The Arts and Social Network - attachment through art

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Abstract
This article describes the development of the Arts and Social Network, a unique resource developed specifically to provide social opportunities for people who experience social exclusion because of their diagnostic labels of personality disorder. It supports people to make new connections with others who face similar challenges through monthly arts-based events held in and around central London.

Key words
Personality disorder; Arts; Social exclusion; Network

Origins
In the autumn of 2007, the organisation Personality Plus was launched at Tate Modern. Personality Plus is a user-led community interest company established to engage with people interested in using creativity to challenge the stigma experienced by people given a diagnosis of personality disorder. After its launch, a number of strategy meetings were held to capitalise on its momentum and think about how the scope of its work could evolve to engage more service users.

The core ethos of Personality Plus was to challenge the stigma associated with the diagnosis of personality disorder (PD) by celebrating the heightened creative ability of many people who had received it. As discussions evolved, it became clearer that even though the publicity generated by the high-profile events had succeeded in doing this, it became obvious that these resource-intensive projects only had a limited impact on the day-to-day lives of many service users. We decided to re-focus our energy on projects that would have a lasting impact on people’s lives and felt that the only way we could do this was through something that could engage people more regularly on a long-term basis.

The Arts and Social Network evolved out of a number of meetings between members of Personality Plus and Care Services Improvement Partnership (CSIP) in the summer of 2008. It was decided to run a pilot project in central London that provided an opportunity for people who identified with the diagnosis of personality disorder to enjoy London-based arts and cultural events on a monthly basis. Its main purpose was to support and facilitate service users to meet together in a safe and inclusive way, providing a unique resource for people whose condition often left them feeling very socially isolated. We also hoped that, despite the challenges, people would gain some enjoyment from the experience of going to cultural events with a peer group who could appreciate their difficulties. In the early stages of its development, we also held onto the belief that, over time, these experiences would help people overcome some of their anxieties and assist them in strengthening their resourcefulness to do and see things that they may not have felt able to do on their own.

The issue of diagnosis
Because of the widespread stigmatisation of people who had received a diagnosis of personality disorder and the covert refusal of some psychiatrists to
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diagnose, we decided that the Network would be open to people who ‘identified’ with the diagnosis of personality disorder. We also decided to extend our invitation to carers and friends (who may or may not identify), so that new members felt safe and supported when they first attended.

The need for a social network
The Network came out of a notion that often the positive social interactions that can be so rewarding and transformative for service users are paradoxically the very things that people will unconsciously avoid. This existential paradox is at the heart of the problem – fearing what you desire is one of the most painful things people have to contend with. The gnawing frustration that any motivation to do something proactive to lessen the agony of our isolation is frequently overridden by this aversion to socialising, which often leads to the chronic sense of hopelessness associated with personality disorders.

The understanding that this self-defeating dynamic is rooted in the disruption of the attachment process is well documented and understood, but what could we do to assist fellow service users to overcome this disabling urge to pull away? How could we organise a social event that would not overwhelm service users with too much exposure to the unfamiliar faces, places and spaces that would trigger the very socially-avoidant behaviour and mental distress we wanted to help them overcome?

So near but yet so far
Some of us had benefited from living in a therapeutic community, where the everyday interactions that are a big part of communal living allow people the space to endure a process of socialisation where the challenge of relating to others can be explored.

We could not envisage that a social network, based on these principles, would ever be conceived within mainstream adult mental health services, especially without utilising an authentic collaboration between service users and professionals. Although commonplace in therapeutic communities, this type of non-hierarchical co-working is still very challenging to the majority of clinicians and mental health workers in the current system.

Many of us had endured decades of exclusion before we received any significant treatment. The sense of isolation and dislocation was frequently compounded by the way services are organised, where service users have little or no opportunity to engage with each other. Often people describe watching years of their lives pass by, sitting opposite the same (unknown) people in the same waiting rooms of a local consultant psychiatrist’s clinic after an episode of self-harm, glancing over at each other’s bandaged arms, and wondering whether they suffered with the same condition.

Without a PD-specific resource like the Arts and Social Network, we knew that most mainstream services and community mental health teams (CMHTs) would not enable or support people to overcome their social anxieties or assist them to reach out to each other. The vast majority of mainstream services have failed to see the value of peer support, that an opportunity to interact, connect and share the commonality of one’s experience as a means of mutual understanding is one of the most effective ways of offering support. It is common for people with this diagnosis to struggle to understand what ‘having a personality disorder’ means. It is also commonplace that their family, friends, doctor, consultant psychiatrist, key worker, housing officer, benefits agency and others who they will desperately seek assistance from will also struggle to understand what ‘having a personality disorder’ means as well.

The frustration and difficulty that people encounter when trying to communicate their inner experience to others is often very challenging: How can I translate what I think and feel coherently when I don’t understand myself? To have one’s very sense of existence undermined by extreme and often-paradoxical thoughts and feelings can lead to overwhelming distress and vulnerability. Tragically, personality disorder is also very commonplace, and understanding that in any geographical area there would be people who lived relatively close to each other who would be trapped in these cycles of exclusion was a primary motivation in making our Social Network a reality.

Facing the challenge together: how to include the excluded
From our prior collaborative work with both Tate Modern and the British Association of Art
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Therapy, we came to understand that a process of socialisation would only be possible if we could lessen the intensity of the initial pain of ‘being together’. From our own experiences in treatment and the challenges that we had all faced personally, we started to think collectively about how this could be achieved. With some professional input, we have been able to successfully formulate a process that incorporated a number of key components from the democratic therapeutic community model, as well as elements from arts therapies and the work of arts educationalists, to make these precious opportunities available for the very first time.

We chose exhibitions that provided an optimum level of stimulation and were accessible but neither traumatising or conceptually incongruent for our audience. The ‘artwork’ plays a dual purpose in the Arts and Social Network, primarily as a ‘distraction technique’ to enable those attending to have a tolerable and meaningful experience of connection to each other without being overwhelmed by it, and by providing an experiential focus for conversation. This has helped people to stay present and engaged with each other while lessening the impact of pain-inducing internal dialogues.

During the early network events, when very few people had any prior experience of each other, these inter-relational problems were difficult to manage. Supporting people to get through the social aspect, without becoming locked into cycles of obsessively over-analysing what others may be thinking and feeling about them was a real challenge, especially when people became disruptive or withdrawn.

**Art: building the bridge both internally and externally**

One of our earliest collaborations was with Liz Ellis, the Curator of Community Learning at Tate Modern, who we worked with on a number of Personality Plus events at Tate prior to the development of the Network. Liz worked with us on a gallery tour that was carefully tailored to accommodate the particular needs of our group. She devised a way of employing a small calico bag of tactile ‘found objects’ that people would explore together with her. The aim was to engage the group with non-
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intrusive, non-academic dialogue centred on a small number of exhibits that utilised these ‘found objects’ as a thematic ‘bridge’ into the art works.

This precipitated a process of group and individual identification. Very meaningful and authentic insights started to emerge. People could see how the art works related to their own and each other’s life experiences, promoting further exploration and discovery. Unseen layers of meaning quickly became apparent, adding a richer dimension of growth and commonality, further reinforcing the sense of cohesion within the group.

Even though the group were initially unknown to each other, the awareness that all members shared lived experiences of personality disorder was key. The knowledge that these events are organised and stewarded by ex-service users gave people permission to share difficult experiences in a way that did not feel alienating or patronising. It also promoted a culture of acceptance and mutual respect. These processes eventually made it easier to divert people away from concentrating solely on their own internal struggle and those glimpses of freedom, however transitory, made space for something new. A more enriching and meaningful experience of each other and the art works that they had viewed. The quote below epitomises this, and is representative of a lot of the feedback we have received so far:

‘ASN events have helped me in many ways: meeting people “like me” and also those “not like me” in engaging, challenging and – certainly! – stimulating milieu; the efforts in overcoming the fear of others while finding inspiration through them, and in so doing have helped me progress further towards a better understanding of myself and my art; realising that, despite my worst fears, that I am not alone in all this: finally understanding that the only way through this morass is through art, socialising and networking. It does what it says on the tin.’

The internalisation of positive experiences: a new sense of self

The Network has now run for just over a year and we have seen people begin to break free from the shackles of their condition, even if it is only for a couple of hours. As this quote testifies:

‘I greatly enjoy all the events organised by the Arts and Social Network. For a couple of hours, I am able to forget about having a personality disorder, forget about the government cuts etc that trouble me all the time. These events take me out of my boring existence, and I am able to meet with interesting people who all share a love of the arts. Well done for organising these events. I can’t wait for the next one.’

We hope that the consistency and regularity of the events will reinforce something positive about who people are and how they perceive themselves, and that over time they may be able to internalise these experiences as part of an emerging integrated and acceptable self.

The rewards and challenges of running the Arts and Social Network

As a current service user I would like to say that I feel incredibly rewarded to have been involved in the development of this project. For us as organisers, it is very gratifying to see people taking positive risks, broadening their vocabulary of both inter-personal and creative experiences, giving themselves permission to be playful, and attempting to face their fears and form new relationships.

This has not been without its challenges as another unique aspect of the Network is that the stewarding and organising is undertaken by service users who have to manage their own difficulties during the events.

One of our stewards writes about the challenge that she faced:

‘One of the challenges for me has been finding the balance between trying to include people and reach out to them and allowing them to have their own experience of the Network. Some people have had difficulties in engaging with others, but seem to have wanted to attend and be part of the group despite these difficulties.’
We have found that we can too readily over-identify with the attendees’ anxieties and struggle to contain our desire to intervene and ‘save them’. Also our hypersensitivity to other people’s difficulties can lead us to misinterpret their behaviour as ‘disconnection’, when in reality they are taking time out to reflect privately on the experience and are not in need of our support whatsoever. We started to realise that in some circumstances it was our own fear that ‘we were not stewarding the events effectively’ that was getting located in the group. It was initially hard to own our anxiety and realise that we needed to ask ourselves if we were OK. It became clear that we also needed to give ourselves the space to process our own responses, step back, and give the Network the space to do its work. Each Network event is split into two parts – a facilitated tour of an exhibition, and the social component where people have the opportunity to mix informally and share their experiences with each other. After the event has finished, we convene a reflective space for all staff to talk through and think about any issues that stewarding the event may have left them with.

What next?
We are currently undertaking a rigorous mapping and evaluation of the Network so that we can better understand its strengths and weaknesses, and further improve the end users’ experience. The Network has been a big learning curve for us all, and in the current climate the need for a good evidence base is a vital way of supporting its growth. From its inception, it has always been an aspirational goal of ours to extend the scope of the Network so that many other people could benefit from attending. We hope to do this by generating interest in our work through this research.

Why is it so important?
It is known that people who suffer with personality disorders constitute approximately 79% of completed suicides in the UK. We hope that having a date on the calendar will remind people of the positive experiences that they had at the last event and give them just enough hope to pull through. A brave man once said, ‘without hope... we have nothing’ (Van Sant, 2008).

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Reference

For any enquires and to receive the monthly mail out please email admin@emergenceplus.org.uk; www.emergenceplus.org.uk

Andy Brooker is Director of Emergence, a service user-led organisation supporting all people affected by personality disorder including service users, carers, family and friends and professionals. Emergence was established in the summer of 2009 through the merger of Borderline UK and Personality Plus.