

***It opens a whole new world: Older people's perceptions
of the role of the creative arts as leisure in their lives***

Alison Herron
BA (Hons. Monash), BSW (Melb)

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**School Of Human Movement, Recreation and Performance
Faculty of Arts, Education and Human Development
Victoria University**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis reports on an original qualitative study of older people's perceptions about how they benefited from participating in a creative arts program. The study brought together the research fields of leisure, arts and ageing well to explore the meaning that 10 older people gave to their creative leisure experiences.

Narrative data from in-depth interviews were analysed using a qualitative approach. The major finding of this study was that creative activities, particularly group arts activities, can be a powerful mode for delivering leisure benefits to enhance ageing well. Many participants attributed a sense of a new lease of life to the stimulating opportunities they now had for self-expression. This new lease of life resulted from the benefits of heightened enjoyment along with a strengthened sense of life purpose and meaning. Sharing a common interest was identified as vital to enjoyable social interactions and a sense of belonging.

The findings of this study indicate that there is certainly scope for the arts, leisure and aged care fields to provide a more stimulating and developmental range of creative programs to benefit older people. Furthermore, this study identified specific facilitating strategies that leisure providers can incorporate into program design to enable older people to reap the potential benefits that creative leisure can bring to their lives.

STUDENT DECLARATION

I, Alison Herron, declare that the Master by Research thesis entitled *It opens a whole new world: Older people's perceptions of the role of the creative arts as leisure in their lives* is no more than 60,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

Signature

Date

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DEFINITIONS

Ageing well:

“Self-initiated promotion of good health, philosophical well-being, and selection of opportunities that support achieving and maintaining a personally satisfying quality of life” (Fontane, 1996, p. 288).

Art:

The expression of thoughts, feelings and senses by “the conscious use of skill . . . and creative imagination” (Arnold, 1976, p. 181). Definitions of the arts typically include visual arts, writing, music, theatre and dance.

Creativity:

A process by which a person “employs both the conscious and the unconscious domains of the mind to combine various existing materials into fresh constructions or configurations” (McLeish, 1983, p. 24).

Enjoyment:

“The feeling of pleasure or satisfaction that comes from doing things” (Kielhofner, 2002, p. 54).

Interests:

Activities that bring enjoyment or satisfaction (Kielhofner, 2002, p. 52).

Leisure:

The meaning, experience or state of mind evoked by a freely chosen activity:

“a subjective attitude, an experience that is based on an individual’s own perspective, feelings, values, and past life experiences” (Edginton, Jordan, DeGraaf, & Edginton, 1998, p. 37).

Leisure benefit

An improved condition, the prevention of a worse condition or the realization of a specific satisfying psychological experience (Driver & Bruns, 1999, p. 354).

Leisure facilitating factors

Conditions that promote the formation of leisure preferences, encourage participation and support satisfying leisure experiences (Mannell & Kleiber, 1997, p. 345; Raymore, 2002, p. 39).

Social support:

A generic term for programs whose primary aim is to reduce the social isolation of frail older people, younger people with disabilities and carers. The two social programs in this study are funded as Planned Activity Groups under the Home and Community Care (HACC) Program – see below.

Home and Community Care (HACC) Program:

A joint funding program of the Commonwealth, State and Territory governments. “HACC funds services which are targeted to frail older people, people with disabilities, and carers, providing basic support and maintenance to people living at home whose capacity for independent living is at risk, or who are at risk of premature or inappropriate admission to long term residential care” (*Victorian Home and Community Care (HACC) Program Manual*, February 2003, p. 3)

1. WHY THIS STUDY?

With improving opportunities to practice the arts and to pursue lifelong learning, tomorrow's elders could take up the challenge of creativity in the later years in ways unimagined today. The creative old age once reserved for elites could become an opportunity for all. . . . the real debate about age and creativity has barely begun. Gerontologist, Harry Moody (1998, p. 411).

The Beginning: Origins of My Interest in this Research

A turning point in my understanding of ageing well and listening to older people's voices came in 1996 when I attended the annual conference of the Australian Association of Gerontology on the theme of "Successful Ageing." While there were many conference papers that interested me, there was one particular presentation that I found inspiring. In this presentation, "The Tyranny of Superageing: Resisting new stereotypes in the reconstruction of ageing," Dr Susan Feldman and Dr Barbara Kamler spoke about some of their findings from their innovative research with older women. They had worked with older women in a series of writing workshops to offer opportunities for these women to develop new storylines of ageing to replace the stereotypical limited (and limiting) ageist storylines. What was most powerfully moving for me was to hear the voices of these "ordinary" women through Susan and Barbara reading from their stories and to listen to the women's voices on video as they read their own writing. These were powerful stories of strength, resilience, courage, transition and identity evoked through the simplicity of everyday life experiences. The research indicated that self-expression through the creative arts has enormous potential to enhance older people's sense of ageing well and to educate the wider population about the experience of ageing.

At the time of the "Successful Ageing" conference, I was working as a social worker in a community agency. My role was to develop and manage a social support program for socially isolated older people living in the local community. Underpinning the program was my practice model which combined social work, community development and

leisure principles to support people to enhance their quality of life. In consultation with older people in the local area, we decided initially to focus on providing opportunities for socially isolated older people to develop new friendships within small leisure groups. These groups were established in response to people's interests and were supported by trained volunteers. As relationships developed within the interest-based groups and people talked more freely about their lives, their confidence and assertiveness grew. It became evident to me that these older people were looking for more opportunities through the program – opportunities which would offer them more choice, control and intellectual stimulation. Their leisure experience became “a site of resistance” where they could resist the limiting ageist stereotypes and engage more actively in the community. Just as Wearing (1998) explained her rationale for blending leisure and social work, I found that leisure offered “a more holistic, positive and preventative approach to the quality of human living than the problem-oriented approach of social work” (p. xiii) and that a leisure model has more to offer than the traditional aged care model of the major funding bodies and policy makers.

Feldman and Kamler's research provided the seed for my increasing interest in the value of creativity to older people. Our social support program embarked on a range of projects to promote health and well-being through the arts – for older people to be seen and heard. The first project was a series of writing workshops for older women, which Susan Feldman facilitated using the approach she and Barbara Kamler had developed (Kamler & Feldman, 1995). The experience of these workshops was the catalyst for an arts exhibition at the municipal art gallery during 1999 International Year of Older Persons. For this exhibition entitled *Walk in My Shoes*, the artist-curator resourced older people in aged care programs to create the works to be exhibited. Groups participating in the exhibition observed changes in their social interactions. Placing a group of people together in an aged care program where the common factor is their health and mobility problems is not necessarily conducive to connecting socially. There may be no threads of common interest apparent. Contributing to this exhibition offered a chance for people to find out about each other's lives and skills and also opened up channels for greater communication. This in turn provided opportunities to establish links and uncover those

common threads. It gave everyone a chance to talk about themselves and their lives, at the same time focusing more on those around them. We then undertook a major arts project, *Older People's Living Stories: Promoting Health through the Arts*, funded by philanthropic and local government grants, which engaged older people in storytelling, writing and playback theatre performance. I then wanted to learn more about why creative arts-based group programs can have such an impact on older people and why I could see a deeper level of social interactions, a greater sense of vitality and an excitement in their whole being.

At the same time as I was observing the impact of creativity on older people's well-being, I was also frustrated as the manager of a social support program that our evaluation measures for the government funding body were based only on quantitative measures, such as numbers of people attending and numbers of hours of service provided. We were required to measure what was convenient to measure, when it was the impact on people's quality of life that needed to be evaluated. It seemed to me that the starting point was to find out what older people themselves believe is important to them.

Once I commenced this research for my Masters degree, I experienced a number of parallel processes between my personal life and my research. While studying ageing well in my professional life, I felt I was dealing with "ageing unwell" in my family life as the health of my parents and parents-in-law deteriorated dramatically and we had to negotiate the maze of the aged care system. As I was completing my interviews with participants in the first program, I noted in a reflection that I was experiencing similar feelings to what the participants were describing to me. The processes of interviewing, transcription, creative thinking and analysis were totally absorbing and provided an escape from the many problems of family life and work. My research activities lifted my mood and gave me a sense of moving forward. New revelations, new connections and new understandings created a sense of excitement for me.

I just managed to complete the data collection before I decided to leave work and defer my studies so that I could care for my father. In the following few months, what became

most important was that my parents received the services they needed and were treated with dignity and retained their sense of control over decisions affecting their lives. My thinking about ageing well seemed out of step with my experiences during this period and I questioned the reality of what I was hoping to achieve through my research. I started to doubt whether I could get back my perspective or my passion. My whole life was involved in caring and the problems of old age: sickness, dying, aged care facilities and hospitals. It felt like “all downhill,” just what I had been working and researching to dispel! What kept me on track was that I felt I owed it to the people I had interviewed to complete the research. They had participated to make a serious contribution to academic research and to help other older people - I didn't want all this to end up on the scrap heap.

I returned to my research with a heightened awareness about the need for high quality programs and services which are responsive to the diverse needs and interests of older people and which give dignity and meaning to their lives.

The Topic

People have been drawing, painting, singing and dancing since earliest times. These artistic activities provided the earliest forms of human communication and until recent centuries, creative expression through the arts was part of everyday cultural life. In current times, however, many people do not engage in artistic self-expression as an avenue for enhancing important aspects of their mental health such as their sense of identity, community belonging and resilience. With art being elevated to the realm of those artists possessing extraordinary creative talent and skills, most people experience art as spectators, not as participators (Arnold, 1976; Freysinger & Kelly, 2004).

Arnold (1976) asserts that regardless of ability “within each person is some potential for communication through an art form. All individuals should have the opportunity to develop art as a source of communication just as early people did” (p. 127). This idea has been taken up by Susan Perlstein, Director of the National Center for Creative Aging in New York. She advocates the value of artistic creativity as a “process available to all