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1 **Community-based arts research for people with learning disabilities: challenging**
2 **misconceptions about learning disabilities**

3

4 **Abstract**

5 This article presents some of the community-based artwork of a group of men with learning
6 disabilities, who aimed to challenge some of the misconceptions associated with learning
7 disabilities. People with learning disabilities regularly face many forms of direct and indirect
8 stigma. The consequences of such negative perceptions may affect individuals' social
9 relationships and ensure that barriers are strengthened that prevent their full inclusion. The men
10 in this project used a series of visual and creative methods to challenge some of these
11 misconceptions by telling stories through art, demonstrating skill through photography, using
12 poetry to talk about sexual identity, and improvising drama and filmmaking to challenge
13 stigma, and through sculpture expressed their voices. Thus, by doing so, they were able to
14 challenge some of the stigma associated with learning disabilities, indicating that community-
15 based arts research is a valuable way in which to promote the voices of people with learning
16 disabilities.

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26 **Community-based arts research – what does it achieve?**

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28 There is growing evidence that community-based arts projects can provide many benefits to
29 health and social well-being, educational standards, neighbourhood renewal and economic
30 development in communities (Selkrig, 2011; Lawthom et al., 2012; Harris et al., 2016; Sharkey
31 et al., 2016). Community-based arts, however, has highlighted not only the positive benefits to
32 individuals and groups, such as improving health and social well-being. Indeed, artistic
33 interventions are a recommended part of healthcare provision in primary care and community
34 settings (Crone et al., 2013), for example, for people with dementia (Department of Health,
35 2007; Camic et al., 2014). Lawson et al. (2014) go as far as to say that community arts can
36 present opportunities for artistic expression, and community-based arts enables people,
37 regardless of their ability, to develop skills relating to confidence, self-esteem and
38 communication (Argyle and Bolton, 2005; Davies et al., 2012):

39

40 Community arts projects present opportunities for creativity and artistic
41 expression, rather than therapy per se, and accept participants regardless of their
42 initial level of artistic ability (Lawson et al., 2014, pp. 1–2).

43

44 Clennon et al. (2016) further suggest that the collective gain that may be achieved by
45 participating in community-based arts can lead to transformative social change (also see
46 Purcell, 2009; Swindells et al., 2013). This is in contrast to community-arts-informed research,
47 which can be created for the sake of scholarship and research (Cahnmann-Taylor, 2007;
48 Shannon-Baker, 2015), with a concern for advancing knowledge rather than developing
49 visually pleasing works of art that is accessible to all (Cole and Knowles, 2008). Instead,

50 community-based arts can uncover knowledge on people's lives that may not be accessible
51 through other means that are used in research (Ledger and Edwards, 2011).

52 Community-based arts research, however, has also been used to tell stories of oppression
53 and exclusion of marginalised groups in society, suggesting that community-based arts
54 research contributes to social justice issues. For example, Clennon (2013) explored the
55 transformative effect of participating in community music sessions on young offenders'
56 attitudes towards criminal behaviour. Furthermore, Chappell and Chappell (2016) examined
57 public performance installations created by students based on the needs of bilingual families in
58 schools, suggesting that critical arts-based pedagogies can build on collaborative processes that
59 respect minority groups in contemporary society. Community-based arts research, therefore,
60 can transcend the boundaries of those who can engage in this type of research, building safe
61 and inclusive spaces wherein, for instance, people with learning disabilities are not limited
62 because of their disabilities (Levy et al., 2017).

63

64 **Community-based arts research methods and people with learning disabilities**

65

66 One way of encouraging inclusion and participation in community-based arts research is
67 through photographic methods. 'Photovoice' has been used widely with marginalised groups,
68 particularly with people with learning disabilities, and is a way of using photography so as to
69 find out more about people and their lives, which transcends many constraints associated with
70 accessibility (Booth and Booth, 2003; Aldridge, 2012; Payne et al., 2016). Thus, the process
71 of using photography can encourage people to use technology to represent their identity and
72 emotions in a way that is accessible. Booth and Booth (2003) described Photovoice as giving
73 people cameras to take pictures that capture their life in society. In other words, Photovoice
74 puts people in control of how they represent themselves. For example, Rose (2007) suggested

75 that the 'visual' can act as a trigger for memories and thoughts, which is a powerful way in
76 which to capture experiences in life. Moreover, Photovoice sets out to convey the perspective
77 of the person using the camera, allowing them to think about their context and share the story
78 of the pictures that they take (Teti, Cheak-Zamora, Lolli, and Maurer-Batjer, 2016).

79 Using Photovoice creates revealing forms of data (Hodgetts et al., 2011); similarly, using
80 methods such as camcorders and arts and crafts, it can be used to represent how identity is
81 represented in society and to share stories about life. In recent years, there has been a growing
82 interest in the use of participatory video filming, which may involve participants in the
83 community raising topics to discuss concerning issues in their lives and creating a film to depict
84 such thoughts (Shaw and Robertson, 1997; Hakak and Holmes, 2017). Typically, participants
85 may take on the roles of co-filmmakers and use the camera technology provided, whilst
86 creating a storyboard through collaborating with others (Davidson, 2015; Sitter, 2015).
87 Throughout a range of methods, community-based arts research can be useful for people
88 wanting to express their feelings or explaining experiences who have difficulties in expressing
89 themselves orally (see Fullana et al., 2014; Bridger et al., 2016). Similarly, research has found
90 that the use of drama in theatrical work with people who have learning disabilities can provide
91 active participation and enjoyment, as well as skill development and social inclusion (Stickley,
92 Crosbie and Hui, 2012). Drama can also be a way in which to be spontaneous and to escape
93 from their day-to-day lives (Fenech, 2009; Trowsdale and Hayhow, 2015). Likewise, poetry
94 may have a similar effect of empowerment and inclusion. Writing poetry can be a way in which
95 to express issues relating to sexuality and oppression (Richards, 2017), and poetry has been
96 used to tackle sensitive subject areas (Leavy, 2009), such as issues relating to social exclusion,
97 enabling poetry to create spaces that may enable new ways of understanding the world better
98 (Leggo, 2008; Redman-MacLaren, 2015).

99

100 **Perceptions of people with learning disabilities**

101

102 Community-based arts research, therefore, may not only act as a mediator (Leavy, 2017)
103 between social exclusion and inclusion, but also help people to convey their thoughts and
104 feelings in a way that is accessible, leading to people building self-confidence and relationships
105 with people in their lives. Indeed, Hall (2013) argued that people with learning disabilities can
106 transcend the exclusionary practices that inherently surround people with learning disabilities,
107 and begin to transform what we understand, or not, about what ‘learning disabilities’ means.
108 However, whilst the use of community-based arts research can provide benefits for people with
109 learning disabilities, it is not clear as to whether this type of research is effective in challenging
110 the misconceptions associated with learning disabilities. People with learning disabilities face
111 many forms of direct and indirect stigma, as well as physical and verbal abuse, and subtle forms
112 of disempowerment (Landman, 2014; Foster and Scott, 2015), e.g. through presumed sexual
113 promiscuity and predatory behaviours (Azzopardi-Lane and Callus, 2014). The negative
114 perceptions of people with learning disabilities may also be coupled with sentiments of ‘feeling
115 sorry for them’, pity, and childlike innocence (Jahoda et al., 2010). The consequences of these
116 negative perceptions may affect individuals’ social relationships and ensure that barriers are
117 strengthened that prevent their full inclusion (Harris and Roulstone, 2011). In fact, the
118 continued negative perception of people with learning disabilities is likely to continue, with an
119 expected increase in the number of people with learning disabilities likely to become known to
120 services over the coming decade (Emerson and Hatton, 2008). Additionally, this is at the same
121 time that there is a decrease in funds going towards support and care (Power et al., 2016);
122 therefore, challenging the deep-rooted negative perceptions of people with learning disabilities
123 is more important than ever, albeit inherently complex.

124 With this in mind, the aim of this paper is to consider community-based arts research in the
125 context of a project that was set up alongside a group of men with learning disabilities, using a
126 range of visual and creative methods, to consider whether community-based arts research is an
127 effective way in which to challenge the misconceptions concerning people with learning
128 disabilities.

129

130 **Project overview**

131

132 Over a period of 12 months, 45 workshops were facilitated by the lead author (which lasted
133 for three hours per week), in partnership with a local learning disabilities charity, and a
134 museum. Creative and visual methods were used such as arts and crafts, photography, poetry,
135 drama and sculpture to capture the men's experiences of their understanding of health
136 promotion (Richards, 2014). Negotiations with the charity began when the main author
137 volunteered with the charity and discussed the potential to collaborate with members of the
138 charity in developing a project around health promotion around themes such as diet, exercise
139 and self-esteem, as it related particularly to men. One of the workers at the charity was a
140 filmmaker, and had worked with the museum in the past, and he suggested that we should
141 contact the museum to see whether a project could be developed and be based at the museum.
142 Subsequently, discussions with the museum led to a partnership, and the partnership with the
143 museum meant that at the end of the project the participants could display their work in a six-
144 month community exhibition within the museum, which added excitement and an incentive for
145 all who took part in the project.

146 The men were over the age of 18 years (ranging from 28–65 years), lived in the local area
147 and were accessed via the charity. The researcher worked with some of the charity's employees
148 in identifying men who might be interested in taking part. Different men were contacted who

149 participated in other projects facilitated by the charity, including arts and sports projects;
150 subsequently, the men were introduced to the idea of taking part in this project and decided
151 whether they wanted to participate. Some men needed support and assistance, which meant
152 that support workers and carers attended, and they would often assist in facilitating the group.
153 Approximately 15 participants would attend each week, with up to 40 men being involved with
154 the project at some point over the course of the year. The workshops were based at the museum
155 and facilitated by the main author, who was assisted by an artist based at the museum, and the
156 filmmaker based within the charity.

157

158 **Role and positionality**

159

160 The main author's role in this research involved initial contact with the organisations, getting
161 to know the participants at the charity and acting as a negotiator between the organisations,
162 despite being an 'outsider', i.e. not being a member of the charity, the museum or identifying
163 as disabled. The positions of insiders and outsiders within participative research approaches
164 can be viewed as existing on a continuum, on which the positions of individuals can alter during
165 the course of the research (Bartunek, 2008; Ritchie et al., 2009). In this instance, the role was
166 often renegotiated, continuous and changeable as the project developed. For example, at
167 different points, the role involved being an activity facilitator, resource person, negotiator,
168 researcher and befriender. As Naples (1996) identified, the fluidity of these positions often
169 stems from social and cultural processes within the context of the study, therefore resulting in
170 the multiple repositioning of relationships (Hooks, 1994). The main author would sometimes
171 facilitate an arts and crafts activity, whilst at other times the role became more oriented towards
172 a support worker role, listening to the participant's concerns about life or talking to them about
173 family life. In addition, whilst the roles of the main facilitator were varied in a multifaceted

174 project, the authors of this paper do not identify as being ‘disabled’. This raises the issue of the
175 extent to which the voices of the men in this project are authentically represented, and the
176 extent to which scholars can represent ‘other voices’ (Schrock, 2013; also see Mietola,
177 Miettinen, and Vehmas, 2017). However, speaking for others is often necessary so as to be able
178 to present data and analysis that provide meaningful insights into the lives of people and their
179 views of the world (see Aldridge, 2012). In this project, the data that is presented, and its
180 analysis, is as close to the views of the participants as it can possibly be. Due to the passage of
181 time, the actual draft of this paper was not scrutinised by the participants, but the paper still
182 provides a testimony of the experiences of the participants in this project, and how the different
183 methods were used to convey the stories, experiences and feelings of the participants. The aim
184 was to represent the men’s views that would make them visible and through which a better
185 understanding could be found of the misconceptions that they face that are related to learning
186 disabilities through community-based arts research.

187 Some researchers have raised concerns in respect of the power imbalances and unequal
188 benefits of a non-disabled researcher publishing research without the involvement of research
189 partners or participants (Morgan, Cuskelly and Moni, 2014); however, the participants were
190 provided with sufficient information, and were under no pressure to comply therewith, e.g. in
191 relation to the likelihood that their work, including art and photography, would be published.
192 With the work of the participants having already been displayed in a museum, which receives
193 thousands of visitors a year, the items in the photographs in this paper are the same items that
194 were displayed in the public domain. All names have been anonymised and a limited use of
195 pictures has been presented, which reduces the possibilities of identifying the men. Moreover,
196 the participants spent time choosing from hundreds of photographs, pieces of art, poetry and
197 films from the work that they had produced; therefore, the items in the photographs (the author
198 took the photographs of the items) were significant to the participants. The workshops were

199 designed in respect of, and driven by, participative principles in that we planned themes and
200 topics with which to discuss aspects of health promotion such as self-esteem, diet, exercise,
201 and what ‘disability’ meant to them. The group would then participate in an activity which was
202 negotiated and led by the main author, most of the time. The project was ethically approved
203 prior to commencement by the university ethics panel, and the museum and learning disabilities
204 charity granted approval, alongside the participants, with regard to data presented in this paper
205 being published.

206

207 **Analysis**

208

209 Over the course of the project, hundreds of pieces of art, photographs, film clips and poetry
210 were produced by the participants. This made it a challenge for the participants to decide what
211 they wanted in the community exhibition, because whilst the space was a large room, an
212 exhibition typically is not cluttered with items or overpowering. However, the participants
213 selected the items that they favoured the most because these items conveyed their favourite
214 memories or experiences within the project and beyond. The items in the photographs that are
215 presented in this paper were of significance to the individuals in the group, and are the items
216 that will be considered in terms of whether community-based arts research, using creative and
217 visual methods, can be a way in which to challenge the misconceptions concerning people with
218 learning disabilities.

219 To make sense of the items that were selected by the participants in the photographs, and to
220 understand the significance of the items, the photographs selected in this paper represent each
221 of the main arts methods used in this project (arts and crafts, photography, poetry, drama and
222 sculpture). Thematic analysis (see Braun and Clarke, 2006) was used to help consider the key
223 themes that emerged from how these methods helped the men to challenge misconceptions

224 regarding disability. Thus, what is presented is a thematic discussion surrounding the main
225 themes that emerged from across the methods. The structure of this section relates to the key
226 themes that emerged from using each of the main methods, with the themes organised around
227 the modes of engagement with each method.

228

229 **Telling stories using art and craft**

230

231 **(Insert Figure 1 about here)**

232

233 The project aimed to focus art and craft activities towards helping the men to express their
234 insights into aspects about their lives. For example, in Figure 1, Gareth took part in a session
235 that focused on ‘favourite places’ (a topic the men were interested in exploring through art),
236 and Gareth’s favourite place was his annual pilgrimage to Lourdes¹ in France. For Gareth, this
237 was important because at other similar arts-based projects, he used the materials to draw, paint
238 and create in a way that was prescribed to him by project facilitators. Gareth did not like this,
239 and instead enjoyed this project’s approach of participating and deciding has a group, to make
240 use of the materials around him, in his own way. Thus, Gareth was doing what he loved to do,
241 without being told how to paint and draw the picture, which he felt made a refreshing change,
242 and he felt empowered by using art and craft to tell stories about his life:

243

244 I don’t like being told what to do. I can paint, I can draw, I can tell my stories
245 about my life (Gareth).

246

¹ Lourdes is a market town in France and is an important Roman Catholic pilgrimage site.

247 In another workshop, the men wanted to tell stories about life and talk about some of their
248 dreams and fantasies. In response, a volunteer artist (who worked with the group most weeks),
249 suggested that the group could create a story about being super heroes, which would depict a
250 story about the men trying to save a woman who had been kidnapped by an ‘evil sorcerer’. The
251 story ends with the evil sorcerer renouncing his evil ways and he unites with the super heroes,
252 which is a classic comic strip storyline (see Figure 2). This comic strip was an opportunity for
253 the participants to create ‘humans’, with special powers, that they wished they could be.

254 The super heroes were created individually by the men over a couple of workshops, using
255 materials provided by the museum. The story was created through a combination of individual
256 ideas, and group work, where the men developed the full storyline together. One participant
257 wanted to be ‘Barbados Man’ because:

258

259 I want to dance and sing and do my thing (Callum).

260

261 Whilst another participant wanted to be ‘Ice-Skater Man’:

262

263 My superhero can glide and fly and be free (Mark)

264

265 In the end, a story was created that they wanted to share relating to fantasy and imagination,
266 where the men felt included and collaborative, transcending conforming boundaries of
267 exclusion and lack of choice they experienced in other community-based arts projects. For
268 example, Gareth felt that in other projects he was not able to do what he wanted to do, instead:

269

270 I want to do things because I want to do them (Gareth).

271

272 Similarly, Steve also felt that he was stifled by sitting down in day centres all the time, and
273 in his view, he felt that:

274

275 We should go out more often (Steve).

276

277 Importantly, for Joseph:

278

279 It is good to talk; I like talking ... can't talk at home.

280

281 Thus, the men were comfortable about engaging and relaxing in this project because they felt
282 they could make choices, be included and able to express their opinions when it suited them.
283 Through art and craft, and the creation of a giant comic, they challenged some of the
284 misconceptions about learning disabilities that imply they do not know how to communicate
285 effectively, or have no skills. By engaging in this form of art and storytelling, they opened up
286 discussion through these methods, helping them to express their viewpoints and make choices
287 about what they wanted to do.

288

289 **(Insert Figure 2 about here)**

290

291 **Developing hobbies and skills with cameras**

292

293 **(Insert Figure 3 about here)**

294

295 The community exhibition that took place at the end of the project, over a period of six
296 months, aimed to be visual and thought provoking in relation to how the men lived their lives.

297 They wanted to showcase their interests, hobbies and knowledge, and through their exhibition,
298 they wanted to challenge some of the misconceptions that relate to learning disabilities. Indeed,
299 the participants were encouraged to use technology to represent their identity, emotions and
300 feelings on matters of interest to them. For example, Jack brought his own film and camera
301 equipment, and he became the 'official' photographer and filmmaker in the group. Using this
302 equipment empowered him, because he felt there was 'something to do' (Jack), which he could
303 feel he could be in control of, and, be able to make choices:

304

I like filming the group. It gives me a role in the group (Jack).

306

307 In Figure 3, in a similar way to Jack, David used his own photographic equipment to capture
308 moments within the workshops, and he showcased his skills in capturing fun moments within
309 the group, and the activities the men participated in such as art and craft, drama, photography
310 and creative writing:

311

Taking pictures is my hobby. I really love it (David).

313

314 **(Insert Figure 4 about here)**

315

316 Like David and Jack, the other participants liked to take photographs, and they took
317 photographs with skill because the photographs vividly highlight the story of the project and
318 the work of the men. For example, the pop-up art piece in Figure 4 contained pictures of the
319 men engaging in different activities at the museum. In some workshops, the men participated
320 in activities related to working with animals, dancing, taking pictures or filming. Specifically,
321 this pop-up piece captured the essence of the surroundings at the museum. The bricks

322 dominated the background to the art piece, which was a major characteristic of the buildings at
323 the museum. Although there is no specific reference to any significance to the bricks, it does
324 however suggest that the men considered their physical surroundings to be important to them
325 and for them to be at this location participating in activities:

326

327 I love coming here. It's exciting and there's always something to do. It's a nice
328 place (Steve).

329

330 This is a marked difference to the church halls, or day centres, they would regularly attend. The
331 men felt free and excited at being in this building, away from their day-to-day lives, and this is
332 represented vividly in the interactions within the photographs taken by the men. Using
333 photographic technology, the participants felt empowered because they had something to do,
334 that they could make choices about, and it helped Jack and David to build their confidence in
335 engaging more with people.

336

337 **Poetic voices and sexuality**

338

339 **(Insert Figure 5 about here)**

340

341 One of the most insightful activities that took place was when the men developed some
342 creative writing/poetry. This was the idea of James, a member of the group, who felt it would
343 be a good idea for the men to do some writing, and for the men who could not write, to be
344 supported by the carers and volunteers in attendance. Following this initial workshop, which
345 involved the group writing about their 'favourite hobbies', Mark, a quiet, shy member of the
346 group came to the group with a script of a poem about 'Love', which he presented to the group.

347 (see Figure 5 – an example of Mark’s writing). Consequently, Mark took this as an
348 opportunity to discuss with the group that he was gay, which he revealed at the end of the poem.
349 When Mark ended his poem this way, there were chuckles of laughter and shock throughout
350 the group because they did not expect Mark to be so emotional in expressing his feelings about
351 his sexuality. However, Mark received a round of applause after the initial shock, and he
352 appeared very happy with what he had done. Mark shared his perspectives and experiences of
353 being gay with the men in the project using poetry as a way to engage with people and talk
354 about a topic that is often a taboo for people with learning disabilities. Mark was not pressurised
355 into doing anything, but at his own pace, he made the decisions about how he expressed his
356 intimate and personal views (see Richards, 2017). In one instance, he commented on why he
357 continued to write in this way:

358

359 I feel that people listen and I can’t talk about this at home (Mark).

360

361 For Mark, writing and reading out his work made him feel valued in a way that he had not felt
362 before. Using poetry was a way for Mark to talk about his sexual identity, and to seek the
363 support from his peers. Without the use of poetry, Mark was unlikely to have discussed his
364 sexual identity, and there would have been a missed opportunity to discuss a sensitive, but
365 important issue for people with learning disabilities.

366

367 **Dramatising stories and filmmaking**

368

369 **(Insert Figure 6 about here)**

370

371 For most of the participants, the main activity they wanted to participate in was drama,
372 mostly improvised drama. This stemmed from their previous experiences of participating in
373 projects where drama activities took place. The men, or the facilitator, would suggest a topic,
374 whether it be related to health (talking about exercise, and acting this out in a scene at the gym)
375 or whether they wanted to copy a scene from a film or television programme, and then they
376 would act this out in a space, often with dialogue or mime. In one workshop, the topic of 'being
377 clean' emerged because for many of the participants, having regular showers, washing clothes,
378 smelling nice and having a good appearance was important to them. However, many of the
379 men had experienced negative comments about their appearance and hygiene, and they wanted
380 to convey some of those experiences through drama (see Figure 6).

381 In one drama scene, the group decided to be a panel of experts, with Mark acting as the
382 facilitator. They rehearsed what they wanted to say about their experiences of 'being clean',
383 whilst Steve filmed the panel discussing topics related to their everyday routines of self-care.
384 For instance, they discussed the importance of brushing their teeth, and washing their hands
385 and body. Nonetheless, the drama scenes were not just ways for the men to have some fun and
386 to be creative, but they provided an opportunity for the men to challenge the misconception
387 that people with learning disabilities do not know about self-care and 'being clean'.. At one
388 point, Paul made it clear about why he was conscious about his appearance:

389

390 If you want to kiss the girls, you gotta brush your teeth (Paul).

391

392 This suggests that Paul was aware of his personal hygiene, and for him to engage with other
393 people, he felt that looking after himself was important. In addition, when he said this, the men
394 laughed and thought it was funny, so whilst performing in front of the camera, they did not just
395 aim to tell stories of personal experience that were negative, but they also told jokes and had

396 fun. Furthermore, whilst the men had fun improvising and telling their stories, there was a tacit
397 assumption that these men with learning disabilities were not ‘clean’, or they were not
398 ‘hygienic. For example, Frank stated that:

399

400 I always wash my hands when I visit the toilet (Frank).

401

402 For most people, this would be an obvious thing to do, but Frank felt he had to emphasise that
403 he always washed his hands because people assumed he did not know he should do this, or
404 wash his hands at all. Overall, performing improvised drama scenes, and filming their stories,
405 was a way to highlight their knowledge and experience, but challenge the stereotypes
406 associated with ‘hygiene’ and learning disabilities.

407

408 **Expressing citizenship and rights using sculpture**

409

410 **(Insert Figure 7 about here)**

411

412 Whilst the forty-five workshops took place over the course of a year, the construction of the
413 large sculpture in the community exhibition took place over four workshops. The artist
414 associated with the museum had the initial idea of sculpting the men’s hands, with the intention
415 of gluing the hands against a door, giving an impression that the hands were trying to break the
416 door down. The door symbolised a barrier that the men were trying to overcome, a metaphor
417 for the barriers they faced in life. The men placed words on one side of the door, which reflected
418 the negative aspects of their lives on the sculpture, and on the other side of the door, they placed
419 words that conveyed their hopes for the future. At the first workshop, the men discussed some
420 of the challenges they faced because of how people perceive them:

421

422 They call me an idiot. They don't think I know anything, but actually I do
423 (James).

424

425 The men had strong opinions about the negative stereotypes associated with the label of
426 'learning disabilities'. The development of the sculpture, and the meaning the men applied to
427 the sculpture, was a collective response that they felt that their rights had been infringed during
428 their lives, and they expressed this through words and the sculpturing of their hands. In
429 addition, the men's knowledge of having rights to 'have sex', be 'accepted', not getting 'upset'
430 or wanting people to 'be civil', suggested that the men wanted society to be more aware of their
431 responsibility to behave respectfully and equally towards people with learning disabilities, in
432 'the way we (the men), want to feel and to be fully accepted as the people we want to be'.
433 These examples were words/actions the men wanted to experience, but are depicted beyond
434 the green door, out of reach, by their sculptured hands, because of the misconception and
435 restraints made on them by wider society. However, by creating a simple sculpture that
436 reflected upon their bad experiences and their wishes for the future, they were able to challenge
437 some of the misconceptions associated with learning disabilities.

438

439 **Discussion**

440

441 Community-based arts research projects aim to empower participants, whilst aiming to
442 provide a space wherein people can express themselves, and in this case, a space wherein the
443 misconceptions pertaining to learning disabilities can be challenged through these approaches.
444 For these reasons, developing a community-based arts research project was an ideal way for
445 men with learning disabilities to come together, use creative and visual methods and challenge

446 misconceptions regarding learning disabilities. For example, photography was used to develop
447 skills and hobbies that people with learning disabilities are not expected to be able to develop.
448 Similarly, poetry was written in order to convey the feelings of one man who wanted to talk
449 about his sexuality and fantasies. Drama was improvised so as to express the men's
450 perspectives on health promotion, and sculpture and art were created to tell stories about some
451 of their experiences and to convey the challenges that they have faced in their lives.

452

453 **Using community-based arts to challenge misconceptions about learning disabilities**

454

455 The participants in this project used a range of methods to tell stories about different aspects
456 of their lives, including issues surrounding citizenship, expertise, skills, emotions, and general
457 well-being. This is in marked contrast to other qualitative methods, such as focus groups and
458 interviews, which are usually applied in participatory research with people with learning
459 disabilities (Jurowski, 2008; Povee et al., 2013), ensuring that there are problems for people
460 who need alternative forms of communication and accessibility. Whilst research relating to
461 community-based arts research is developing, this research has already demonstrated that it can
462 provide specific benefits, including towards health and social well-being (Selkrig, 2011),
463 opportunities for artistic expression (Lawson et al., 2014), self-esteem and communication
464 (Argyle and Bolton, 2005), and transformative change (Clennon et al., 2016). Thus, by using
465 creative and visual methods, the men were able to challenge some of the misconceptions related
466 to learning disabilities, such as not being able to work, the discrimination that they face
467 regarding their experiences and knowledge, and how they relate to people. In other words, they
468 demonstrated their creativity (arts and crafts), skills (photography), sexual identity (poetry),
469 knowledge and experience (drama), and used their voices to challenge misconceptions about
470 learning disabilities (sculpture). In addition, not only did these methods act as tools for the men

471 to express themselves within a project amongst peers with learning disabilities, their work was
472 shared, via the community exhibition, with thousands of people who visited the museum,
473 ensuring that their work extended to their wider sociocultural contexts. The community
474 exhibition started with an opening ceremony which the men attended and wherein they met
475 members of the public and representatives from charities and other organisations to discuss
476 their work. Not only did the men feel empowered and excited about sharing their work with
477 the wider public, the people whom they met felt that they learnt more about the day-to-day
478 circumstances of being a person with learning disabilities, and one person commented that the
479 exhibition had been ‘informative, thought-provoking, fun’.

480 The use of community-based arts research methods is important because it raises issues of
481 subjectivity and reflexivity (Reavey, 2012) and brings the interpretation of data produced in
482 research into sharper focus. This is crucial at a time when people with learning disabilities are
483 being excluded, more than ever, in society, e.g. from paid employment, with the consequences
484 of unemployment being associated with laziness and benefit scrounging (Goodley, 2014;
485 Runswick-Cole and Goodley, 2015; Bates, Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2017). However, as
486 the men indicated through the sculpture, they want to be ‘equal to everyone’ and to ‘achieve’
487 and be ‘accepted’. Yet, since the onset of austerity measures, people with learning disabilities
488 have received bad press because of negative associations being made with receiving benefits
489 (Briant et al., 2013). With an increase in the number of people with learning disabilities likely
490 to become known to services expected over the coming decade, alongside the decreases in
491 funds going towards support and care (Emerson and Hatton, 2008; Power et al., 2016), hearing
492 their voices through creative and visual means is significant and may go some way to
493 challenging some of those misconceptions. The use of sculpture, for instance, highlighted that
494 the participants wanted to engage with the world around them, not be excluded from wider
495 society. Using sculpture helped the participants to make a statement of their beliefs, wherein

496 they could express their views and share with the wider public in a way that was unlike that
497 used by traditional forms of research.

498

499 **Importance of community-based arts projects for people with learning disabilities**

500

501 Whilst there is evidence that the use of visual and creative methods in community-based arts
502 research projects is beneficial, there are still issues relating to control (Povee et al., 2013). For
503 instance, the methods used in this project were essentially still facilitated by the researcher
504 (lead author), volunteers and carers. This ensured that there were issues surrounding making
505 choices, sharing expertise, and full participation (Richards, 2016), reducing the full control and
506 development of using these methods with the aim of gaining full insight into the lives of people
507 with learning disabilities. However, with health providers increasingly looking for more
508 innovative ways in which to deliver services and reach health targets, especially with hard-to-
509 reach groups, a range of creative approaches may be more suitable in community-based arts
510 research projects (see Cowling, 2004; Kilroy et al., 2007). In healthcare, the arts is
511 progressively being seen to have roles in enhancing processes of care and acting as a medium
512 for sociocultural change (Abbott and Avins, 2006; McPherson, 2006; Coholic and LeBreton,
513 2007). Thus, art/the arts is a form of expression that may highlight values or communicate
514 feelings, responding to the social and cultural settings within which a person or people live.
515 For example, alongside poetry, photography and sculpture, drama and improvisation were used
516 to depict stories or debates/discussions in relation to the men's lives, as a way of engaging and
517 expressing feelings and thoughts, with facilitators supporting research participants in being the
518 performers (Fitzgerald, 2007). The participants not only used the opportunity of being on
519 camera to improvise scenes from their favourite television programmes, but also developed
520 scenes that involved the men debating key themes relating to health promotion, such as 'being

521 clean' (personal hygiene). The scenes that the men created opened further debate and
522 discussion surrounding issues about which they would not normally be able to talk due to the
523 restrictive nature of their lives, e.g. not being able to set their own routines or talk about being
524 sexually active.

525 Similarly, a good example of where strong feelings were expressed was that of Mark's
526 poetry. He wrote poetry not only to talk about his hopes for the future, but also to discuss the
527 difficulties that he faced due to being a gay man with learning disabilities. Mark used poetry to
528 help the reader/listener to feel and hear his thoughts in his own words (also see Ward, 2011),
529 meaning that poetry can provide the means to express what cannot always be voiced
530 (Richardson, 2000). Thus, the use of poetry in research not only opens potential spaces for
531 people to engage with and understand their contexts more (Clark-McGhee, 2015), but also may
532 stimulate critical debate and reflection, which can highlight tensions and challenge or resist
533 disempowering practices in professional life (Kinsella, 2006).

534 In the way that Mark's poetry constructed meanings about his life and sexuality,
535 photography was also used to convey perspectives on how the men viewed their lives and
536 contexts. The use of photography was useful for the participants to explore their own cultural,
537 social and historical contexts. For example, the men took photographs that represented aspects
538 of their identity, as well as emotions and feelings in respect of matters of interest thereto.
539 Gauntlett (2007) emphasised the benefits of using visual methods as an embodied experience
540 and, therefore, a worthwhile alternative to traditional interviews and focus groups. Thus, visual
541 and creative methods may record as well as preserve and provide deeper meaning to the
542 activities and feelings expressed in a way that people with learning disabilities, for instance,
543 can interpret for themselves. Subsequently, community-based arts research, using creative and
544 visual methods, can be a way in which to promote inclusion and participation and allow the
545 voices of marginalised people and groups to have a voice in social research (Goodley and

546 Moore, 2000; Aldridge, 2012), meaning that people with learning disabilities can transcend
547 exclusionary practices (Hall, 2013).

548

549 **Conclusion**

550

551 This article presented some of the community-based artwork of a group of men with learning
552 disabilities, who aimed to challenge some of the misconceptions associated with learning
553 disabilities. There is no doubt that people with learning disabilities regularly face many forms
554 of direct and indirect stigma because of their label of ‘learning disability’, as well as physical
555 and verbal abuse, and subtle forms of disempowerment because of presumed sexual
556 promiscuity and predatory behaviours, accusations of laziness, and accusations of lacking in
557 skill, knowledge and experience. However, the men in this project used a series of visual and
558 creative methods to challenge some of these misconceptions by telling stories through art,
559 demonstrating skill through photography, using poetry to talk about sexual identity, and
560 improvising drama and filmmaking to challenge stigma, and through sculpture expressed their
561 voices in respect of their lived experiences and hopes for the future. Thus, by doing so, they
562 were able to challenge some of the stigma and stereotyping associated with learning
563 disabilities, indicating that community-based arts research is a valuable and empowering way
564 in which to promote the voices of people with learning disabilities.

565

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