**The role of participatory arts in addressing the loneliness and social isolation of older people: A conceptual review of the literature**

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# **Abstract**

Loneliness and social isolation are pertinent issues for older people due to the life transitions and loss often experienced in later life. Research points towards the potential for participatory arts with older people to address loneliness and social isolation; however, there is little conceptualization of the mechanisms through which this can be promoted. This conceptual review brings together selected literature that reports on the social impacts of participatory arts with older people to develop a conceptual framework of themes that respond specifically to understandings of the experience of loneliness and social isolation. First, participatory arts can strengthen existing relationships and build new relationships by facilitating social interaction and promoting social capital, thus promoting social embeddedness in the community. Second, participatory arts can address the discrepancies between expected or desired relationships and reality by enhancing well-being, self-worth and a sense of belonging that helps older people to feel more content with their social lives. Third, participatory arts can be accessible and inclusive of everyone and enables older people to make a valued contribution towards the community, which facilitates meaningful social participation. This conceptual framework is a useful resource for those advocating for the value of older people participating in the arts. Key factors raised across the literature are discussed along with avenues for future research. Ultimately, the potential for participatory arts in reducing loneliness and social isolation is evident, but this potential needs further investigation and promotion to make a real difference.

**Keywords**

participatory arts

older people

loneliness

social isolation

social relationships

social participation

# **Introduction**

The UK population is ageing. Between 1997 and 2017, the number of people aged 65 or older increased from 15.9% to 18.2% of the total population, and this is projected to rise to 24% by 2037 (Office of National Statistics 2018). For this older population, loneliness and social isolation are pertinent issues due to the life transitions often experienced in later life, such as loss through retirement or bereavement and reduced mobility as a result of deteriorating health (Windle et al. 2011; Collins 2014).

Loneliness can be defined as ‘the unpleasant experience that occurs when a person’s network of social relations is deficient in some important way’ (Perlman and Peplau 1981: 31), which may be due to a discrepancy between the number of relationships or the quality of relationships compared with what is desired (Cacioppo et al. 2009). Loneliness is often characterized by feelings of emptiness and rejection, while the opposite would be feelings of belonging or social embeddedness (de Jong Gierveld et al. 2016). It is possible to differentiate between emotional loneliness due to the absence of an intimate or close emotional attachment such as a partner or best friend, and social loneliness due to the absence of an engaging social network including friends, colleagues and neighbours (Weiss 1973). Meanwhile, social isolation is the result of objectively small social networks of relationships or separation from networks (de Jong Gierveld et al. 2016). Although people who feel lonely are not necessarily socially isolated and likewise people who are socially isolated do not necessarily feel lonely (Victor et al. 2000), the experiences are interconnected. In general, people with smaller social networks are at greater risk of loneliness; however, other aspects of the network are also relevant. For example, people with small networks of close and meaningful personal relationships may feel adequately socially embedded.

Participatory arts are beginning to show potential for reducing social isolation and loneliness through published research and reports, as part of benefits to health and well-being more broadly. The arts include music, dance, theatre, visual and performing art forms, and literature (Arts Council England 2013), while participatory arts refer to the collaboration between an artist and a participant in a creative process to produce an event or experience (Arts Council England 2010). A report by the Baring Foundation and the Campaign to End Loneliness mapped a huge variety of ways in which the arts are used to work in a participatory way with older people in the United Kingdom, and the personal and societal benefits of this (Cutler 2012). They highlighted the intrinsic value in engaging the talent, experience and enthusiasm of older people in the creative arts and the pursuit of cultural activities, consistently identifying the benefits of feeling valued, creative expression, using skills and engaging with others. The report also noted the severe lack of support in terms of policy and funding for arts and cultural activities that engage older people, and called for research into the effects of the arts on personal and community relations. A more recent report from the Baring Foundation reflects on their work from 2010 to 2017 on the arts and older people, providing inspirational examples of projects with a focus on dance, digital arts, singing and music, festivals, drama and spoken word, and visual arts, galleries and museums (Cutler 2017).

***Aims, scope and structure of the review***

This conceptual review of the literature aims to explore the ways in which participatory arts reduce loneliness and social isolation for older people. Given that the majority of the available literature considers the impact of participatory arts on health and well-being more generally rather than the social impacts specifically, there is little understanding of the mechanisms through which participatory arts can address loneliness and social isolation. By bringing this literature on social impacts together into a conceptual framework, this review intends to provide evidence for those advocating for the value of older people participating in the arts and stimulate further primary research into the possibilities for promoting belonging, social embeddedness and social participation of older people through the arts and thus tackling loneliness and social isolation.

This review draws on selected papers from a more extensive scoping review conducted for a wider funded study entitled ‘Creative Journeys’, which was led by Anglia Ruskin University in partnership with Essex County Council Culture and Community Engagement Team. The scoping review explored the impact of participatory arts on social relationships for older people in care and community settings. A further conceptual review drawing from the scoping review but focusing on reciprocity in the social relationships of older people has been published elsewhere (Wilson et al. in press). The scoping review involved a comprehensive search strategy using keywords related to arts, older people and social outcomes across five electronic databases: MedLine, CINAHL, AMED, Web of Science and ASSIA.

The literature here is presented under three themes: (1) enhancing social relationships, (2) promoting satisfaction with social life and (3) enabling meaningful participation. It is important to note that these themes are interrelated and overlapping as artistic processes are not linear; much of the research findings from individual studies are relevant to more than one theme. Therefore findings from some individual studies are presented across themes. Presentation of the literature will be followed by a discussion on these themes as a conceptual framework for the role of participatory arts in tackling loneliness and social isolation and promoting belonging, social embeddedness and social participation for older people.

# **Conceptual review**

# ***1. Enhancing social relationships***

The first theme outlines the evidence for participatory arts having the potential to strengthen existing relationships and build new relationships by creating a space and opportunity for social interaction. First, by facilitating shared interests and experiences, participatory arts help older people to interact with each other and strengthen or develop relationships that contribute towards their social network. Second, by providing opportunities for those relationships to be reciprocal and supportive, participatory arts can generate social capital and a sense of community. In this way, participatory arts may enhance the social relationships of older people and promote social embeddedness, in turn directly addressing issues of loneliness.

## *1.1. Interaction and social networks*

Many examples of increased interactions and enhanced social networks can be seen in the literature around singing and music groups for older people. First turning to singing groups, Skingley and Bungay (2010) used qualitative interviews with seventeen older people to explore their experiences of participating in a community-based singing programme, ‘Silver Song Clubs’. Experiences included increased social interaction and some participants saw these social outcomes as their primary motive for participating. In a similar vein, Davidson et al. (2014) used mixed methodology to evaluate the impact of a singing programme on 36 older people living in the community in Australia. Despite little effect on their health and well-being seen in standardized quantitative questionnaire measures, qualitative interviews revealed various social benefits. These included socio-musical outcomes such as becoming a member of a group and participating in a new kind of social contact with others in the group. Social engagement was the focus of Cohen et al.’s (2006) study on the effects of community-based cultural programmes for older people in America. They used questionnaires and self-reported measures with participants assigned either to a choral or a control group. Amongst impacts on their physical and mental health, participants involved in the choral group were more able to initiate new close relationships with others in the group and there was also a trend towards increased levels of social activity compared with those in the control group. In turn, loneliness decreased more so in the choral group. Another choral group in Scotland was evaluated by Hillman (2002), who received survey responses from 79 people of retirement age at the time. Participants rated their perceptions of their health and well-being before and after joining the choral group, and improvements related to social life were reported in both qualitative and quantitative data (although this was not statistically significant).

Turning to the role of music-making, Hays and Minichiello (2005a) conducted focus groups and interviews with people aged 60 years and older living in the community in Australia about the role of music-making in their lives. The social aspect of sharing music was a prominent theme and participants talked about the ways in which music brought people together and helped people to connect and develop friendships. Specifically, the authors conclude that music can help to lessen feelings of loneliness and social isolation, therefore improving quality of life. Similarly, Dabback (2008) explored identity construction and revision in later life through participation in the Rochester New Horizons Band, a professionally led group instrumental music programme. Of 100 members, 22 took part in focus groups that generated qualitative data around the social interactions and networks experienced within the group. The findings show how identities are formed not only based on the musical skills acquired but also negotiated through the social dynamics of the group. Participation in the band led to new friendships and strengthened existing relationships, and these relationships were considered as equally important to the music-making.

Incorporating theatre with dance, Bicknell (2014) considers past research and primary experiential data from the ‘Body of Knowledge’ project to demonstrate how participatory dance-theatre enables unique and meaningful interaction between older people. The approach is identified as distinct from other art forms in that it allows people to experience physical contact with others in the safe and appropriate context of dance. This human touch is particularly significant for many older people who live alone or in residential care settings and may rarely experience physical contact beyond care procedures. In addition, participatory dance-theatre provided the opportunity for older people to work together towards a shared endeavour that allows for friendships to develop during rehearsal periods.

In terms of visual arts, a mixed-methods evaluation by Greer et al. (2012) with senior citizens taking part in professionally taught painting classes revealed increased social engagement and interactions; a sense of belonging; formations of new relationships; and altered family relationships as participants and their family members took pride in the artwork produced and conversations between parents and children took on new dimensions. Some of the participants found that their art helped reinforce family relationships.

## *1.2. Social capital and community*

Social capital is defined by Putnam (1993) as cohesion in the community that arises from the availability of local community organizations and networks; civic engagement or participation in those networks; a strong, positive community identity and sense of solidarity; and norms of trust and reciprocal support within the community. The potential for participatory arts to promote social capital, extend social networks and create supportive environments for older people could go a long way towards tackling issues of loneliness and social isolation. In a qualitative case study of a community choir in Australia, Langston and Barrett (2008) consider how community music can foster social capital for choir members, most of whom were retired. Through a survey, field notes and interviews, indicators of social capital were identified. These included trust, shared norms and values, civic and community involvement, networks, knowledge resources and contact with families and friends. In addition, fellowship was found to be a fundamental factor for some choir members, evolving from trust and generating further trust, friendship, mutual support, collaboration and the development of relationships. The authors conclude:

Choirs that embody strong community connection, individual autonomy, bonds and fellowship greatly enhance the chances of successful creation of social capital, by binding together people of similar interests and backgrounds to create an environment of mutual cooperation, friendship and goodwill. Langston and Barrett (2008: 133)

In addition, in the aforementioned Rochester New Horizons Band (Dabback 2008) the relationships that developed or strengthened over time were reported to provide vital support through some of the adverse life events associated with older age, providing another example of participatory arts facilitating social capital and support.

Exploring community dance, Cooper and Thomas (2002) conducted a qualitative ethnographic study over one year of social dance groups for people aged 60 years and older. Researcher participation, observations, filming and interviews were conducted across three different sites in London and Essex offering ballroom or modern sequence social dance. In addition to benefits to well-being, participants valued the social support network accessed through social dancing and the sense of community spirit in the dance hall. Participants were aware that many of their fellow dancers had lost partners and lived alone, which created a group consciousness to provide social and emotional support for each other, for example sending cards when someone fell ill and attending social events together. However, it was noted that this community spirit was most evident in modern sequence dancing where all couples performed the same routine in unison, as opposed to ballroom dancing.

Moving on to theatre, in their evaluation of the ‘Creative Gymnasium’ project delivered by the Belgrade Theatre, Coventry, Savin-Baden et al. (2013) also found an important role for participatory drama in developing relationships for older people. Drama and arts activities were provided to people aged 50 plus in community and residential settings. Qualitative data showed that participants developed a new and broad set of relationships. The peer group showed a commitment to and reliance on one another, which led to friendships, support and a sense of community cohesion. In addition, participants had something new to talk about with family members and people from the wider community.

Finally, the Bealtaine Arts Festival in Ireland provides a large-scale example of community arts that celebrates creativity in older age. The festival offers opportunities for older people to meaningfully participate in a wide range of arts activities and also engages local authorities, libraries, educational institutions, health and social care organizations, and voluntary bodies for older people. O’Shea and Léime (2012) reflect on the findings from large-scale surveys with both organizers and consumers of the festival and interviews with older participants, artists and organizers. Significant benefits in terms of social and community networking were identified: 95 per cent of older people agreed that ‘participating in Bealtaine means that I have got to know people I wouldn’t otherwise have met’ and 87 per cent agreed that ‘participation in Bealtaine had increased their level of involvement in their community’. All participants reported that Bealtaine facilitated the formation of new and lasting friendships, allowed older people to make connections with others who had similar interests and also offered the opportunity to meet people they would not otherwise have met, such as local young people through intergenerational projects. Furthermore, Bealtaine helped to break down barriers for isolated older people in care settings by holding exhibitions and events in these places and connecting them with the local community to build a more reciprocal relationship. Older people were more aware of what was happening in the community and more likely to become involved and even organize further events or arts groups themselves. Overall, this contributed towards greater social cohesion through increased social connection and social capital, and the social inclusion of older people in the local community. The authors acknowledge the need for further evidence of the benefits of the arts for the health and well-being of older people, particularly intervention studies that shed light on the mechanisms that mediate this relationship.

# ***2. Promoting satisfaction with social life***

In addition to strengthening existing relationships and building new relationships, the second theme explores the potential for participatory arts to address discrepancies in expectations and realities around the number and quality of relationships older people have. First, by enhancing well-being and self-worth, participatory arts may lift the spirits of older people and help them to feel more content with their existing social life. Second, by creating a sense of belonging, participatory arts may enable older people to make deeper bonds with a particular group and feel more connected to others more generally in the artistic community. In this way, participatory arts may promote a greater satisfaction with social life and a sense of belonging, offering perhaps a more indirect route to addressing issues of loneliness.

## *2.1. Well-being and self-worth*

Research into the ‘Music for Life’ project investigated the social, emotional and cognitive benefits of community music-making amongst older people (Hallam et al. 2012; Creech et al. 2013a, 2013b; Varvarigou et al. 2012). Three sites in the United Kingdom offered musical activities for older people (aged 50–93) including singing in small and large groups, rock groups, and classes for guitar, ukulele, steel pans, percussion, recorder, keyboard and music appreciation. A control group was made up of individuals attending language classes, art and craft classes, yoga, social support, a book group and a social club. Although art and craft classes may have had implications for this review, the findings from the musical activities are still relevant. Creech et al. (2013a, 2013b) conducted a mixed-methods evaluation with 398 older people and found that music-making facilitated a greater sense of purpose and a positive outlook on life, feelings of autonomy and control, and positive social relationships providing social affirmation. In addition to a sense of purpose and general positive feelings, other mental health benefits attributed to the creative and expressive quality of music-making included increased confidence, protection against stress and depression, and support following bereavement. In addition, the social affirmation element occurred through opportunities created for social interaction and the development of positive social relationships between older people; the giving and receiving of peer support that bolsters competence; and the performance of music that allows accomplishments to be recognized by others.

Hays and Minichiello (2005b) researched the personal meaning of music for older people living in the community in Australia. Through in-depth qualitative interviews with 52 people aged 60 years and older, they explored how music is related to identity, self-expression and personal well-being. They found that through music, participants were able to reflect on their own personhood and redefine their self-identity since retiring. Music helped them to become aware of and explore their emotions to better understand them, but could also stimulate more positive ways of thinking. Singing or playing an instrument and choosing specific music to listen to was seen as a way for older people to express the self and convey feelings and emotions to others. Musical networks provided people with the experience of feeling accepted, valued, needed and belonging, and music provided interaction with others, offering opportunities for people to connect at a personal level, and influenced the development, maintenance and communication within relationships. Indeed, many participants claimed that irrespective of medical health conditions, music was the key to their sense of well-being and contributed to their inner happiness, contentment and peace. One participant stated: ‘You are never alone when you are listening to music’ (Hays and Minichiello 2005b: 444).

In terms of visual art-making, Reynolds (2010) conducted qualitative, semi-structured interviews with older women aged 60–86 years living in the community and found that creating art enriched their everyday lives. The sensuality of different colours and textures stimulated the mind and could distract participants from negative experiences and in turn enhance well-being. It also challenged the skills of participants but allowed them to be playful in their creativity, providing a source of satisfaction on completion. The women also reported that art-making enabled them to maintain reciprocal relationships with friends and family, and their social connections were valued for being on equal status rather than implying dependency as they were based on mutual interests and shared topics of conversation. The art-making allowed them to feel like continuing valued members of the community.

Greaves and Farbus (2006) researched the outcomes of the ‘Upstream Healthy Living Centre’ intervention, which used mentors to engage socially isolated older people in creative activities in their communities. Qualitative data from interviews with participants, carers and referring health professionals expanded on quantitative data from questionnaires indicating that psychological benefits were intertwined with increased social interaction and the perceived quality of those interactions. This led to increased social networks and mutual support that in turn improved both psychological and physical well-being. There was a sense of increased optimism, self-worth and willingness to engage in life, which helped to reduce symptoms of depression and loneliness.

## *2.2. Sense of belonging*

A sense of belonging was evident in Lally’s (2009) report on the ‘Sweet Tonic’ programme, a singing-based participatory arts initiative comprising 30 weeks of music workshops, culminating in a concert showcasing the achievements of the participants. The 26 participants who completed the programme were self-identified seniors aged 51–83 years from Australia (none of whom were frail or mentally impaired). A qualitative evaluation, involving observation, interviews, focus groups and questionnaires, revealed that the programme had demonstrable positive social outcomes. The majority of participants reported an increase in their level of community-based activity and social outings. In addition, they enjoyed socializing with others in the group and felt supported by the group, with a stable group dynamic emerging throughout the programme. Creative collaboration to write and perform their own song helped a sense of group solidarity evolve throughout the programme.

In addition to the emotional, cognitive and health benefits discussed in the previous section, Creech et al. (2013a) also found that participants developed a strong musical self-concept as a result of the social affirmation from others through performances for their friends and family. They experienced a sense of belonging as a musician and felt that they were playing a vital and valued role within the community. Furthermore, Hallam et al. (2012) drew on the data from the ‘Music for Arts’ project to show that participating in musical activities offered opportunities to socialize and develop deep connections with others in the group, which became a fundamental part of their lives, leading to a sense of belonging. For example, one participant stated: ‘I think you feel support from everybody. If there is a concert, we are altogether in it and you feel everybody is there for you’. This sense of belonging was also identified by Pike (2011), who investigated the engagement of senior citizens aged 65–95 years in weekly group piano classes at an American University, using state-of-the-art digital piano labs. An eight-year longitudinal qualitative case study of 35 participants revealed a number of broad themes, one of which identified peer support as a valuable outcome. Participants engaged in modelling and supportive encouragement of others to improve their skills and progress; they felt a sense of belonging within their peer group of pianists.

A dance programme in Nottinghamshire called ‘Young @ Heart’, specifically aimed to tackle the social isolation of older people in a rural community, was evaluated by Stacey and Stickley (2008) using observations and interviews with eight female participants. They found a range of benefits, including the intrinsic value of emotion, confidence, stimulation and personal development. In addition, the instrumental value of group engagement, group recognition and future visions of the group were also identified; group members provided company, friendship and a sense of belonging within the community. Moving on to theatre, a qualitative evaluation of a UK-based community theatre group for people aged older than 60 years found that relationships that resulted from participation in the group were described as central to participants’ experience of personal enrichment (Pyman and Rugg 2006). The experience was one of feeling personally valued, welcomed, supported and encouraged in trying out newly acquired skills. Reciprocity in relationships was also emphasized. Performances incorporated elements of local history, which helped to explore collective identities and how older people fit within the wider community. Recreating a sense of community spirit was also seen as important through raising funds, providing a focus for community celebrations, and making a connection with audiences from the local community.

Finally, Vogelpoel and Jarrold (2014) investigated the possibilities for the social prescribing of participatory arts activities for older people with sensory impairments. After a twelve-week programme, data from mixed methodology including interviews, observations and quantitative psychological well-being scores indicated increased mental well-being and self-confidence to participate and collaborate; reduced social isolation, which is a particular concern for older people with sensory impairment; establishment of new friendships based on shared interests; and a greater sense of belonging and group cohesion between people experiencing similar life challenges. Indeed, the research shows how participatory arts can be a powerful alliance for social care providers in helping older people to adapt and cope with changing health needs through peer support.

# ***3. Enabling meaningful social participation***

As we have seen, participatory arts help people to enhance social relationships and promote satisfaction with social life, therefore ameliorating some of the issues around loneliness, but the third theme explores how they may also hold specific qualities that facilitate the engagement of older people who are socially isolated. First, the form of participatory arts allows creative expression in any medium and can therefore be accessible for everyone. Second, it provides older people the opportunity to contribute towards the community and be recognized and valued for that contribution. In this way, participatory arts enables meaningful social participation and may combat the social isolation of older people.

## *3.1. Accessibility of the arts*

The widely accessible nature of the arts is demonstrated by a large body of research that has investigated the involvement of diverse and marginalized older people in participatory arts. For example, Habron et al. (2013) report on the possibilities for individual and group music composition as an occupation for older people to enhance well-being. The sample consisted of three older people from the local community and three older people living in a residential care setting where music composition activities involving a string quartet and a professional composer from Manchester Camerata took place. Through working together, participants felt a sense of belonging and friendships developed across the divide of those living in the care home and those living in the community. In terms of accessibility, this demonstrates how participatory arts are inclusive of those who are typically excluded, such as older people living in care homes, and can establish deep connections between people who may not normally have the opportunity to meet. The authors discuss the importance of engaging older people at different stages of the ageing process to promote relationships and community building for all. Moreover, the aforementioned study by Hays and Minichiello (2005b) found that for some, music was an essential way of communicating with others who had lost the ability to communicate through language as a result of dementia, Parkinson’s disease, stroke and aphasia, for example. Under these circumstances, music was capable of facilitating forms of communication and feelings of connection within social and intimate relationships.

A non-peer reviewed evaluation report by Vella-Burrows and Wilson (2016) considers the impact of two dance programmes on the quality of life and well-being of older people with dementia. People with dementia often find it more difficult to communicate effectively with others and may become dependent on immediate carers, leaving them at greater risk of becoming socially isolated. Delivered by Green Candle, ‘Remember to Dance in the Community’ consisted of weekly dance sessions in a community arts centre attended by people with dementia along with some family carers/support workers, while ‘Remember to Dance in Hospital’ held dance sessions twice a week in an acute assessment unit for patients with dementia along with staff or family members. A total of 37 people across the two programmes participated in mixed-methods case studies, including questionnaires, observations, interviews and focus groups. Amongst other findings, the studies showed that there was a withdrawal from verbal communication over time, which was expected due to the focus on dance movement and the layout of the group in a large circle that was only conducive to verbal communication between neighbours. However, there was a rise in non-verbal communication across each observed session, indicating an increase in confidence or ease of engagement with each other. The authors suggest that these findings may indicate stronger social relationships, which was supported by qualitative data. Furthermore, this example highlights the opportunities that participatory arts provide for different ways of communication and expression particularly for those who may find it more difficult to communicate in older age.

The ‘Arts, Health and Seniors’ programme in Vancouver, Canada (Moody and Phinney 2012; Phinney et al. 2014) provided community-engaged arts to community-dwelling seniors (aged 65 years and older) considered at risk of social isolation. Professional artists collaborated with participants to create an aesthetic product or performance that addressed a relevant community issue. An ethnographic evaluation from Moody and Phinney (2012) revealed that amongst other things the programme provided an opportunity for the seniors to build relationships across generations, making new connections with young people in their neighbourhood and enriching and strengthening their connections with younger family members. This demonstrates the accessibility of the arts for people of all ages, and as such the possibilities for promoting intergenerational relationships. The programme also allowed participants to make connections with other artists and supported and enriched connections between the group of seniors themselves. Although some participants did not always want to be involved directly in art-making, they still contributed to the community experience and played a valuable role within the group, which emphasized the different ways in which people can be involved in participatory arts; it is not always about actively creating art.

With respect to the aforementioned ‘Upstream Healthy Living Centre’, Greaves and Farbus (2006) identify some of the factors that mediated the impact of the programme, which specifically aimed to engage socially isolated older people in creative activities through mentors. They found that accessibility in terms of suitable transport and an appropriate venue were particularly important, and the capacity of mentors to provide support and tailor creative activities to the abilities, preferences, health status, social skills and confidence of the older people. Moreover, the capacity of mentors to empower the older people, by building their confidence and self-efficacy was the biggest mediator of impact and meaningful participation. Davidson et al. (2014) also highlighted some of the practical and logistical issues affecting older people’s participation including the need for support to facilitate the initial engagement of socially isolated older people in arts activities.

## *3.2. Contribution to community*

Finally, participatory arts can give older people a sense of purpose or reason for social participation by offering opportunities to contribute towards the community, which challenges age-related stereotypes about older people as unable to contribute, and is not only beneficial for older people but also strengthens the community as a whole. In terms of music and singing, a number of studies compared participation in musical activities with participation in other activities, such as languages and yoga (Hallam et al. 2012; Creech et al. 2013b; Varvarigou et al. 2012). These studies found that through participating in music-making activities, older people were able to give something back to the community in the form of performance in schools and residential care settings. This not only fostered intergenerational relationships but also engaged older people living in care settings who are often cut off from the community. A similar approach is seen in the Rochester New Horizons Band, made up of older community members who perform in various settings, which allowed members to make a valued contribution by bringing music to those on the margins of the communities (Dabback 2008). These examples again demonstrate the accessibility of arts for everyone, but also highlight the value of making a contribution to the community and enabling meaningful participation.

In theatre, Bernard et al. (2015) examined the connection of older people living in the community to the New Victoria Theatre in North Staffordshire. Although they focus on the experiences of older people who have existing relationships with the theatre, the case study found that theatre and drama can promote the participation and inclusion of older people by bringing together intergenerational community members. Moreover, the subject of the drama performance can provide different representations of ageing and associated life transitions such as retirement and bereavement, and in doing so can challenge stereotypes of older people and facilitate social connection between older people and the community. This shows how participation in the arts is not only a form of meaningful social participation for older people, but can also address some of the wider community assumptions that contribute to the risk of social isolation.

The aforementioned ‘Arts Health and Seniors’ programme (Moody and Phinney 2012; Phinney et al. 2014) also included a performance or presentation of artworks in a public venue to further engage with, and be appreciated by, the wider community. The skills, abilities and expertise of the artist, along with the individual knowledge, creativity and life experience of participants, were all valued in the art-making process. Participants talked about becoming more socially connected to members of the wider community due to their confidence to initiate conversation and the opportunities for interaction with people from different cultures when bringing their art into public spaces. They felt that they had something important to contribute to the broader community that was worthy of recognition, and were therefore able to engage in the community as full and active members. The culmination of building a positive collective identity and enabling a positive contribution to the community highlighted that older people had ‘something to say, and somebody who might want to hear it’ (Phinney et al. 2014: 342).

Liddle et al. (2013) consider participation in arts activities within the social context, based on the comments from 114 women through the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women’s Health and in-depth interviews with 23 women. These qualitative data revealed that participation was often influenced by existing friends and family, but also offered opportunities for forging new friendships and continued participation resulted in strengthened social connections and a shared identity. The women were able to contribute to their families and communities and were recognized for the contributions that they made. Furthermore, in some cases the women used the arts to support charitable causes and made valued contributions to wider society. The authors suggest that ‘Passing on these items to others, as well as sharing their knowledge and skills in arts and crafts, also touches on notions of generativity, where there is a concern for the welfare of subsequent generations’ (Liddle et al. 2013: 335). This concern for subsequent generations and society as a whole is also evident in Murray and Crummett’s (2010) participatory arts action research on part of the ‘CALL-ME’ project. They aimed to investigate the connection between community arts activities and the material and psychosocial worlds of the older residents in a disadvantaged urban community. Ethnographic data with eleven older people considered at risk of social isolation revealed social interaction as their primary reason for participating in the community arts activities. However, the authors also claim that ‘community arts can be both personally and socially transformative’ (Murray and Crummett 2010: 778) by bringing people together and creating a sense of identity and belonging that allowed older people to challenge the negative social representations of outsiders and begin rebuilding their community for the future.

# **Discussion**

The literature presented in this conceptual review demonstrates the multitude of ways in which participatory arts can enhance the social lives of older people. Drake suggests that:

Artistic expression and experience bring joy, celebration, humanness and depth of feeling into our lives, uniting people in ways that transcend intellectual knowledge and belief, connecting us intimately and immediately with our fellow human beings – forging a true community of people. (2010: 60)

Indeed, these powerful words are supported by the literature and point towards a special quality of participatory arts that could enhance efforts to address the loneliness and social isolation of older people in our communities. This is possible first through strengthening existing relationships and building new relationships by facilitating social interaction and promoting social capital. In this way, participating in the arts can help older people to feel socially embedded in the community and thus has the potential to directly ameliorate feelings of loneliness. Furthermore, participatory arts could also address the discrepancies between the expected or desired relationships and reality by enhancing well-being, self-worth and inviting older people to feel part of a wider artistic community. This may help older people to feel more content with their social lives and promote a sense of belonging that has the potential to lessen feelings of loneliness more indirectly. In addition, the accessibility of the arts allows it to be inclusive, irrespective of the capacities of older people, and enables them to make a valued contribution to the community. As such, participating in the arts facilitates the meaningful social participation of older people and in doing so may combat issues of social isolation. Feeling valued by others was a pertinent finding across all three of the broader themes, providing support for the participatory nature of participatory arts that requires older people to contribute in some way. This allowed for an element of reciprocity in the relationships held by older people, which are otherwise frequently characterized by dependency.

The conceptual themes identified are not exclusive and it is important to understand their complexities and how they interconnect, overlap and interact with each other. For example, making a contribution to the community may boost the well-being and self-worth of an individual, which may in turn give them more confidence to engage in social interactions and develop relationships that lead to a sense of belonging. These experiences will be different for different individuals and groups depending on a plethora of factors, such as individual preferences, the art form itself and the approach of the arts facilitator. Indeed, Davidson et al. (2014) found that the facilitator of the programme was key to its success, not only in terms of musical skills but also social leadership, which has implications for how and by whom arts activities are delivered. Another important factor identified by much of the literature was around the sustainability of the arts activities and the sustainability of impacts on loneliness and social isolation. Some of the literature presented participatory arts programmes that were ongoing and therefore have high potential for sustainable impacts, while others took place over a fixed period of time. With respect to the latter, Bicknell (2014) emphasizes the importance of building a legacy for lasting friendships by encouraging and enabling people to stay in touch after the project has finished so that friendships can continue. Furthermore, although the arts are theoretically accessible for all, within the wider social context there may be significant barriers for older people participating in the arts. Opportunities are often limited, particularly for those older people who experience financial hardship. Arts events and activities are becoming increasingly digitally exclusive, community and day centres are in decline, and many services aimed at older people are threatened by cuts in government spending (Bicknell 2014). The current social, economic and political context has placed a huge strain on health and social care services for older people, with shrinking local authority budgets that have meant that 26 per cent fewer older people are entitled to publicly funded social care, which is compounded by pressures on the National Health Service and shortages in both nursing and care staff (Humphries et al. 2016). Given the established links between loneliness and social isolation and well-being, creative participation in the arts has great potential in mitigating some of the consequences of this adversity for older people.

Although many of the studies reviewed for this article focus on comparatively small samples sizes, they are rich in depth and detail, illuminating the nature of the impact of participatory arts on social relationships. These findings also resonate with some of the themes discussed in the wider literature. For example, Moody and Phinney (2012) and Phinney et al. (2014) summarize that the ‘Arts Health and Seniors’ programme fostered three important and interconnected social processes that may influence social inclusion: the participants were able to expand their community connections with various community members including family and neighbours; the participants developed a meaningful role that was important for them, one of contributing to the community through the creation of art; and through working together towards shared goals, the participants became a more cohesive group. By bringing together evidence of these processes and outcomes from the literature across different communities, settings and forms of art, this conceptual review deepens our understanding of how participatory arts could be used more purposively to address loneliness and social isolation for older people. It is useful in providing evidence for those advocating for the value of older people participating in the arts, offering a rationale for increased funding and provision of the arts to promote belonging, social embeddedness and social participation of older people.

In terms of future research, it would be useful to explore these concepts further to identify the particular mechanisms through which participatory arts achieve these social impacts and what it is about arts that is different from other social activities. This is the intention of the Arts Council England-funded Creative Journeys research project, of which this review represents one strand. The wider project explores the triggers and mechanisms through which participatory arts in care homes facilitate the development and maintenance of social relationships for older people. Some work is emerging in this field; for example Secker et al. (2017) have identified the specific importance of the creative processes and the learning involved for visual arts courses to improve mental well-being. However, establishing how participatory arts can be applied to maximize the impacts on social embeddedness, belonging and social participation for older people would be beneficial. It would also be useful to undertake longitudinal research to explore the sustainability of such impacts and provide evidence for funders and policy-makers to encourage greater investment in participatory arts for older people. This need is echoed by O’Shea and Léime (2012), who advocate for public policy that recognizes the importance of creativity in older age and the possibilities for the arts to strengthen health and social care services for older people.

Of course, participatory arts is not a panacea. It should not be considered as a replacement for existing support and strategies to tackle loneliness and social isolation. Rather, it should complement existing strategies and strengthen the package of formal and community support for older people experiencing or at risk of loneliness and social isolation. In support of this notion, Vogelpoel and Jarrold state:

Participation in arts programmes has the potential to avert crises of loneliness and isolation by enabling older people to get in touch with each other, with services, their communities and their own creativity and in a way that is not care/support resource heavy. By using and extending the existing networks of support and arts provision into a more integrated health and support system for older people, there is much to gain socially, financially and individually, for a significantly and exponentially growing cohort of people. (2014: 48)

It is hoped that this review will provide evidence to policy-makers for increased funding for such activities to address concerns of loneliness and social isolation for an ageing population. This review also advocates for arts organizations and practitioners continuing to include components that intend to enhance social relationships, promote satisfaction with social life and enable meaningful social participation when working with older adults. Adequate funding and policy support is required to encourage diverse, inclusive and sustainable participatory art programmes that are capable of addressing concerns of loneliness and social isolation for an ageing population.

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