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How do community-based arts activities enable the identity change recovery process from serious mental illness: A protocol for a realist review

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Abstract

Background: Serious mental illness (SMI) has been identified as a key health issue to be addressed due to static recovery rates, increasing the burden on mental health services. Emerging evidence indicates that community arts activities can support SMI recovery, however the complexity of such social interventions makes it difficult to determine what works, how and in what context. In addition, identity change is one particular recovery process that is often overlooked within intervention evaluations. The aim of this research is to discover causal explanations of how, why and in what context do community-based arts activities enable the identity change SMI recovery process.

Methods: A realist review will be conducted utilising four search cycles: (1) background; (2) programme theories; (3) empirical evidence; (4) middle-range theory. Each cycle will include both structured literature searches and citation searching within a wide range of sources to include both empirical and grey literature. An initial programme theory will be used to define broad search terms, which will be refined as programme theory develops. Similarly, inclusion criteria will be adapted throughout the review, with literature items being appraised and selected for relevance, richness and rigour. An expert panel of stakeholders will be consulted throughout the process to contribute literature suggestions, check programme theory salience and dissemination.

Discussion: This realist review will explore the contextual features of living with SMI and what mechanisms are activated through community arts interventions and why. A particular focus will be on the outcome of the identity change SMI recovery process.

Keywords: Realist review, serious mental illness, recovery, identity, community arts.
**Background**

The realist review outlined within this protocol will form the first phase of a realist evaluation within the authors doctoral thesis. The research project has been supported by the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) Applied Research Collaboration Yorkshire and Humberside (UK), the University of Huddersfield, and the Southwest Yorkshire Foundation Trust charity Creative Minds. The broad scope of the project is to explore the role of creative activities in serious mental illness recovery (SMI).

Mental illness is the second-largest source of burden of illness in England (MHFA England, 2020), and has been identified as a key issue to be addressed in the NHS Long Term Plan (2019). In particular, SMI is related to health status inequality and a reduced life expectancy of about 20 years (NHS, 2019). With recovery rates for SMI conditions, such as schizophrenia and psychosis, never exceeding 40% (MHFA England, 2020) SMI recovery is a crucial area for development. Drake & Whitley (2014) argue that low recovery rates aren’t due to ineffective treatments, but rather that recovery is defined solely by measurable clinical outcomes such as symptom reduction. The focus of SMI recovery has now begun to move away from clinical definitions towards a personal recovery approach (Brennaman & Lobo, 2011). SMI recovery can be broadly defined as an individual, non-linear “process whereby people with severe mental illness progress to live autonomous, contributing and satisfying lives in the community, even with persisting symptoms” (Whitley et al., 2015). In order to operationalise such a broad definition of recovery, Leamy and colleagues (2011) proposed the empirically developed CHIME framework. This framework consolidates shared experiences of SMI recovery into five key recovery processes – connectedness, hope, identity, meaning and empowerment. In line with this person-centred approach to SMI recovery, there is a commitment to offering non-clinical prescriptions within a care plan,
such as social prescribing schemes (Department of Health, 2006). Community-based creative activities have been identified as cost-effective interventions, however further research is needed to better understand how, why, and for whom they work (NIHR ARC Yorkshire and Humber, 2019; Fancourt et al., 2021).

Emerging evidence indicates a relationship between community-based arts activities and recovery from mental illnesses (Dayson & Bashir, 2014; Kimberlee, 2013; Stickley & Hui, 2012; Walters, 2015; White & Salamon, 2010). However, many of these studies and evaluations take a top-down approach, making assumptions about the important mechanisms of change. Plus, in a review of socially prescribed activities Polley et al. (2020) found 99 different outcomes, making it hard to determine what works, for whom and in what context.

It is also worth highlighting here that many of the CHIME processes were featured within outcome reports, with the exception of identity change. Williams et al., (2012) notes that identity change is rarely considered within evaluations of mental health interventions, which could explain the lack of data. Yet a positive identity change has been found to be an important feature of SMI (Best et al., 2016; Buck et al., 2013; Wisdom et al., 2008). Identity Theory argues identity provides a reference point to understand the behaviour of ourselves and others (Burke and Stets, 2009). Therefore, a positive identity when living with SMI will encourage improved health-related behaviours and quality of life (Slade, 2009). As little research attention has been given to the identity change recovery process within the context of community arts activities, this will form the focus of the current realist review. By gaining further understanding of the role of identity within community arts interventions, we can better understand the processes involved that produce benefits for people living with SMI.
Review objectives

The aim of this research is to discover causal explanations of how and why community-based arts activities enables the identity change recovery process from SMI. The overarching research question is:

How, why, and in what context do community-based arts interventions enable the identity change recovery process from serious mental illness?

A realist approach has been selected for this review as it is particularly applicable to complex social interventions set in a variety of different contexts, that produce different outcomes (Pawson, 2006). Community-based arts activities are one such type of social intervention. As a theory driven approach, a realist review requires an initial programme theory to test, refine and establish the parameters of the review (Flynn et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2013). Through the critical review of relevant literature to define SMI recovery and the role community-based arts activities, a broad initial programme theory was established:

Adults with SMI (Context) access a community-based arts activity (Intervention), which provides psychological and social resources (Mechanisms), that enables the identity change process in SMI recovery (Outcome).

The objectives of the review will be to develop and refine the initial programme theory by establishing:

1. Details of the contextual features of living with SMI
2. What mechanisms enable the identity change recovery process within the context of a community art activity.
3. The interaction between context and mechanism that results in enabling the identity change recovery process.
4. How the identity change recovery process is experienced.
Methods

The realist approach aims to discover causal relationships between specific contexts and mechanisms, that explain outcomes (Pawson, 2006). Realist reviews utilise a type of systematic literature review utilising an iterative process of searching, appraising and synthesising the literature. Details on how this will be carried out are provided in the following sections.

Search strategy

The realist review will be conducted within four search cycles: background; programme theories; empirical evidence; and middle-range theory searches (Booth et al., 2018). Search strategies within each cycle will include structured literature searches, citation searching and approaching the expert panel for suggested papers, evaluation reports and relevant policy documents. Structured searches will be conducted on electronic databases such as PsychInfo, CINAHL & MEDLINE, Scopus, Summons, Pubmed, as well as the repository for arts and health for sourcing grey literature. Booth et al. (2018) outlines a specific purpose within each search cycle, summarised below:

• Background searches aim to explore the scope of the literature and define the boundaries of the review.

• Programme theory searches focus on finding literature that offers explanatory insight of CMO configurations.

• Empirical evidence searches aim to find literature that will test developing programme theories.

• Middle-range theory searches explore cross-disciplinary middle range theory that may offer a higher level of abstraction of programme theories.
The searches will be limited to the date range of 2005 – 2020 to coincide with the UK government’s commitment to utilising community-based activities for recovery (Department for Health, 2006). Only items written in English will be considered due to translation limitations. The CIMO (Context, Intervention, Mechanism, Outcome) framework will be used to structure search terms as this framework was designed for use within a realist review (Booth, Harris et al., 2013).

Whilst it is not possible to outline the search terms that will be used throughout the review, terms for the background searches will be established from the initial programme theory. For example, terms relating to the context of living with SMI will include both specific diagnoses such as “schizophrenia”, and general phrases relating to mental illness such as “serious mental illness”. Intervention terms will be established from reviewed texts to encompass the broad terms used to describe such programmes, including “social prescribing” and “arts of prescription” (Public Health England, 2015; Thomson et al., 2015). Lastly, both mechanism and outcome terms will include the CHIME processes and general evaluation terms to ensure the background searches produce a broad range of results. An information specialist at the University of Huddersfield library will be consulted to pilot search terms.

**Literature selection and appraisal**

The types of study that can be included within a realist review is broad including empirical studies, as well as grey literature such as evaluation and policy documents (Wong, 2018). A realist review places emphasis on relevance and richness to select literature, particularly within the initial search cycles (Pawson, 2006; Booth, Harris et al., 2013). Assessment of
rigour is encompassed as the review progresses and is expanded beyond the traditional focus on methodological concerns (Pawson, 2006).

Relevance

Pawson (2006) argues that relevance is established as a combination of the project parameters and researcher judgement, and it is not possible to determine these parameters for the entire review. Rather, as the review progresses relevance will become defined by the developing programme theories. The research question and scope of the review can provide a starting point for the background searches. Therefore, initial criteria for relevant items will include a focus on adult populations living with SMI and community group arts activities (see table 1).

Richness

Richness refers to both the diversity of data sources, and the depth of insights within the literature to explain how an intervention works (Booth, Harris et al., 2013). This is established on reading the literature to determine that there is a sufficient level of detail to draw inferences about how and in what context the intervention works (Booth, Harris et al., 2013). The inferences drawn from the data will contribute to CMO configurations, providing novel insights for programme theory development. As with relevance, judgements made on whether an item offers sufficient explanatory depth will be determined by the theories as they are developed. Therefore, initial criteria for richness will again be guided by the focus of the review and whether an item offers CMOs that explain the identity change process within community arts activities (see table 1).
Rigour within a realist review is not solely focused on methodical approaches and requires the reviewer to consider how evidence is utilised within the literature item (Wong, 2018; Pawson, 2006). Therefore, judgements about rigour are not determined by “pre-formulated checklists” (Pawson, 2006, pg. 98), but by establishing whether the evidence presented can make a valuable contribution to programme theory development. This links with criteria relating to richness but also requires the reviewer to consider the clarity of conclusions and how well this is supported by data (see table 1).

**Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

Using the research question and initial programme theory a set of inclusion and exclusion criteria based on relevance, richness and rigour is outlined in Table 1. However, the iterative nature of the realist reviews means that the inclusion criteria may be adapted as new lines of enquiry become apparent. Therefore, pieces of literature that may be excluded within one search cycle, may be included within another. Pawson (2006) argues that utilising such an iterative process improves the rigour of the review as inferences are continuously tested and refined against pertinent data.
### Table 1: The initial inclusion and exclusion criteria based on relevance, richness and rigour

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Inclusion</th>
<th>Exclusion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relevance</td>
<td>• Study population or subject of paper includes adults aged over 18 with SMI&lt;br&gt;• Arts activities taking place in a community-based setting&lt;br&gt;• Group based activities&lt;br&gt;• Activities must include artistic engagement, including listening, reading and crafts etc</td>
<td>• Common mental illness or general wellbeing&lt;br&gt;• Arts activities taking place in formalised mental health settings, such as hospitals or art therapy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richness</td>
<td>• Offers explanatory insights into the identity change recovery process&lt;br&gt;• Add new detail to CMOs</td>
<td>• Individual activities&lt;br&gt;• Environmental and physical activity focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rigour</td>
<td>• Clear analysis / synthesis / line of reasoning is outlined to explain explanatory insights and conclusions drawn. &lt;br&gt;• Explanatory insights and conclusions are effectively supported by data</td>
<td>• Descriptive findings only and/or no insights into identity change. &lt;br&gt;• Does not add anything new to CMOs or PTs. &lt;br&gt;• No clear explanation of how explanatory insights and conclusions have been established. &lt;br&gt;• Explanatory insights and conclusions not clearly supported by data.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Data extraction and synthesis

Search results will be downloaded into Zotero (Vanhecke, 2008) and de-duplicated where possible. Searches will be recorded in line with the Realist And Meta-narrative Evidence Syntheses: Evolving Standards (RAMESES) publication standards, modelled on the PRISMA statement and developed specifically for realist research (Wong et al., 2013).
To develop theory from selected items, data from within the literature will be synthesised using realist logic that articulates realist programme theory as context + mechanism = outcome (CMO) (Wong, 2018). A retroductive approach will be taken to data extraction and synthesis by coding the data against CMOs or configurations thereof (Gilmore et al., 2019).

As demi-regularities emerge through this process CMO configurations can be organised into programme theories. The process of item selection, data extraction and synthesis is an iterative one and will be undertaken concurrently (Pawson, 2006).

Item selection and synthesis will be undertaken by the lead researcher. It is acknowledged within the RAMESES publication standards that capturing the authors decision processes can be challenging. To overcome this both a broad description of the selection process, and a justification of the selected items will be provided (Wong et al., 2013). To further verify the findings during the review process, and expert panel will be utilised to gain feedback and advice on programme theories as they develop.

**Expert Panel**

Stakeholder consultations are a common feature of realist reviews in order to ensure that the salience of programme theories, by gaining insights from people with lived experience of the review topic (Wong, 2018). The expert panel also offers public and patient involvement and engagement (PPIE) within health-related research to ensure research is relevant, accessible and appropriately disseminated (Health Research Authority, 2022). The UK Public Involvement Standards (2018) will be used to ensure the quality of PPI is maintained inline with NHIR standards. The aim will be to recruit an expert panel of service users and charity staff members through the partner charity Creative Minds, to gain
different perspectives on the programme theories developed. It is anticipated that at least two group consultation meetings will be held during the review process.

**Dissemination**

This realist review will be written up in-line with the RAMESES publication standards and the results of the review will be submitted to a peer-reviewed journal. Findings will also be disseminated to the expert panel and partner charity through a group consultation meeting, which will include a presentation outlining the research aims, overview of methods, a summary of key programme theories and a discussion of their meaning. A copy of this presentation will be distributed to the expert panel and partner charity.

In addition, the findings from this review will inform the second stage of a realist evaluation, in which programme theories developed from the review will be tested and refined against the lived experience of people living with SMI who attend community arts activities.
References


