

Research

‘It’s not all bingo and knitting’: an exploration of positive ageing and occupational participation through engagement with community leisure activities: a qualitative study

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Abstract

Background/Aims Loneliness and social isolation have a negative impact on the health and wellbeing of older adults. The aim of this study was to explore the lived experiences of a group of older adults involved in a range of occupational-focused leisure activities provided by the Weekday Wow Factor, a small social enterprise led by an occupational therapist to understand their perceptions of positive ageing and occupational participation.

Methods This small-scale qualitative research project explored the experiences of participants attending a weekly daytime disco that took place in a city centre nightclub. Participants also engaged in a number of other activities offered by the Weekday Wow Factor and discussed these during the focus groups. A total of 26 participants took part in four focus groups, with topics for discussion being informed by the 4D cycle of appreciative enquiry: discovery, dream, design and destiny.

Results Three overarching themes with sub-themes were found: mental wellbeing with sub-themes of social isolation, occupational participation and health promotion; inclusivity with sub-themes of positive ageing and community; and engagement with sub-themes of environment, occupational flow and occupational justice.

Conclusions Activities that facilitated friendship, a feeling of usefulness and belonging to a community were valued by participants, along with a sense of adventure from a range of activities that are not traditionally associated with older people. These activities need to be easily accessible to the community with implications for public transport and the social prescribing agenda. Occupational justice is important to the provision of community-based resources for older people to promote healthy and active ageing, which contributes to wellbeing.

Key words

Health promotion and inclusion; Mental wellbeing; Occupational justice; Occupational participation; Positive ageing

Introduction

Loneliness and social isolation have a negative impact on the health and wellbeing of older adults. Loneliness is defined as the subjective measure of negative feelings linked to the perceived lack of a social network (Valtorta and Hanratty, 2012), whereas social isolation is a lack of contact with others (Chana et al, 2016). As the ageing population grows, there are a significant group of older adults who experience loneliness and social isolation (Alpert, 2017). Consequently, this has a significant negative impact on the health and wellbeing of older adults (Coyle and Dugan, 2012), including the impact of both physical and social environments (Domènech-Abella et al, 2021). Ageing is often perceived negatively in western society; traditional views held include the perception of deteriorating and poor physical health, decreasing cognitive skills, reduced motivation, inflexibility and being resistant to change (Chiu et al, 2001).

Health and wellbeing are influenced by a number of characteristics, including access to social networks and occupational roles (Collins et al, 2020). However, because of increasing health issues and the loss of significant relationships (Collins, 2014), these **[AQ: health and wellbeing or access to social networks and occupational roles?]** may decrease as people age (Alpert, 2017). This can lead to increased levels of social isolation, loneliness and a lack of meaningful occupation (or activity) in later life, subsequently negatively impacting on physical and mental health and wellbeing (Lim and Kua, 2011).

Occupational science encompasses key concepts fundamental to viewing individual as occupational beings. **This [AQ: do you mean occupational science?]** includes occupational deprivation, alienation and occupational injustice, where individuals are unable to participate in meaningful activity because of a range of external factors, including political, socioeconomic and health inequalities, that are outside the individuals control and sphere of influence (Rudman et al, 2008).

Shared and/or physical activity groups encourage social participation, enabling people to build new social networks and, in turn, combat loneliness and positively impact health and wellbeing (Chan et al, 2017).

It is widely recognised that there are a high number of older adults who experience occupational deprivation because of social isolation and socioeconomic disadvantage (Meisters et al, 2021). There is a relationship between social isolation and poverty in older people and poor health outcomes (Stewart et al, 2009; Domènech-Abella et al, 2021) increasing dependence on both physical and mental health services (Gale et al, 2011). This project aimed to collaborate with communities to identify the ‘wants and needs’ of older adults and to facilitate occupational engagement and participation in a range of social activities that would not only reduce social isolation but promote healthy active ageing through a public health focused approach. The aim of this study was to explore the lived experiences of older adults involved in The Weekday Wow Factor to understand their perceptions related to positive ageing and occupational participation.

Background

The Weekday Wow Factor is a small social enterprise, led by an occupational therapist offering a range of community-based participatory activities for older adults in Glasgow based on the premise of occupational science, in particular occupational participation, engagement and justice, linking to the premises of social justice (Blank et al, 2015). This includes the development of a daytime disco for the over 55s in a city centre nightclub, bringing older adults together to enjoy music, dancing and food within a traditional nightclub setting. Attendees are older adults who chose to participate in the activities on offer, they are not referred from other services specifically, although as information about the Weekday Wow factor circulates through word of mouth and social media, this may change in future in line with the social prescribing initiative (NHS England, 2023). Other

activities have included zip lining, trampolining, go carting and speedboat rides. The daytime disco is the flagship event and was the first activity to be provided.

The activities offered are based on the choices of attendees, who are aged between 55 and 92 years. The activities challenge the stereotypical views of older adults, while working towards the public health agenda of promoting positive and healthy ageing ([Marsillas et al, 2017](#); [World Health Organization, 2020](#)) and combatting social isolation and loneliness contributing to poor mental health and wellbeing in older adults (Campaign to End Loneliness, 2023). The project has grown since 2017 to include wider urban settlements within the metropolitan borough of Glasgow. Some activities have become inclusive to those younger than 50 years of age, with a need based on social isolation or occupational deprivation, such as those with a learning disability and those caring for young children in socially deprived communities, including grandparents.

Methods

Design

This qualitative study used focus groups, based on the principles of social constructivism as described by Gergan and Gergen (2004), whereby the lens through which individuals view the world is based upon interpreting what happens around them. Social constructivism in this case enables an understanding of the perceived impact that the Weekday Wow Factor had in alleviating social isolation and facilitating occupational engagement and participation at both an individual and community level ([Papageorgiou et al, 2016](#)).

Appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005) was used as a method for data collection. The overriding aspect of this methodology is that it focuses on the positive, exploring what is currently good about a situation and examining ways in which it can be improved further. Appreciative inquiry involves four phases (4D cycle): discovery, dream, design and destiny ([Table 1](#)). Appreciative inquiry was chosen for this study as the researchers were interested not only in the evaluative opinions and views of the participants (discovery), but also in opportunity and potential for the collaborative coproduction of the future scope of the organisation (dream, design and destiny) to make the Weekday Wow Factor a fully inclusive community-led social enterprise ([Tembo et al, 2021](#)).

Table 1. The 4D cycle

Discovery: the best of what is	Dream: what could be	Design: what should be	Destiny: what will be
What do you love most about daytime disco and the Weekday Wow Factor?	What would be your ideal range of activities at the Weekday Wow Factor?	What do we need to make this happen? What can you do to help make this happen?	What small changes could be made now to encourage more community involvement?
What drew you to attend?	What would be your 'three wishes' for the future of the daytime disco and the Weekday Wow Factor?	Who else do you think could be useful to achieving the developments of the Weekday Wow Factor	How would you like to be involved in the development of the Weekday Wow Factor/day time disco?
What has encouraged you to stay?			

What do you think you can contribute to the Week Day Wow Factor ?			
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Ethical approval

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Ethics Committee at Northumbria University (reference: 4593). The facilitator of the Weekday Wow Factor acted as gatekeeper during the recruitment process, informing attendees of the purpose of the focus groups for the research process. They also distributed the participant information sheets and ensured that written informed consent was provided by participants before the focus groups took place. Verbal informed consent was also gained by the researcher with each participant again before they took part in the focus groups.

Participants

A total of 26 individuals (21 women and five men, aged between 55 and 92 years) met the inclusion criteria. This included being a regular attender, ie, attending the majority of sessions [AQ: how many sessions would this be?] provided weekly and providing informed consent. [AQ: how many people were initially identified and were any excluded – if so, why?].

Data collection

Four focus groups were organised, each including 6 or 7 participants, which were undertaken in the nightclub venue following two separate sessions of the daytime disco. The focus groups were audio recorded, along with field notes, and transcribed verbatim. The different participants were given alphanumerical codes (eg P1).

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data, (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014) which involved the primary researcher reading transcripts multiple times in order to become immersed within the data and make sense of it. Multiple reading of transcripts transformed ideas into potential categories and themes using framework analysis with the co-researchers, this enabled the researchers to develop their understanding and interpretation of the data to develop the conceptual themes for the descriptive data (Furber, 2013). Interconnection of identified categories and clustering of themes followed. Finally, as part of the framework analysis approach, selective coding took place, enabling the team to agree final themes, with short extracts from transcripts included under each theme in a more structured process. These were then peer reviewed by the co-researchers as part of the triangulation process (Creswell, 2013).

Results

Participantsthey identified a role

Out of the 26 individuals, 19 were retired, six were not in paid employment and one was working part time in paid employment. In addition, 10 of the 26 participants identified themselves as carers, and two of the 26 participants identified themselves as volunteers [AQ: volunteers for what?]

Three overarching themes with sub-themes were identified from the focus group data:

1. Mental wellbeing, with the sub-themes of occupational participation, social isolation and health promotion
2. Inclusivity, with the sub-themes of community and positive ageing
3. Engagement, with the sub-themes of environment, occupational flow and occupational justice.

Mental wellbeing

Access to a range of opportunities for social interaction was lacking for many of the participants and that this was impacting negative on mental health and wellbeing [AQ: quotes?]. The majority of participants commented on their mood improving and 'lifting' as a result of attending the weekly disco, which provided them with a reason to get up on a Monday and having 'something to look forward to'. [AQ: full quotes from participants?]

Occupational participation

Occupational participation had a positive impact on mental wellbeing, with one participant explaining:

'I'm part of a community and I feel useful here.' (P26)

'I have no idea where the time goes, my days used to drag but Monday goes like a flash' (P22)

AQ: any other quotes?

Social isolation

Social isolation was disrupted when participants went to the daytime disco, a participant described the disco as a lifeline where:

'I can be myself for a couple of hours and the weight of living is lifted.' (P15)

'This is the highlight of my week, I have a reason to get out the house and have a bit of fun' (P21)

'Mondays are now good days –if I didn't come here I would probably just stay in bed' (P3)

'I wouldn't miss this, it's the highlight of my week, my lifeline really' (P3)

AQ: any other quotes?

Health promotion

Participants identified improvements to both their physical and mental health and wellbeing, this is illustrated by one participant describing and increase in their levels of physical activity, confidence and mental wellbeing:

‘I am moving much more, getting out more ... I just feel more active and better in myself, I have the confidence to try a range of the other activities since attending the disco.’ (P18)

 **AQ: any other quotes?**

Inclusivity

Community

The participants identified being part of a community that was accepting no matter who you are of if you have a disability:

‘I am known as the pole dancer ... I can dance away here on my crutches, and no one bats an eye.’ (P12)

‘I can be myself for a couple of hours and the weight of living is lifted’ (p15).

 **AQ: any other quotes?**

The inclusivity of the activity of disco dancing is that there is no ‘failing’; everyone is entitled to and expected to dance however they wish, which has a positive impact on self-esteem, unlike the confines of a formal dance class, where it is possible to get the steps or moves wrong.

‘you cant really go for a coffee for less than £5 and here I get my

lunch and have a laugh with my pals dancing the day away ’ (p3)

 **AQ: any other quotes?**

Positive ageing

The phenomenon of positive ageing was also highlighted throughout the focus groups, with one participant being surprised at what she had achieved within the group:

‘If you had told me 10 years ago [that] I would go on a zip slide, I would never have believed you.’ (P16)

Another participant reflected on and challenged the stereotypes of older adults, with one participant in her 90s stating:

‘Getting old is not all about bingo and knitting, it’s about putting on your lippy and having fun, you know, living, who thought I would try a speedboat ride, it was great!’ (P1)

Engagement

Environment

The Weekday Wow Factor explores the use of existing facilities and venues embedded in the local community that are not typically tailored towards older people (such as the nightclub):

‘I love telling my granddaughter that I go to the same club that she does.’ (P5)

Participants also highlighted the importance of the environment of an authentic nightclub:

‘I get a real buzz; it takes me back to my student days.’ (P9)

Occupational flow

Engaging in the activities taking place within an authentic environment promotes occupational flow for the participants:

‘I can just lose myself in the music I love and have a boogie [dance] with my pals, just like we used to do when we were young.’ (P17)

Occupational flow helps participants to stop focusing on the more mundane and often challenging circumstances, such as caring responsibilities, in their day-to-day lives:

‘You leave your problems at the door and just enjoy yourself.’ (P6)

‘I have no idea where the time goes, my days used to drag [go slowly], but Monday goes like a flash [quickly].’ (P22)

Occupational justice

A commitment to attending and engaging in activities provides escapism for the participants, but there are also opportunities for socialisation, linking to occupational roles and occupational justice and the right to participate and be part of community activities:

‘I’m a part of something here, there are lots of opportunities that I would never have tried before – everyone is so welcoming.’ (P22)

‘You leave your problems at the door and just enjoy yourself’ (P6)

 **AQ: any other quotes?**

Discussion

The findings of this study illustrate that the Weekday Wow factor daytime disco and other activities provide an ideal opportunity for older adults to participate in meaningful events that are stimulating and safe. The social interactions that the participants experience promote occupational justice. Over half of the participants indicated other physical and mental health benefits such as increased stamina and motivation, improved physical fitness and activity levels (Bungay and Jacobs, 2020), and a reduction in symptoms of anxiety and low mood. **These findings concur with the World Health Organization (2020), who highlighted the importance of community-based social participation to health through the ‘Decade of healthy ageing baseline report . [AQ: this ref goes to the ICF, which doesn’t seem to have this in there (I checked online), please provide another reference]**

Loneliness and social isolation are key aspects of occupational alienation and deprivation which contribute to occupational injustice (Goll, 2015) **this is reflected in the opinions of participants in terms of how they felt before their participation in the Weekday Wow Factor activities, for example one participant stated that without the daytime disco they would ‘probably just stay in bed’ and another explained how the disco was their ‘highlight of the week.’ [AQ: suggest adding these quotes to the social isolation section as we shouldn’t be adding new information to the discussion]** Causey-Upton (2015) proposed that older adults are often deprived of engagement in their valued occupations because of social isolation and stated that health and social care professionals have a responsibility to ensure access to a range of leisure activities by addressing environmental and social barriers. This is echoed within the occupational justice ethos of the Weekday Wow Factor and further reflected in the discussions with participants.

The social aspect and inclusivity of the activities were paramount to participants in terms of their mental wellbeing and quality of life. In addition, the participants’ reports of increased activity levels and benefits to their physical health supports previous research that found participating in social activities, including recreational, cultural and volunteering activities, was linked to improved quality of life, increased muscle mass, improved balance and improved cognition in later life (Douglas et al, 2017). The sense of belonging and usefulness expressed by participants links directly to their sense of purpose and has a positive impact on their self-esteem, increasing motivation to participate in additional activities offered in addition to the daytime disco. This finding supports Sepúlveda-Loyola et al’s study (2020), which suggested that engaging in social interaction through a range of activities provides a stimulus to increase physical activity. Social interaction has a positive impact on self-esteem as a result of developing psychological and emotional support through developing greater connectedness with others.

Attendees of the daytime disco have undertaken a number of occupational roles during the session including befriending, fetching lunch and drinks for less mobile attendees and welcoming new members [AQ: not mentioned in the results, perhaps some quotes could be inserted in occupational participation section?]. Townsend and Marval (2013) and Durocher et al (2014) identified that older people are an intrinsic, valuable and productive part of society, and have the right to occupational justice through occupational participation and engagement in their local community. As part of the ageing process, occupational roles, such as partner/spouse, friend, worker, naturally change over time because of a range of factors, including bereavement and retirement; undertaking roles such as volunteer or befriender can help re-establish occupational roles (Blank et al, 2015). Occupational justice is linked to the concept of social justice (Lewis and Lemieux, 2021) and is defined as the right to have access to and participate in a range of occupations and occupational roles (Wilcock and Townsend, 2000). Occupational justice reflects the intrinsic need for people to engage with their environment, allowing for intellectual stimulation, personal safety, pleasure and social participation (Galenkamp and Deeg, 2016).

The findings of this study demonstrate that socialisation is not the only benefit to the mental wellbeing of the participants. [Croft \(2017\)](#) and [Mapes \(2017\)](#) have also suggested that older adults should be encouraged to be involved in occupational participation and engagement through positive risk taking and promoting self-management and independence. The older population has traditionally been limited to participating in the often mundane ‘age appropriate’ activities provided for them. Participation in activities traditionally viewed as the premise of the young challenges therapists, other healthcare workers and wider society’s thinking in terms of positive risk taking. Participating in activities is relevant to the rise of social prescribing in the community, which is aimed at improving the mental wellbeing of individuals ([Drinkwater et al, 2019](#)), further supporting the recommendations suggested by [Causey-Upton \(2015\)](#).

The ethos of the Weekday Wow Factor reflects positive risk taking, recognising that older people are adults capable of making decisions over their own health and safety rather than being informed what they can and cannot do based on a risk assessment ([Croft, 2017](#)). The participants are not conventional clients or service, and they have the right to make choices about their level of participation ([Bongers et al, 2018](#)); Participants are advised to consult their medical practitioner to decide their level of participation if they are unsure ([Nilsson, 2015](#)). Participants want to be involved in a range of different activities that makes them feel alive and an active part of society. [Coudin and Alexopoulos \(2010\)](#) studied the impact of stereotypes in older adults and found that negative stereotyping of older adults led to reduced risk taking, help-seeking behaviours and an increased sense of loneliness and social isolation. Participating in the non-stereotypical Weekday Wow Factor activities, such as disco dancing, trampolining and zip lining, promotes positive risk taking and engagement with others, thus improving mental wellbeing and independence.

The context of the environment is also key; the daytime disco taking place in a nightclub, rather than a community hall, adds to the authenticity of the event ([Sugiyama and Thompson, 2006](#); [Goodman et al, 2007](#); [Moran et al, 2014](#)). This encourages participation and acts as a conduit to reminiscence and reflection, sharing meaningful memories, life events and experiences.

Engagement and participation highlight the importance of the environment and how this promotes occupational justice and occupational flow – the ability to lose oneself within an activity or occupation ([Lewis and Lemieux, 2021](#)). This concept is central to health and wellbeing ([Reid, 2011](#)); occupational engagement or ‘doing’ is key to everything that people undertake and impacts on all aspects of daily life. Flow is often linked to mindful doing and as such provides the opportunity to achieve balance in one’s life and reduce stress ([Gallagher et al, 2015](#)). The environment is a vital enabler to participation ([Lui et al, 2018](#)) and is key in the success of the daytime disco facilitating occupational flow ([Csikszentmihalyi and LeFevre, 1989](#); [Chilvers et al, 2010](#)).

[Husk et al \(2020\)](#) highlighted that for community initiatives to succeed, key factors are authentic and welcoming environments, and accessibility. Participants demonstrated commitment to attend regularly, some travelling from the greater Glasgow area on public transport. [Hine and Mitchell \(2017\)](#) explore the key role that public transport plays in both alleviating and causing social isolation, which in turn has an impact on occupational justice ([Preston and Rajé, 2007](#)). The importance of this came to light in exploring the dream and destiny aspects of the inquiry; participants felt that the Weekday Wow Factor should be expanded throughout Scotland and needed greater promotion by the Scottish health boards. This poses challenges, particularly within practice in physical health fields where the focus may lean towards a more traditional ‘rehabilitation’ model, such as providing equipment and physiotherapy or prescribing antidepressants to tackle anxiety and low mood ([Howarth and Lister, 2019](#)). Practitioners need to be aware of the range of activities on offer and work closely with community initiatives to further promote health and wellbeing through occupational justice for the older population.

As such there are clear implications for allied health professional in equipping themselves with the understanding of the power of occupation and positive risk taking with older adults, and placing this at the heart of their practice (Pentland et al, 2018). Signposting to and working with social enterprises and other third sector providers, such as The Weekday Wow Factor, opens up opportunities for individuals to make self-directed choices to improve their health and wellbeing through occupational engagement and participation. The Scottish Government (2021) highlighted that older adults are intrinsic to the community and public services within Scotland, acknowledging the need for a proactive approach to develop both the physical and mental health of older adults, particularly since COVID-19.

The Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland (2021) outlined the need for collaborative partnerships between community groups and traditional health care providers to improve access to a range of supportive social activities, which links closely to the work of the Weekday Wow Factor.

Implications for practice

With the rise in social prescribing (Aughterson et al, 2020), public health-focused third sector organisations led by allied health professionals working in conjunction with community-based link workers can provide a range of community and socially based services that combat key issues of ageing, including loneliness, reduced physical activity, anxiety and depression (Coyle and Dugan, 2012). Maintaining and improving mental and physical health within the community may also have a positive impact on the number of older adults accessing traditional health and social care services, which are currently under pressure (Simmonds, 2022).

Limitations and recommendations for future research

This is a small-scale qualitative study that has highlighted the key benefits of a community organisation promoting positive ageing through meaningful occupation and purposeful activity in one specific community, it is therefore not transferable. Further research is needed to evaluate the impact that social isolation has on older adults both mentally and physically. Practitioners' knowledge of public health-led practice and the development of effective relationships with those providing community-based activities should also be evaluated.

Conclusions

The Weekday Wow Factor is a small social enterprise championing the positive ageing and inclusive communities through the power of occupation. The participants reported increased levels of self-esteem, mood, motivation, and general mental wellbeing along with an increase in physical activity through their engagement with the activities on offer, with the daytime disco being one of the most popular and regular attended activities in the area. Participants were keen for the organisation to grow and expand and clearly recognised the value of this small social enterprise to themselves but also to their communities. There is a clear opportunity to further develop such initiatives through the growth of social prescribing and the development of community-based activities for older adults demonstrating the power of occupation to reinstate and promote health and wellbeing.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Data sharing

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