

Practising Well

Conversations & Support Menu

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November 2021

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Arts & Humanities
Research Council



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The **Practising Well: Conversations & Support Menu** research project was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council via Clore Leadership.

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Introduction to this version & about the author

This document presents key extracts from the Practising Well report

The full report and short summary is available from:

<https://www.nicolanaismith.co.uk/research-writing/practising-well-conversations-support-menu>

There will be Practising Well events across 2022 if you would like to hear about these or share your comments about the research please get in touch:

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Nicola Naismith is a visual artist and researcher. She supports creative practitioners through research and advocacy and working as a mentor, coach and lecturer. She is a collaborative partner with the Culture Health and Wellbeing Alliance for the annual Practising Well Award, which seeks to highlight initiatives that make positive contributions to affective support for creative and heritage practitioners working in health and wellbeing contexts. Nicola completed her Clore Fellowship in 2018 and was awarded AHRC funding to undertake the *Artists Practising Well* research project which was published in 2019.

Research introduction

Participatory arts are proven to support our health and wellbeing. They are an opportunity for individuals and communities to explore, celebrate and confront difficult topics and uncomfortable truths. The work that takes place between creative practitioner and participant can be collaborative, intuitive and exciting, and can also be difficult, challenging and demanding.

The combined effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, the rapidly accelerating global climate crisis and the murder of George Floyd - which come on top of wide-ranging systemic inequalities - have given rise to individual and collective grief, anxiety and anger, leading to a combination of stress responses: fight, flight and freeze.

Creative practitioners will be living with and processing their own experiences of these events whilst supporting others through participatory arts offers. Creative careers are often built on adapting, flexing and self-resourcing, which embeds a coping and managing skill set.

Social support has fallen increasingly to civil society, and the 'frontline' now includes many people working with the arts and culture. Participants bring increasingly complex and vulnerable positions into participatory arts opportunities, which in turn leads to an intensification and diversification of experience for both participant and creative practitioner.

Research questions & methodology

What are the key challenges to mainstreaming the 'affective support' conversation within participatory arts?

What evidence-based information is needed to facilitate conversations around affective support between the stakeholders of this work?

When should these conversations within the various project models take place?

How is affective support to be resourced, and who has responsibility for this?

Methodology: Selected literature review, focus group conversations & individual semi-structured Interviews.

Literature review

Reviewing **Wellbeing at Work** literature found that while most research focuses on employment contexts, there are insights from several studies which highlight the isolating nature of self-employed work and the risk of mental ill-health.

Precarity and Needs maps out the financial situation in which creative practitioners work, and the impact of ineffective instrumental support and managing peripatetic working. There are issues with uneven power dynamics between organisations and creative practitioners, which contribute to difficulties around asking for help.

By introducing **Reflective Practice in People-Orientated Professions** there are opportunities to explore how reflection can be used to unpick unhealthy assumptions around practice, process work-based experiences and engage in a continual sense of curiosity and development.

By sharing **Types and Methods of Affective Support** there is an opportunity to consider a range of support approaches beyond those which may be most familiar: Action Learning Sets, Coaching, Creative Practice, Embodied Practices, Mentoring and Reverse Mentoring, Peer Groups, Performance Review, Research, Supervision, Team Meetings and Writing.

The **Associated Materials** section - which brought the literature review to a close - highlighted a conference, practice handbook, research article and online resources that demonstrate the high quality work already being developed, discussed and actioned in this research area.

Focus Groups and Analysis

Across the focus group conversations there was expertise from dance, drama, music, theatre, visual arts and writing. Collectively they had experience of a wide landscape of practice, including working with children and young people, adults, and older people in a range of contexts - including health & mental health, criminal justice and detention centres - and across community settings, defined by geography and common experiences. A variety of leadership styles and approaches were represented.

Across the two focus groups and three interviews a range of connected concerns were expressed, each providing rich material upon which to reflect under the following headings:

Impact of isolation
and precarity

Symbiotic
relationship
between
Instrumental and
Affective support

Role of
consultation and
choice

Awareness of the
barriers to
accessing affective
support

Focus Groups and Analysis

The impact of **isolation and precarity** found that the accumulative effect of a lack of fair contracts - issued late - and subsequent late payment of invoices, together with a lack of inductions, would result in increased workload.

The **sybiotic relationship between instrumental and affective support** is key. Attending to instrumental support - the resources and organisational structures which support the work - communicates respect and value to the creative practitioner.

The **role of consultation and choice** is a central component of this work going forward - without it affective support offers are likely to fall short of being useful or relevant.

Developing a clear awareness of the **barriers to accessing affective support** - the need to financially prioritise paid work and hesitancy over appearing needy - and mitigating against these factors will ensure that creative practitioners access support when it is offered.

Conclusion

The literature review has provided the grounding for this research, with the focus groups and interviews providing in-depth reflections and experiences. The range of individual, organisational and sectorial perspectives has offered me ways of thinking about this research topic in expansive and new ways. There are organisations who are leading the ways in which creative practitioners are supported, to ensure this is rolled out across the whole participatory arts sector change is needed at policy level. The effects of the pandemic, the global climate crisis and the murder of George Floyd - which come on top of existing systemic inequalities - are impacting people in individual and collective ways. In order to hold the complexities and vulnerabilities of participants in participatory arts spaces, creative practitioners must be supported to protect and promote their own wellbeing. Adopting clear and consistent approaches to affective support will result in interconnected gains: sectorial learning, practice development, quality experiences for participants, increased diversification of the workforce and increased wellbeing for creative practitioners.

In arriving at the 8 recommendations I first considered allocating them to different stakeholders - some aimed at creative practitioners, some directed towards organisations and funders. However, the case for affective support is best progressed if a shared understanding and collective endeavour is undertaken in the context of remembering where the resources to enable change are currently held. I have purposely described each recommendation as a verb to describe an action, for it is only through doing that change will happen.

Recommendations

Supporting

Instrumental support needs to be in place consistently across the participatory arts sector as a whole. Induction, introductions, fair contracts which include allocated planning, debrief and evaluation time, and prompt payment of invoices all communicate value and respect to creative practitioners, and are the foundations of any participatory arts work.

Promoting

Affective support and reflective practice activities need to be promoted as a mechanism by which to sustain professional curiosity in the participatory arts sector, and not simply as a way to avoid burnout.

Collaborating

Adopting a collaborative approach to the design, delivery and evaluation of affective support initiatives (to include creative practitioners, organisations and other stakeholders) will help to ensure frameworks of support are suitable for both creative practitioners - in their different career stages and specialisms - and organisations, in terms of management processes.

Planning

Planning processes which include creative practitioner support conversations as an integrated part of project inception, recruitment, development, delivery and evaluation - and which allow space to adapt as individual needs change and as the work dictates - will help to embed support in a sustainable way.

Recommendations

Learning

Engaging in a period of experimentation, experiential learning and evaluation around affective support will help stakeholders understand what works well.

Guiding

Updating grant application guidance to include specific questions about - and inviting costs related to - affective support for creative practitioners will communicate an understanding of the true cost of participatory arts work.

Evaluating

Prioritising funding to support longitudinal wellbeing studies of creative practitioners working in a range of participatory arts settings will help to build an evidence-based picture of the impact of this work on individuals and the sector.

Developing

Securing funding to establish a working group which includes diverse representation from freelance, organisational and funding perspectives, practice, research and operations to collectively develop this work in the future will help to ensure change happens and in timely ways.

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