Understanding Participation in a Community-Based Art Program

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Introduction

- Doctoral capstone project in collaboration with a community-based art program in Philadelphia
- The existing community-based programs seek to provide opportunities for self-expression, rehabilitation, and fostering dignity
- Research on similar art-related programs has shown benefits of engaging with art for people with dementia and their caregivers on social engagement, feelings of inclusion, and communication (Camic & Chatterjee, 2015). Similar program conducted at the Museum of Modern Art (NYC) reported increase in happiness after attending the program (Rosenberg, 2009).
- Nilsson and colleagues (2007) found that for people ages 85 years and older, presence in a purposeful social environment and opportunities for self expression, rehabilitation, and fostering dignity 

Objectives

1) To understand the perceived benefits of occupational engagement with art for people with dementia and their informal caregivers
2) To understand the art program’s influence on interpersonal relationships.

Methods

- Semi-Structured Questions
- Interview and Field Notes
- Coding Tree Development
- Coding by Two Independent researchers
- Differences Resolved by Discussion

Table 1. DEMOGRAPHICS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Caregivers</th>
<th>Persons with Dementia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of participants</td>
<td>8 (5 male, 3 female)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average age (years)</td>
<td>70.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DSRS scores</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All participants had a college or technical degree, were married or widowed, no comorbid health conditions. DSRS=Dementia Severity Rating Scale</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
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Results - Themes from Qualitative Analysis

Study was approved by Thomas Jefferson Institutional Review Board and all participants consented or assented to participate in the study.

1. Art positively influenced social engagement: Participants valued social engagement and built connections. Being with the art provided an opportunity to bond, socialize with others, and create a common denominator. Some participants highlighted enjoying learning and listening to other participants' perspectives about the artwork. Caregiver-1 reported, “we just don’t have much in common anymore, we can look at the paintings… hey what do you think... we can talk about that... I’m almost ready to say [art’s] our only activity we can do together.”

2. Art experiences encouraged occupational engagement: Viewing and discussing the art was a valued occupation where persons with dementia and their caregivers could engage in, especially for those with limited verbal communication. Participants reported a desire to engage in their own leisure occupations with art. Caregiver-2 took ideas from the program to provide care to his loved one at home.

“I feel joy. I feel my imagination to carry me in all kind of weird places [laughs]” curiosity. I feel... intellect... I love exploring the thoughts that may be in there...” (Person with dementia-10)

3. Participants’ emotional and mental well-being: Overwhelmingly positive feelings of enjoyment, enrichment, and sense of calmness when viewing, discussing, and being with the art were reported. These feelings provided an opportunity for social and occupational engagement, which was said to be better than any other occupations they have done or treatments they have received. Caregiver-1 reported “I felt there was no anti-hypertensive medication I could take. This just brings you right down to a really good feeling.”

4. Presence in a purposeful social environment: Participants valued the non-threatening, safe environment of the museums, where they didn’t need to speak about the disease. The art program discussions had no rules or limitations, and could engage in conversation without judgment. Participants looked forward to meeting new people and building relationships. Some participants compared the program to a support group, whereas others felt it was an opportunity to socialize due to limited social networks. For many, the program provided a variation in routine, although some participants did report challenges related to transitions and attendance.

“I feel joy, I feel my imagination to carry me in all kind of weird places [laughs]” curiosity. I feel... intellect... I love exploring the thoughts that may be in there...” (Person with dementia-10)

Results [Continued]

5. Learning from different perspectives: Participants enjoyed learning about all different things, not just dementia and caregiving. They also reported learning about themselves in both the program and the reflective interview process of this study. In the end, participants reported feeling hopeful that people in later stages of dementia will be active in the community and gain helpful resources like community-based art programs.

Discussion and Implications

- Discussion: The results indicate the unique and significant influence that discussing and viewing visual art can have on occupational engagement for both caregivers and people with dementia. The program provided a variation in routine, although some participants did report challenges related to transitions and attendance. Participants enjoyed learning about all different things, not just dementia and caregiving. They also reported learning about themselves in both the program and the reflective interview process of this study.

- Implication: Therapeutic arts can use this information to understand the value of community-based programs for clients with dementia and their caregivers. With shifting roles, it is invaluable for loved ones to engage in occupations together to connect. Partnerships between healthcare and community-based organizations can promote inclusion and occupational justice for populations who may feel socially isolated.

- Limitations: include risk of personal bias inherent to qualitative research and the limited sample size.

Conclusion and Future Research

- Conclusion: The findings contribute to an increased understanding of the impact of community-based arts programs for both populations. The museum environment and using art as a medium for engagement was meaningful for caregivers and people with dementia. The social environment enhanced interpersonal relationships and provided new ones that offer learning and role validation.

- Future Research: We encourage future research to aim for a larger and more culturally diverse sample to increase generalizability of findings to a greater population.

- As a capstone project, this research provided the opportunity to understand and perform the research process in its entirety, and to discover the engagement and relationship between people with dementia and their caregivers in a community-based art setting.

Acknowledgements

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References


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