time in which older people are actively engaged in communities and have ample opportunities and experiences to explore.

Creativity as an activity is beneficial because it involves a broad assay of interests and can be encourages in older people of all functional abilities. The contributions of older people to society are being increasingly recognised by the government and the public. For instance, increasing retirement age is used to encourage everyone to work into later life. These changes transform older people’s roles within society, the community and families as well as the services available for older people (Steptoe, Demakakas & Oliveira, 2012 p.119). This
is important to understand because it impacts on the expectations society has of older people and the facilities available for accessing social activities.

Due to altering demographics, traditional family structures are adapting and welfare provision is having to be re-evaluated, for example the view that retirement results from deteriorating mental and physical health has now become outdated. It could be said that this stigmatised view of ageing was constructed by society’s out of date notion that older people are “unproductive” (Estes, Biggs and Phillipson, 2003). However a more contemporary view is that older people can continue to live enriched lives and be productive within society, providing they maintain good health and can access the resources needed to engage in daily activities (Gergen & Gergen, 2006). Within the literature it is clear that participation in activities is linked with improved health, well-being and life satisfaction in later life (Nimrod, 2007). Activity theory states that older people must remain active into retirement in order to maintain life satisfaction and resist declining health (Lemon, Bengtson & Peterson, 1972). Since the development of this theory, extensive research has shown the importance of activity in later life.

The development of the hypothesis named Successful ageing has also grown from this research into activity theory. Successful ageing is defined as: “low probability of disease and disease-related disability, high cognitive and physical functional capacity, and active engagement with life” (Rowe and Kahn, 1997 p.433). This is shown on the diagram below.

![Figure 1: A model of successful ageing. Taken from: Rowe and Kahn, 1997 p.434](image)

This holistic view of ageing encourages older people to primarily contribute to society and as a result gain medical and social benefit. However, this theory also could have a negative impact on older people from the exertion of pressure on them to resist social withdrawal,
which can naturally occur with age. In this way, older people may feel obliged to uphold a busy lifestyle, in order to be a successful ager, which may never be obtainable. Activity theory and successful ageing theory can explain the benefits of creative activity for older people and are being used within policy to encourage participation in the community.

Critical gerontology presents the view that conflicts exist within successful ageing theories which can be seen by examining the origins of what is considered successful within society. For example, if everything we do is socially constructed then having an ideal of a successful older person simply results in a pressure on individuals to conform to socially constructed ideals. The seemingly inevitable decline in functional ability and life satisfaction, which participation in activity can in theory prevent, is feared by many people as they grow older due to society’s idealisation of the young. If older people could age in the way they wish without the pressures of society and we may see the positive sides of ageing more clearly. In this way, creativity could be a method of drawing out the positive aspects of ageing and encouraging older people to deal with ageing itself, instead of getting them to appear younger conforming through participation in activity (Estes, Biggs and Phillipson, 2003). On the other hand, creativity is an activity in itself, so by using creativity to help older people interpret and cope with ageing we can indirectly encourage the benefits seen by maintaining activity in later life. Creativity is an activity which is diverse and can be adapted to the needs and wishes of the individual, taking place in solitary or social environments to ensure the full benefits for the individual are achieved. These healthy theoretical debates drive research into activity in later life, providing the evidence for the development of potentially beneficial policy and initiatives within the community. Overall, social participation through activity in later life plays a key role in maintaining mental and physical health for older people as well as ensuring older people remain “productive”, “successful” and “active” within society as they age.

**What are the benefits of creative activity in later life?**

The positive impact of activity in later life for health and well-being is well established within research. However, the specific aspects of activity which are responsible for these improvements are less clear. The literature suggests that social engagement plays a key role in reducing loneliness, maintaining life satisfaction and improving health outcomes (Marmot
& Steptoe, 2012 p.3). Regular activities for older people within the community may improve the social networks and communication of those older people who are isolated in the community. Evidence from an American cohort study of 1138 older people suggested that social activity reduced the rate of cognitive decline in the five years following retirement (James et al. 2011). The evidence from this study is shown below.

[Figure 2: Graph taken from James et al. (2011) p.1001 to show the estimated rate of cognitive decline in participants with high level of social activity (light line) vs. Low level of social activity (dark line).]

From the graph above it is clear that social activity reduces the rate of cognitive decline in the first five years following retirement and is also estimated to have an effect on cognitive decline after five years. The sample size for this study is adequate for the conclusions which are drawn; however it would be interesting to see if social activity continues to slow the rate of cognitive decline over a longer follow up time. However, this evidence shows that social activity plays a key role in maintaining cognitive function in later life. Consequently, social activity could be partly responsible for the benefits shown for activity in later life and could be a primary factor in successful ageing. Another key aspect which is shown to improve health in older people is physical activity. Aerobic activity alongside strength/balance training is recommended by the World Health Organisation for all older people independent of their functional ability, in order to reduce potential risk of falls and generally improve health and well-being (WHO, 2010). Wang Et al. (2013) in a large three year follow up study of 1463 older adults in China found that mental, physical and social activity in later life
reduces cognitive decline including memory, language skills and executive function. Once again, the follow up period for this cohort study only shows the short term benefits of physical activity, and longer follow periods are necessary in order to understand physical activities true benefits. Despite these shortcomings it is apparent that physical activity in later life contributes significantly to successful ageing as well as to well-being in later life.

The evidence to support creative activities in later life is wide-ranging and there are a number of reports which review the current evidence. For instance, from a review of the literature concerning centenarians taking part in creative activities it is apparent that a passion for creativity which is maintained despite ageing helps even the oldest old to remain mentally and physically active (Antonini, et al. 2008). It is evident that the benefits which contribute to the positive impact of creative activity in later life are multifactorial. The Katz et al. (2011) suggests that the value of creative activity in old age lies with participants keeping mentally and physically active, having contact with the outside world, developing self-determination and engaging in social interaction. The Mental Health Foundation review evidence which suggests that participation in arts projects improves mental well-being, community interaction and health outcomes; recommending that support and encouragement should be given to communities to create flexible services which attempt to reach out to hard to reach pockets of the older population (Mclean et al. 2011). Therefore, older people of all abilities could benefit from initiatives to encourage creative activities which would improve health and social outcomes. These studies suggest that the benefits of activity in later life on cognitive function are multi-factorial and therefore a variety of activity could be beneficial in later life.

**Potential negative aspects of creativity for older people**

The negative aspects of creativity have not been considered extensively within research. It could be argued that creative activities are available more readily to those with the functional ability and financial security to support their own interests. The initiatives described in this essay demonstrate the geographical inconsistency which exists in the provision of creative activities for older people. Unfortunately, those unable to reach services, such as isolated individuals living in poverty, may be those who would benefit most from these services provided by the voluntary sector.
In addition, with the current economic climate arts-based activities are not priority within funding provision for older people. This means that evidence suggesting the impact of creative activity on health and well-being may well go to waste if services are not implemented effectively. However, the broad nature of creativity as a focus lends itself to becoming available to all in one way or another; whether it is joining an activity class or visiting a local gallery or even listening to music on the radio; and some of the benefits of creativity can be gained. Until evidence based recommendations are implemented effectively by local councils and facilities responsible for the care of older people, the true benefits of creative activity in later life will be unknown.

**Does creativity decline with age?**

As we age there are a variety of cognitive and psychological changes which occur within the brain, some of which are for the better and others are not. The evidence suggests that cognitive function declines with age in the areas of: attention, memory and perception. Conclusions for language and higher processing may also be affected by ageing, but the evidence is less clear (Glisky, E.L. 2007). Creativity is a complex cognitive process which involves many areas of the brain and many different mechanisms. The Geneplore model suggests that there are two phases of creativity, the generation and the explorative phases, each require different cognitive processes (Finke, Ward, & Smith, 1992; Finke, 1996). This model is shown below.

[Figure 3: The Geneplore model taken from *Finke, Ward & Smith (1999)* p.193]
This model presents the process of creative thinking. Original ideas (Pre-inventive Structures) are formed during the generation phase and are remodelled in the explorative phase (pre-inventive explorative and interpretation). Then, creative insights can be focused onto specific areas and expanded as the ideas ruminate around the cycle (Finke, Ward & Smith, 1992). This theoretical model helps us to understand the many factors which contribute to creative cognition, which show that creativity can be a very personal process.

There is substantial evidence to suggest there is an age-related decline in problem solving processes (Denny & Wadsworth, 1981) as well as declines in the ability to retrieve information from memory (Salthouse, 2006) both of which are involved with the generative phase of creative thinking. In addition, the explorative phase could also be affected by ageing, as it involves conceptual interpretation, shifting and hypothesis testing, which could decline with age. However, the evidence for declines in these areas of cognitive processing with age is limited. Jaquish (1984) in a study of 316 Chinese participants found age-related declines particularly in flexibility and fluency of thinking in divergent thinking tasks, but this didn’t affect the originality of ideas. The evidence presented here suggests the cognitive processes responsible for creativity do decline with age, with the exception of original thinking. However, it could be also argued that old age simply represents a different kind of creativity than other stages in the life-span (Sasser-Coen, 1993). Moreover, recent evidence suggests that when age differences in working memory are taken into account, the trend of declining ability to think creatively with advancing age is no longer apparent (Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2011). Therefore, could ageing even benefit the process of creativity?

Andersson (1989) examined fluidity, flexibility and originality in 52 subjects over the age of 70 over 13 years and found that there was no change in these factors with age. It could be argued that the ageing brain could be better suited to creative activity than the younger brain; evidence suggests that the older brain is more distractible and disinhibited than the younger brain which could increase creative thought (Carson, 2009; Hasher & Zacks, 2008; Healey Et al, 2008; Kim Et al, 2007). In fact, Simonton (1990) deduced that there are seven reasons why creativity should continue until the end of life: declines in creative achievement are not large enough to mean that older people lack any creativity, declines in physical ability are less relevant to creative inability in the age of good health in old age, the scientific proof that creativity is minimal in old age is limited, creativity depends on individual
circumstances and preferences, the trend of creativity declining with age is not consistent across all creative domains, quality of production may increase as quantity of production decreases with age and finally in some cases creativity can surge in later years of life defying the trend that creativity decreases with age (Simonton, 1990).

Creative achievement is possible at all ages, numerous anecdotal examples of artistic masters who created their best work in later life. Artists can adapt their technique to accommodate for increasing functional disability in order to achieve a lasting legacy and in some cases their lifetime’s best works. For instance, this can be seen with Monet’s “Water Lilly” collections which were painted when the artist was in his 70s and 80s and are remarked as revolutionary within the Impressionist movement. The patterns of creative activity across the lifetime, which will be explored further in this essay, should be examined in order to evaluate creative capacity in later life.

There are a number of longitudinal studies which measure creative output across the lifespan of known artists and composers. These studies help us understand how creativity can change across individual’s lifespans; in order to assess how creativity is affected within a social context. However, creativity has proven difficult to measure reliably. For simplicity, the majority of studies focus on production to map trends in creativity across the lifespan (Simonton, 1984), as oppose to accounting for the quality or originality of work produced. Studies using these methods suggest that productivity increases rapidly up to a peak at 20 years into a career, and then declines thereafter (Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2011). Simonton in 1988 measured both the quality and the impact of work alongside the quantity of work produced to measure creativity across the lifespan, finding that the quality of work become more relevant with age while the quantity of work produced is reduced. Furthermore, these trends seem to alter with domain and for each individual (Simonton, 2000). It is clear that creativity transforms with age and quantity of work produced professionally declines. However, individual creative potential and age at career onset cannot be fully taken into account with these methods, therefore qualitative evidence has a large role to play in understanding the importance and meaning of creativity to the individual.

Bryant Et al. (2006) presents a case follow up of the 52 year old lady who undertook activities post-retirement in order to improve her physical fitness and general well-being,
thus posing the question is retirement a time to alter previous habits and explore new activities? Peter Laslett (1987) remarked on the appearance of the “Third age”, in which a generation surrounded by a consumer culture embark on retirement by expanding and extending their leisure interests (Laslett, 1987; Gilleard & Higgs, 2007). Therefore, as a role of a person changes throughout their lifetime, different aspects of activity in life become more or less important. To this generation creative activity may be essential to happiness in later years. It has been acknowledged that some new interests can be taken up during retirement, but these tend to be more solitary activities or activities at home (Nimrod, 2007; Nimrod, 2009). However, this experience of ageing is not universal, as old age remains a time of inequality, for instance evidence from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing reveals that education, occupational class and wealth play a central role in leisure activities, particularly cultural activities which could be deemed creative (Scherger, 2011). Evidence from this study also indicates that contrasts the perspective that activity continues into later life, although this may be true for some individuals, in a general sense activities outside the home decreased with age (Scherger, 2011). Overall, the trend of creativity declining with age should be interpreted considering the complex interactions of cognitive function which contribute to creativity and limited measures (product output) to study creative worth. It may be that creative capacity simply changes with age, as with other parts of the life-span, to mean that older people approach art-based activities from a different perspective than the young. It has been shown that creativity can be continued as an activity of a lifetime or can be taken up on later life or given up in later life and the nature of this pattern depends on the individual, their experiences and their social context. At the end of the day, creativity is a personal and multi-faceted process which benefits quality of life, can aid coping with the experience of ageing and improve health outcomes and therefore should be encouraged.

**What creative activities do older people take part in?**

A report from 80 participants in the national survey of quality of life (2004) showed that 90% of older people engage in hobbies or leisure activities regularly, with some participants remarking that an active and varied life ensured a good quality of life (Gabriel & Bowling, 2004). However, this small scale research is overshadowed by evidence from the English Longitudinal Study of ageing (Marmot & Steptoe, 2012). In this large study (11,000 participants who were
50 years), social disengagement was measured; this is made up of four factors which are measured: low civic participation, limited leisure involvement, cultural disengagement and impoverish social networks. The results from wave 5 (2010-11) showed that one in six older people are socially disengaged. Furthermore, socially isolated individuals were more likely to have a lower socio-economic status, have poorer health and to be un-married, separated or divorced (Marmot & Steptoe, 2012). In addition, in 2010-11 on average 48% of older people were not engaging in any leisure activities and 40% of men and 37% of women are culturally disengaged (Jivraj, Nazroo & Barnes, 2012). Therefore a considerable proportion of older people, who are most likely of lower socio-economic status, are socially isolated and detached from potentially beneficial activities. This is despite efforts in the voluntary sector, by local authority and by governmental policy to encourage active ageing.

Across the UK there are a number of initiatives to encourage older people to participate in arts-based projects. The Baring Arts foundation launched a project in 2009 to evaluate the evidence supporting creativity in old age and to identify projects in which creativity in later life are encouraged; the report outlines an impressive array of professional and voluntary projects running within the UK (Cutler, 2009). An example which was set up by Age Concern in association with Cheshire Council is “Wear purple arts” which provides professional artist run workshops for people over the age of 55, as well as music and visual art workshops for day care centres and residential homes across Cheshire (Age UK Cheshire, 2011). Larger professional projects such as Live Music Now’s: “Active Music, Active Minds” run music based sessions such as, “Musical memories” for older people UK-wide which focus on enjoyment and social interaction through music (Live Music Now, 2013). Although the benefits of such projects are well documented, the availability of these projects to all older people remains geographical and the numbers of people who are accessing these services are unknown.

On a positive note, there are a number of ways in which older people can take part in creative activities; ranging from visual arts to drama and story-telling to music; these activities can focus on the world, nature, emotion or reminiscence. The specific activities which older people take part in are unknown, although there are a variety of options available. However, qualitative evidence can be explored in order to evaluate the impact of
these different types of arts for older people taking part in these activities. The visual arts, dance, music and intergenerational projects will be considered will be explored here.

Visual Arts

Fisher (2000) examined the opinions of 36 contributors to a senior art exhibition, it was suggested that creating pieces for display at the exhibition had allowed self-expression, build confidence and consolidated individual’s self-image as well as giving people the opportunity to learn new skills. A comparative study of 300 American participants with an average age of 80 years, showed that community based art sessions increased general health, reduced the amount of doctors visits and reduced the need for additional medication (Cohen, 2006). More recent evidence, from a qualitative study of 32 amateur artists, shows that creativity inspires fresh ambition ensuring a valued connection to the world, removing negative stereotypes of ageing and builds community connections (Reynolds, 2010; Murray & Crummett, 2010). Dulwich picture gallery’s review of their 5 year programme shows that flexibility, patience and gentle encouragement are necessary factors in working with older people on visual arts projects.

Dance and music

Barnes (2010) examined the effectivity of the “Step change” dance program for older people using questionnaires and interviews from 349, it was found that dance classes had physical health benefits, improved balance and enhanced mood. Additionally, Stacey (2008) found that dance sessions improved confidence by enhancing social networks, community connections on top of physical fitness.

The evidence to support the benefits of music therapy in later life is extensive. Lally (2009) examined the impact of the “Sweet tonic programme” for 19 well older people in Australia, the findings showed there was a subject improvement in fitness, flexibility, mood and self-esteem associated with singing weekly in a choir. Dabback (2008) furthers this by suggesting that participating in musical activities provide structure and purpose for older people. Much of the benefits of creative activates seem to be re-occurring themes between domains, for instance both music and visual arts activities provide a purpose for older people and dance and the visual arts improve confidence and social networks. For these reasons, projects
which aim to bring together communities within the voluntary sector often use creative activities to encourage social engagement.

Intergenerational projects

Intergenerational projects use art based programmes to successfully encourage interaction between the young and the old, with aims to challenge preconceived attitudes, enhance enjoyment and build ongoing relationships (Hatton-Yeo, 2006; Mayo Et. Al 2012). From personal experience, being part of the Griffin Community Trust based in Tower Hamlets which works with connecting medical/dental students with older people living in the community, there can be a number of challenges and benefits with these programmes.

However, the community cohesion and acceptance of others which is encouraged through creative activities between socially and culturally distinct group of people can not only benefit older and younger people, but also bring together more isolated and down trodden members of society, such as refugees who can also be experiencing ageing and poor health (Kidd, Zahir & Khan, 2008). The evidence to support the benefits of creative activity in later life of many domains is convincing. However, it could be argued that the benefits shown from creative activity stem from the social integration and community interaction, as oppose to the creativity itself. Whilst, social activity may well contribute to the benefits of creative activity it is shown that solitary creative activities improve self-rated happiness and contribute to successful ageing (Menec, 2003). Further research is needed to establish the key factors which contribute to the benefits of creative activity in order to optimise programmes offered to older people. Overall, qualitative studies suggest that creative activity improves quality of life, sense of well-being, self-confidence and community networks. However, the majority of these studies are small scale and further larger scale longitudinal studies are needed to fully appreciate the benefits to individuals and its impact on general health and well-being of the older population.

**Could creative activity be used therapeutically for illness in later life?**

Major depression affects up to 9.4% of older people living in the community and 42% of those living in Institutions (Djernes, 2006). Additionally, of those living in the community 35% report loneliness and 34% have non-integrated social networks (Golden, Et al. 2009).
These figures suggest that a significant number of older people are depressed, lonely or socially isolated. These are factors lead to poor mental and physical health (Golden, Conroy & Lawlor, 2009). Evidence from semi-structured interviews, with 26 older people with depression and social isolation at baseline, shows that encouragement of creative activity can significantly improve depression, confidence and social support at 12 months (Greaves & Farbus, 2006). However, it has also been suggested that depression can moderate the benefits of creative activity for successful ageing, especially in those from ethnic minorities or low educational level (Flood, 2006). Therefore, the linked relationship between creative activity, depression and social isolations is complicated to establish true causality. For example, does a lack of involvement in creative activity lead to depression? Or does depression cause people to reduce their involvement in social activities? It could be argued that causality is not essential to establish because creative activity is shown to improve depressive symptoms and provide social support. In this way, creative activity could be offered to older people with depression or social isolation to improve quality of life and general health. However, more evidence is needed, from larger scale trials, to examine the potential benefits and practicalities of these creative activities as a conservative treatment for depression in older people.

Furthermore, the use of musical and art therapy in Palliative care relieves some suffering for many. Evidence suggests that music therapy relieves pain and psychological suffering (Magill-Leveault, 1993); whereas, visual art making improves symptom control, quality of life and coping in cancer patients (Wood, Molassiotis & Payne, 2011). For these reasons creativity as a psychological intervention can be used for many other mental and physical conditions. The benefits of these therapies could be used to provide support for frail or unwell older people to cope with ageing. Case studies presented by Johnson & Sullivan-Marx in 2006 demonstrate the how art therapy can help older people cope with the challenges of ageing by instilling hope, aiding communication, allowing management of emotions and encouraging life review. The use of creative activity in the care of Dementia patients is a hot topic in Gerontology research. As mention earlier, creative activity can reduce the normal cognitive decline associated with ageing (Wang, 2013), but could it be used to slow cognitive decline with the pathological process of Dementia? The impact of creative activity on the rate of cognitive decline in people with dementia is unknown.
However, intensive creative therapies over eight weeks (dance, drama, music and movement) are shown to improve communication, self-expression and engagement in patients with dementia in the short term, but more evidence is needed to investigate potential long term benefits (Rylatt, 2012). Creative and sensory therapy is recommended by the charitable organisation, Mind, to encourage relaxation, emotion expression and communication for people with all mental illness, including dementia (Mind, 2013). In this way, art and music therapy can be used to treat symptoms and improve the experience for people. This could mean that creative therapies could help older people cope with the normal physiological changes which occur with ageing.

**Policy: Active ageing and Creativity**

Over the last twenty years, these theories have been adapted into policy. The term Active ageing was originally defined by the WHO (2002) as “the process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age” (WHO, 2002 p.12). Active ageing is seen as a key political model to lessen the impact of demographic change (Tesch-Roemer, C. 2012 p. 4-6). This policy framework aims to encourage activity in later life within a supportive social environment (WHO, 2002). Therefore, with remaining active in later life politically encouraged so strongly, it is important to assess ways in which healthcare, social care, communities and families can provide opportunities for older people to remain active. European Union Guidelines on promoting active ageing in Europe, aim to accelerate the implementation of active ageing policy to ensure quality of life for older people is improving and will be sustained (Andor, 2011). This essay focuses on creative activity as one aspect of activity in later life because there is little evidence to investigate how creative activity can impact ageing.

Creativity as part of active ageing is predominantly promoted by charitable organisations, but also by some local authorities. Age UK endorse the arts as part of the “leisure and learning” guidelines to encourage older people to access creative activities, promoting active ageing (Age UK, 2011). An example of local government implementing this policy is the Welsh Assembly Government and Welsh arts council publication “Arts in Health and Wellbeing: an Action Plan for Wales” which aids professionals in adapting the arts into healthcare and the community (Hart & Jones, 2009). Although the positive impact of
implementation in the field of active ageing is encouraging, policy specifically promoting creativity in old age is limited; therefore the encouragement of creative activity in old age is left to the voluntary sector.

**Conclusion**

In the context of the ageing population, what it means to be “old” is changing. The older population is becoming increasingly diverse, with many retired people remaining active and contributing to society, whilst others suffer from deteriorating health and functional ability. Policies from the WHO, EU and British Government encourage older people to remain active in order to maintain health, well-being and ability well into later life. Creative activity is shown to play a role in maintaining mental and physical health, self-worth and social interaction (Katz, et al. 2011). Despite alterations in cognitive processing with age which decrease problem-solving ability and information retrieval, it can be argued that the older mind is more adept to imaginative thinking with increased distractibility and dis-inhibition. Studies in showing creativity across the lifespan even suggest that in later life, despite a decline in quantity of work by professional artists, the quality and accreditation of work increases with age. Therefore creative activity could provide older people with opportunity to develop new skills, achieve success and provide cognitive stimulation. The English Longitudinal study of ageing suggests that in the UK the number of activities people undertake outside the home declines with age (Schergen, 2011). Additionally, older people who are socially isolated, poor and have declining health status are the least likely to engage in activity (Marmot & Steptoe, 2012), in spite of the fact that they may benefit the most. Therefore, even though creative activity is encouraged within policy and the number of fantastic opportunities available for creative activity outside the home is growing, the evidence suggests that many older people are unable to access these services. Therefore, future research is required to understand and develop programmes more appropriate and accessible for older people who still unable to reach these services.

The benefits of creative activity itself, ranging from visual arts to musical activity, have been explored extensively within the literature. The evidence reviewed in this essay suggest that community based programmes encourage social integration, reduce stigmatisation, improve well-being, fitness and self-esteem. However, the provision of creative activities is not
universal across the UK. There is potential that the well and wealthy could access these opportunities for creative activity and those less able to access services will fail to benefit from creative programmes, especially with an economic climate in which arts-based activities are not a priority. Nevertheless, if the knowledge that creative activity can benefit older people was more wide-spread, then all older people could endeavour to introduce a little creativity into later life, even through listening to the radio or engaging in creative session once in a while and experience the proven benefits. Creativity is even considered an evidence based treatment to improve self-esteem, promote achievement and develop social networks for those who are depressed or socially isolated. Moreover, within palliative care musical and arts based therapies can improve pain management and psychological well-being. Arts based therapies could be used as a conservative approach to help older people cope with the ageing process, as well as dealing with declining health and function which could potentially improve pain management in chronic conditions reducing the need for medication, reduce social isolation or depression and generally improve quality of life. These ideas could be explored in future research in order to provide alternative treatment for older people and reduce the need for expensive medical treatments. Overall, the literature presented in this essay suggests that creative activity could be useful tool for individuals and society within the ageing population. However, further research is needed to establish the key factors in creative activities which contribute to patterns of improved health and well-being, as well as to explore ways to improve access to services and ways in which arts-based activities can be optimised to improve quality of life for older people.
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