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# **Being known, branching out: troupes, teams and recovery**

## **Abstract**

**PURPOSE:** This research aims to reach beyond existing research into the mental health benefits of arts-based or educational opportunities, to discover the particular impact on members' recovery processes of being part of a *committed, long-term* troupe or community – specifically focusing on specialist theatre companies.

**METHODOLOGY:** Following a literature review investigating the growing number of theatre troupes for mental health service users, qualitative research was conducted into one such company. In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with six company members. Thematic analysis of interview transcripts was then cross-checked and enriched through a group interview with six other members.

**FINDINGS:** Two overarching themes emerged: the importance of 'being known' within the company (key sub-themes included 'intuitive democracy' and the 'paradox of reliability'), and the ways in which individuals 'branched out' from this secure basis into artistic, professional and voluntary roles, while remaining company members.

**RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS:** The findings from this small-scale study, while not necessarily generalisable to other long-term communities of care and learning with a 'troupe' or 'team' structure, would provide valuable starting points for a larger-scale investigation.

**PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS:** If generalisable, institutions in the mental health and educational worlds should place more emphasis on developing and resourcing long-term models of support.

**SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS:** The specialist theatre company model contrasts with prevalent individualised, time-limited services for those experiencing mental ill health.

**ORIGINALITY/VALUE:** The study provides compelling narrative evidence to amplify understanding of how 'connectedness' is experienced within a troupe, and may enable individuals with mental illnesses to progress further in their recovery journey.

## **Keywords**

Recovery; CHIME model; arts and health; arts in health; specialist theatre companies; university / healthcare provider partnership; individualised care.

## **Introduction: Recovery and connectedness**

It is not surprising that the arts are frequently invoked as playing a key role in the recovery process of individuals who experience mental ill health. To recover – that is, to attain a good quality of life despite one’s diagnosis – people must, according to Leamy et al. (2011), develop a sense of connectedness, hope and optimism about the future, identity, meaning in life, and empowerment (forming the acronym ‘CHIME’). As Stickley et al. (2018) concluded from their extensive literature review and qualitative research, all five of these elements of recovery are evident in participatory arts activities for mental health service users, “especially enhanced connectedness and increased hope” (2018, p. 6).

Connectedness, or ‘a sense of belonging’, has long been recognised as a fundamental human motivation (Baumeister and Leary, 1995), crucial to psychological and physical health. However, despite the evidence for the importance of a sense of belonging, mental health provision in the UK often does not appear to value it as a central component of recovery. The rise of individual therapies, particularly Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, and the insufficiency of community mental health provision to meet demand, particularly for those with enduring and complex mental ill health (CQC, 2017), have created a system in which the person takes an individual journey toward ‘recovery’ that is their own responsibility. Harper and Speed describe it thus:

The onus for recovery is on the individual, whereby that individual must change their attitudes, values, feelings, goals, skills and roles, in a deeply personal way, in order to effect change within their own life. Rather than effecting social change, the marginalised other is required to change their personal outlook. (2012, p. 12)

This understanding of recovery has two key implications. Firstly, that it is an individual's *interpretation* of their circumstances (which may include marginalisation or injustice), rather than the circumstances themselves, that leads to distress (Binkley, 2011; 2014; Cromby, 2011). Secondly, it tends to valorise rapid and time-limited interventions by mental health services, aimed at building a person's resilience in such a way as to enable them to take ongoing, autonomous responsibility for their recovery (Harper and Speed 2012).

There may be two reasons for the prevailing emphasis on individualised, short-term approaches. The first is the legacy of massive changes within mental health in many countries in the 1970s and 80s, when the psychiatric hospitals closed because it was recognised that institutionalisation and dependency on mental health services was dehumanising (CQC 2017). Ever since governments have been understandably anxious of creating new dependencies and 'asylums in the community'. In order to avoid this, many services are time-limited and people are envisaged as taking a 'recovery journey' that, by implication, has an endpoint and must be taken at a certain speed. The second reason for the growth of individualised treatments perhaps lies in wider cultural and economic changes, summarised by many as 'neoliberalism' and its focus on free markets, restricted public sector budgets, and the individual as a 'consumer' making free choices for themselves (Binkley 2014). This approach has undoubtedly been empowering for many of those whose mental health problems are amenable to the interventions available.

Yet more recently, individualised and short-term approaches to mental health diagnosis and treatment have been explicitly challenged in the UK by Johnstone et al. (2018)'s Power Threat Meaning Framework. This interprets mental ill health as an intelligible response to factors including income inequality, isolation, poverty, poor

housing, abusive relationships, prejudice, and social oppression, and posits a lasting change in these factors, both within an individual's own life and at societal level, as a key component of recovery.

A similar bifurcation of approaches is equally evident within arts in mental health. At one end of the spectrum, many arts interventions for those experiencing mental ill health are time-limited and focused on achieving individual health outcomes, for example as courses within a Recovery College (see for example Ebrahim et al 2018, Cameron et al 2018). At the other, there exist specialist theatre companies whose members are predominantly mental health service users, of which there is a small but growing number of such companies in the UK and worldwide. Rather than offering termly courses, such companies operate as long-term 'troupes', committed to working, performing, and developing their artistic and professional skills together over a period of years.

There is substantial evidence for the beneficial effect of arts projects of varying durations, ranging from weeks to years, on participants' mental health, including the development of their social networks (for example Cameron et al 2018, Ebrahim et al 2018, Hacking et al 2008, Heenan 2007, Stickley et al 2018). Hacking et al (2008) find that participation in the arts widens social networks, and Heenan (2007) that it can provide a catalyst to reintegration into the community. However, a focus on a sense of belonging raises questions as to the long-term sustainability of such effects after the temporary community of a course is dissolved, as the factors which contributed to many participants' ill health within their community are likely to remain unaffected. There is a particular shortage of research into specialist theatre companies, and parallel long-term learning communities such as specialist sports teams and choirs. For this reason there is a need for investigation of the role played in recovery of long-term arts-based

approaches, which might have the potential to foster an enduring sense of community and an ongoing bulwark against marginalisation.

*Case study: Out Of Character Theatre Company*

This research aims to investigate the contribution of specialist theatre companies to members' recovery journeys, through a literature review followed by an in-depth study into one company. Out of Character Theatre Company developed out of Converge York, a university-based provider of free arts, sports and other courses for those who experience mental ill health, whose structure is similar to that of a Recovery College, although its courses are explicitly focused on education rather than therapeutic goals (Rowe 2015). Yet in contrast to Converge York's time-limited courses, the company is a long-term, committed group of actors who perform in a wide range of venues under the leadership of a professional director, as well as offering a Simulated Patient service and developing theatre-based research projects into the lived experience of mental ill health.

The company is subdivided into two troupes: Out Of Character, who perform in theatres and other high-profile venues, and In The Moment, a 'development' troupe whose emphasis is less on performance and more on the development of performance skills and confidence. Its work is largely funded by external grants, as well as by ticket sales and donations. The company is established as a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) accountable to the Charities Commission, with a board of trustees including company members, and full voting rights for all members at Annual General Meetings. Its two artistic directors are professional writers and theatre-makers without extensive lived experience of mental ill health, but members who are service users take on leadership roles (often in a paid capacity) including as choreographer, graphic

designer, web designer, outreach workshop leader and Simulated Patient Service coordinator. Members also serve on the steering groups of the company's projects.

Out Of Character's website gives as the company's purpose:

We make challenging work for inquisitive audiences with the aim of transcending the boundaries of modern theatre and your perceptions of mental health, claiming the territory between inspiration and medication.

As this statement suggests, specialist theatre companies such as Out Of Character have several important aims besides facilitating members' recovery; indeed such companies may not even cite recovery as one of their key purposes. Nonetheless, this research aims to discover what role, if any, involvement in the company does play in members' recovery from mental ill health. In so doing it aims to provide some insights and directions for further research into troupes, teams and other long-term communities of interest for those in recovery.

## **Literature Review**

A review of literature relevant to this investigation necessarily comprises three layers: the theory and empirical evidence relating to the role of group membership and belonging in recovery from mental ill health; literature about theatre and mental health recovery; and finally the limited existing literature on specialist theatre companies, which bring together these two possibly therapeutic dimensions.

### *Groups and belonging*

In their review of the literature related to the need to belong, Baumeister and Leary (1995) conclude that ‘the need to belong is a powerful, fundamental and extremely pervasive motivation’ (p.497) and that lack of attachments leads to ill effects on health and wellbeing. A few years previously, Hagerty et al (1992) provided a valuable analysis of the sense of belonging specifically in mental health. Their definition of the concept is useful for the current study: ‘the experience of personal involvement in in a system or environment so that persons feel themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment’ (p.172).

Hester Parr (2006) carefully and critically considers the role of artistic practice in promoting such a sense of belonging amongst people with mental health problems. She tentatively suggests that ‘social and psychological stability ... might be cultivated through participation in creative spaces’ (p. 162), a process she refers to as ‘situated belonging’ (p.151).

Doroud et al’s (2018) meta-synthesis provides a valuable complement to this conception of situated belonging, by exploring the role of place in promoting recovery in mental health. They conclude that specific spaces and places (one might consider the examples of a rehearsal room, a community centre or a theatre) can be crucial to people’s recovery process through creating the context for ‘doing, being, becoming and belonging’ (p.110). Rowe’s own previous research (2015) finds evidence that a university campus, as a socially valued space of intellectual and creative activity, can fulfil such a role if it consciously aims to make its spaces available to those who experience mental ill health.

*Theatre and Mental Health*



The decades since the 1970s have witnessed a flourishing of ‘applied theatre’ work aiming to support and empower those who experience mental ill health, amongst other marginalised groups. This work has many roots and influences, from overtly therapeutic practice models of dramatherapy (e.g. Emunah 1994, Jennings 1997), to a broad range of more informal approaches arising from the community arts and alternative theatre movements (see for example Kuppers and Robinson 2007, Nicholson 2005). All of these approaches rest to some extent on the same essential understanding of the power of an oblique and imaginative approach to troubling themes:

Many patients are not ready to directly address the emotionally loaded issues in their real lives, and playing out related themes in imaginary roles allows for a degree of emotional distance. (Emunah 1994, p.vii)

A foundational text for theatre in mental health is Augusto Boal’s *Rainbow of Desire* (1995), which developed Boal’s ‘Theatre of the Oppressed’ methodology so as to identify and confront internalised oppression, or what Boal referred to as ‘the cops in the head’ – the psychological defence mechanisms and learned behaviours which restrict people’s agency, wellbeing and development. Three further approaches which have been particularly influential within theatre in mental health are playback theatre (Fox and Dauber 1999, Rowe 2007), therapeutic storytelling (e.g. Gersie 1997, Frank 1995) and digital storytelling (e.g. Balfour 2009). Each of these enables a narrativisation of problematic experience, enabling what Rowe (2007) calls a ‘reparative reconstruction of the self’ (2007, p. 65), often through an abstract or fictional lens. Arthur Frank emphasises the two-way, interdependent nature of this narrative process, in that the self-expression of a ‘wounded storyteller’ or performer also entails taking responsibility for the listener or audience. For Gersie, the collective nature of this process is a vital

component, in that through shared creative activities, ‘a person’s collaborative ability is evoked, nurtured and sustained’ (1997, p. 6).

Because of this, Gersie attests, engaging in theatre or storymaking groups can contribute to recovery and gaining independence from mental health services:

The therapeutic storymaking group interrupts a person’s tendency to drift towards a long-term involvement within the professional or semi-professional mental health context – amongst other reasons, because the groups aim to strengthen the clients’ ability to engage with greater efficacy with their informal social network. (1997, p.5)

### *Specialist theatre companies*

Throughout the UK and internationally there exist a growing number of specialist theatre companies specifically for actors who experience mental ill health (or addiction), including Stepping Out (Harpin, 2010), Theatre Troupe (Hunka, 2016), Fallen Angels (Zontou, 2017), 18 ANO (Zontou, 2013), and Outside Edge (Outside Edge 2018). In addition there exist theatre companies for actors with physical and/or learning disabilities, such as Mind The Gap (Calvert, 2015), Odyssey Theatre (Wooster, 2009) and Improbable Theatre Company (Eckard and Myers, 2009). Although each is unique, these companies have several characteristics in common with each other and with Out Of Character. All are predominantly amateur, although most specifically seek to create paid employment opportunities for those in recovery; Outside Edge is typical in stating: “Wherever possible, the company employs people with experience of addiction recovery” (2018). While acknowledging the potential therapeutic value for members of their work (Outside Edge aims “to change the lives of people affected by addiction through theatre and drama” [2018]), they often distance what they do from therapy or ‘arts in health’ initiatives.

A key distinction in this regard is their emphasis on high-quality, public performance, usually involving professional directors and other creative professionals, and sometimes in theatre venues, although they also tend to perform in university, community and healthcare settings. Stepping Out's director Steve Hennessy states that

we are trying to bridge the gap between community theatre and professional fringe theatre. And we are distinct from drama therapists in that drama therapists are all about process. (Harpin, 2010, p. 43)

Indeed these companies often identify as much with other groundbreaking theatre companies as they do with services for those with mental health difficulties – Harpin in fact analyses the work of Stepping Out as an example of cutting-edge, avant garde theatre (2010).

Companies' reasons for aspiring to high quality performance are several. Firstly, they may wish to develop their members' skills, networks and professional identities to the extent that they can transcend what has been called their 'mental illness identity' (Rowe 2015) or restricted roles associated with their disability (Calvert 2015), and reach out to professional and creative opportunities. Secondly, these companies may have an awareness-raising, destigmatising, or other collective political purpose.

In this respect companies set up for physically disabled and learning disabled actors have played a trailblazing role. Mind The Gap was one of many theatre companies established during the 1980s informed by the social model of disability, and closely allied to the disability rights movement (Calvert 2015). The company makes work that overtly campaigns to dismantle the structural and attitudinal barriers to the full inclusion of learning disabled people in society. Hunka (2016) alleges that such an activist orientation has until recently been lacking from theatre work with those

experiencing mental ill health, limiting the potential for collective identification and campaigning; indeed she suggests using the term ‘psychic disability’ for mental ill health in order to emphasise the social factors which ‘disable’ service users. Analyses of recently established companies for those who use mental health services suggest that such an orientation is becoming more prevalent. Stepping Out “is concerned with the politics of the collective as opposed to the individual” (Harpin, 2010, p.51), and Out Of Character (2018) has created original plays which raise awareness of historic and present injustices against those with mental ill health.

Finally, these performances act as a focal point for dialogue. Zontou (2013) notes that 18 ANO often perform before audiences which include fellow service users, creating a space for public discussion of key issues in this marginalised community.

Companies tread a sensitive ethical boundary in giving performance opportunities to vulnerable actors, which can both set high expectations of reliability and present personal risks (Zontou 2017). Zontou describes Fallen Angels’ key challenge as ‘representing personal experience’ without promoting ‘the exploitation of human experience’ (2017, p. 210). Most companies resolve this issue by avoiding using autobiographical material in productions (Harpin, 2010), or by transforming it into a fictional (Zontou, 2013) or abstract (Zontou, 2017) frame. Another challenge for both mental health and disability-focused companies is that of meeting audience’s expectations in relation to standards of performance. On the one hand, the different strengths and perspectives of actors who experience mental ill health or disability can generate an unusual and provocative aesthetic; for example, Hargrave (cited in Calvert, 2015, p. 149) celebrates “the eloquence of dis-precision” in much of Mind The Gap’s acting. On the other, Wooster finds there is a tension ‘between respect for the stories and their telling and quasi-professional artistic imperatives’ (2009, p.84) in a

performance by Odyssey Theatre. To meet both of these challenges, specialist companies often offer different levels of commitment and performance to individuals in different stages of recovery, including development groups whose emphasis is more on recovery and developing personal expression than on performance (see for example Out Of Character 2018; Outside Edge, 2018).

Reviewing the literature on theatre companies for mental health service users, three different emphases of practice can be discerned: *activist*, *artistic* and *advancement*.



*Fig. 1: Intersecting emphases of specialist theatre companies*

Each company prioritises a slightly different blend of these – thus Stepping Out intends a “synthesis of the theatrical, the therapeutic, and the educative” (Harpin, 2010, 51), while 18 ANO pursues Kuflinec’s “activist therapeutic theatre model” (2007, p. 276; cited in Zontou, 2013). Indeed it might be more accurate to describe these three emphases as a complex of the *affordances* of a theatre company structure. An ‘affordance’ is defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as ‘the quality or property of an object that defines its possible uses or makes clear how it can or should be used’; these three possible uses of the specialist theatre company structure appear from the

literature to be intricately interlinked, although particular companies may overtly emphasise one over the others.

Despite this complexity, and the fact that recovery is rarely given as a central aim, this research aims to elucidate how members understand the role of the theatre company in their individual recovery process. The literature explored above variously locates the contribution of theatre companies to members' recovery in their creation of intense 'communitas' between members (Hunka 2016), in the reconstruction of their identities as actors (Zontou, 2017), and in dignifying or universalising their experiences of mental ill health (Zontou, 2013). However, these claims could equally be made of shorter-term arts initiatives. To understand more precisely what the theatre *company* structure, with its long-term nature, offers to members' recovery process, it was therefore vital to adopt a participatory, qualitative methodology which could explore these themes iteratively and in depth, as will now be outlined.

## **Methodology**

Following a literature review of both research articles and lay documentation of specialist theatre companies for those who use mental health services, in-depth, hour-long, loosely structured, qualitative interviews were held with six company members. For these purposes ethical approval was gained from York St John University, and written informed consent was given by all participants. It is vital to highlight that Heinemeyer acts as administrator to Out Of Character Theatre Company, and Rowe as a trustee, making both authors 'insider researchers', with a unique insight into the company and trusting relationships in which to conduct participatory research with company members. This also places an additional burden on both authors to be as

unbiased as possible in reporting this research; as experienced practice-based researchers both have undertaken substantial training in so doing.

The interview questions were informed by themes emerging from the literature review. They were also designed to enable a variety of visual, narrative and analytic approaches to the research question. In particular, the metaphor of a tree was used to invite interviewees to consider both the ‘roots’ of their involvement in the company (how they became involved) and the ‘branches’ (skills, relationships, further creative or professional opportunities which have developed in their lives through their involvement).

It is important to acknowledge that there is a trade-off involved in the use of such a device. Visual or metaphorical devices inevitably introduce a framing bias to data-gathering – inviting participants to view the company in a certain way - but within arts research, they are widely accepted for their ability to generate fluent, wide-ranging and reflective responses (Reason 2006). For Barker (1998), a key priority for qualitative research into theatre is to engage participants in wide-ranging, reflective conversation about their experiences. In the current study it was felt that the framing bias of visual devices was outweighed by this ability, and the focus they could engender on the role of the company structure in respondents’ biographies. This has implications for how to interpret the findings: the relationship respondents described between the ‘trunk’ of the tree and the ‘branches’ can be considered predictable given the initial introduction of the tree as a device; the novel findings are rather the detail of what constitutes the ‘trunk’ (the nature of belonging to the company) and ‘branches’ (developments in respondents’ lives).

Other questions probed the negative or challenging aspects of company membership.

Interviewees were given the opportunity to check transcripts for accuracy, and these transcripts were then analysed thematically. Quotations were extracted from transcripts which best expressed each theme in interviewees' own words. The 29 themes were then grouped into eight conceptual clusters and mapped in relation to each other.

The thematic analysis was then cross-checked and enriched through a group interview with six other company members, involving twelve members in all. This group reviewed the themes and selected quotations, and made several substantive changes to the provisional grouping and the labels of cluster themes, until the thematic mapping matched their experiential knowledge of the role of the company in their recovery. The most significant change made by this focus group was to reverse the roles of performance and 'being known', so that 'being known' assumed a clear central role, and performance an important but more marginal one.

To ensure a representative sample, six participants were drawn from each troupe of the company (one of which acts as an introductory group for those not yet ready to commit to high-profile performances and strenuous rehearsal schedules), and together the twelve represented a spectrum of duration of involvement in the company.

## **Results**

Thematic analysis and focus group cross-checking brought out two key complexes of cluster themes: 'being known' and 'branching out'. Because of the way interviewees linked these two complexes of ideas, the decision was made to represent the 'being known' complex in simplified form as the 'trunk of the tree' (see Figure 2). Meanwhile the composite diagram of all respondents' answers to the question which elicited the 'roots' and 'branches' of their involvement is supplied as Figure 3. Each of these clusters is now discussed in turn, drawing out some striking sub-themes on the way.



## ***COMPLEX 1: Being known***

***Being known.*** Interviewees returned repeatedly to the idea that the company was a place of deep and abiding relationships, in which they feel secure and valued:

“It’s like a family, you know [...] We get to know each other very well, our strengths and our weaknesses, and how we can express those, in a kind of family situation. It can be very empowering, to feel that sense of belonging.” (Laurie)

Respondents emphasised that the relationships within the company were of a deeper and more dependable nature than those they experience outside it:

“It’s a bit like – well, these people know more about me than my family, really.” (Joe)

Actually it’s the one thing in my week where I go and people will ask about a specific thing I’ve done in the week. Yeah, so if like I say that I have an appointment on Thursday, then guaranteed at least somebody will be like, ‘Oh, how did your appointment go?’ (Imogen)

Several attributed this strong sense of connection to the long-term nature of their commitment to the company, in contrast to theatre courses they had previously undertaken:

“I feel like – a lot more connected to the group in In The Moment, because I think Converge was a set period of time, where we did one thing, whereas I’ve really got history with everyone in In The Moment, because we’ve worked together on so many things and been together so long.” (Imogen)

Others attributed it to the shared experience of theatre-making – and reciprocally, the quality of relationships was felt to be vital to the quality of the theatre they make.

Motivated by this shared purpose of making good theatre, interviewees felt robust and

secure enough to resolve artistic and personal differences which arose within the company:

“There is a sense of not holding onto grievances and those things that go on. I think there is a tremendous commitment from other players and myself to work together, you know, to make it work.” (Laurie)

Two other respondents described ongoing disagreements that had arisen within the company, which had affected their enjoyment of rehearsals, but nonetheless expressed confidence that these would be resolved over time within the context of strong relationships.

While the theme of ‘being known’ was placed by the researchers in a more marginal role than that of performance, the focus group of respondents, following discussion, placed it in a central position within interlinkages to all the other themes.

***Being heard: intuitive democracy.*** Interviewees were emphatic in describing the company’s artistic decision-making processes as democratic, although they were not usually referring to its formal decision-making processes (such as trustees’ meetings and Annual General Meetings). Rather they drew attention to what one could call an ‘intuitive democracy’, in which everyone’s voice is heard. One interviewee described the transparent ‘devising’ process of scriptwriting, facilitated by the director but drawing on every member’s improvised contributions:

“It’s like nothing’s really set in stone. It’s very, kind of, fluid. Jane’ll come with an idea, or an activity, or something. And then we’ll just kind of work from there. [...] And Jane films it on her ipad. [...] Then when it comes to writing, like, a script, she’ll bring bits from previous weeks – bits that worked really well – to make the script.”  
(Imogen)

Interviewees saw devising as the primary vehicle for incorporating everyone's views and input:

"I don't go out there to influence, but I think because I'm part of it and interacting with it, I think I have an equal say in what goes on. [...] Because I think that the way the plays are written is very democratic." (Laurie)

When issues or disagreements inevitably arise, this 'intuitively democratic' approach extends to solving them:

"(There was something that) upset quite a few of us [...] Quite a few of us felt that. So we know that next week – this week – we're gonna go back and talk about which direction we want it to take. [...] We decide everything as a group, whether we're going to do something or not." (Imogen)

***Becoming reliable: the paradox of reliability.*** Interviewees identified a significant aspect of belonging to the company which might be referred to as the 'paradox of reliability': although their health sometimes prevented them attending rehearsals, individual members are able to be much more reliable in attending Out Of Character than other things in their lives, precisely *because* consistent good health is not expected in Out Of Character:

"So even when I am a mess, and I'm doing too much, I'll still go to Out Of Character [...] I love that feeling that you can go there and you could be a mess. And you could sit in the corner and cry, people would just note that, and that that's OK." (Margot)

"(When I had a bad episode with my mental health) they were really kind, and they just wanted to put in place stuff that they can do to help, and now it's perfectly fine [...] – like, everyone knows that happens sometimes and it doesn't really taint their view of me because they've all got their own issues as well. [...] And that means it's the only

thing in my week that I can absolutely say, I'm gonna be there, because quite a lot of things, if I've got a slight feeling that that's going to happen, I won't go." (Imogen)

Interviewees emphasised that their directors and fellow company members did not put pressure on them to attend regularly, but that habits of commitment evolved naturally and voluntarily:

"We do tend to give apologies actually, if we can't come – on the Facebook group we write what's happened – which is nice because there's no obligation to do that – like...it's quite casual, but we feel like doing that." (Imogen)

For this reason, the focus group chose to rename this cluster 'Becoming reliable', to emphasise how reliability developed over time both for individuals and for the company as a collective.

***The performance journey: challenging and binding.*** Many respondents, particularly those from the troupe which performs more frequently, identified performance as the experience which cements the company and gives it its purpose. Two interviewees from this troupe talked in detail about the different moments of the performance 'journey': 1) the nerves and challenges beforehand; 2) the intense, collective, creative experience of performing; and 3) the subsequent sense of accomplishment and celebration.

"(Performance is) when you get those tremendous feelings of bonding with everybody, and working together for a common cause, and then the hard difficult aspects of performing, of nervousness, struggling with words, then the learning to rely on other people, to hold hands and work together is such an important thing, that feeling of friendship and commitment to the language of theatre. [...] And sometimes all these things crystallise and come together, and you have this fantastic moment of...well, it's just really good!" (Laurie)

Closely tied in with this sense of achievement was the sense, shared by all respondents to some degree, that audience feedback confirmed the performance's social value, either through its emotional or inspirational impact on individual audience members, through combatting stigma and low expectations of people with mental illnesses, or through raising awareness of vital issues:

“You get people coming up to you and saying, Wow, that was amazing, that was....we've never seen a play like this before, and it's....not just breaking boundaries and barriers, it's....it's so thought-provoking, and mesmerising [...] And I know we've done our job then.” (Frances)

This cluster of themes was initially placed, based on interview data, in the centre of the thematic mapping, but focus group participants felt performance to be peripheral to (as well as indivisible from) the central importance of 'being known'.

***Openness: good out of bad:*** Respondents strongly valued the ability to talk openly, and often in a very everyday or 'by-the-by' fashion, about their mental health with fellow company members who could empathise with their experience. However this cluster of themes was reconceptualised by the focus group around the idea of 'making good out of bad experience', to emphasise that performance gave full expression, narrative cohesion and social purpose to this openness.

The satisfaction taken from performance was particularly true of performances and workshops held as staff training for mental health professionals, in which respondents felt they were able to draw on their (often bitter) personal experience to create something valuable and contribute to social change.

“I remember years ago thinking, ooh, I’ve been through this but I would like to create some value out of my mental health [...] And I see that in quite a lot of people, really using what you’re going through to make it better for other people’s lives.’ (Lorna)

‘In my poem it’s like, ‘Building performances out of the rubble of the walls we’ve knocked down, and painting pictures people never see because they’ve never had to look.’ (Imogen)

***Balance and flow.*** Respondents valued the reciprocity they felt to exist within the company, in that support was felt to be mutual and balanced, so that attending usually replenished rather than draining their emotional energy:

“There’s really good balance in our relationships with each other. Like, I’m just trying to think what a negative would be, hypothetically, and I guess if I felt like I was taking on everyone else’s mental illnesses, and taking on everyone’s recovery, and being everyone’s advisor, but that actually doesn’t happen. We offer support to each other and we, you know, tell anecdotes about when we’ve done similar, or ask around about psychiatrists (laughs).” (Imogen)

Individuals identified different specific roles and identities which they had come to adopt within the company over time.

“I think I’ve just ‘nominated’ myself social secretary. I’m the one who does the loop texts – Oh, we’re doing this, or we’re going for a drink, or wherever.” (Margot)

“I’ve been told that I’ve got high energy. They need me there...I’ve been told that, if I weren’t there, it wouldn’t be the same.” (Joe)

“I brought in some writing that I did years ago, and we used it in the group, which was really good for me.” (Lorna)

Asked to describe what others in the company value them for, respondents in both individual interviews and focus groups cited:

- Creative roles and strengths (e.g. actor, dancer, bard, poet, clown)
- Social roles (e.g. host, encourager of others, ideas person, chef, guru, facilitator, social secretary)
- Caring roles (e.g. counsellor, philosopher, laughter-maker, great hugger)
- Intrinsic qualities (e.g. being honest, wise, kind, person-aware, supportive, physically expressive)

### ***COMPLEX 2: Branching out***

The ‘branches’ identified by respondents as developments they considered the company to have enabled (or helped to enable) in their lives and recovery processes ranged from friendships, and the emergence of new or buried talents, to paid and voluntary work, and opportunities to have an influence on political decision-making and society. One interviewee has recently published a book, another has started a university course in a caring profession, and another has become a dance tutor and semi-professional actor. Other respondents cite their ‘branching’ activities as taking place primarily within the ecosystem of Out Of Character and Converge York.

One respondent in this latter category identified several knock-on effects from his own recovery. Firstly, he had become a mentor and volunteer support worker to others who lacked the confidence to join Converge York:

“It did actually propel me to not just be well, but help others, and when you help others, it’s so satisfying... I’ve been asked...to be like a stepping stone for...people outside of York, who want to do other things, cause I’ve been through it.” (Frances)

Secondly, he had been able to act as an ambassador for the company and for Converge York at fundraising and networking events, and was conscious of the positive impact of doing this:

“It’s opened the doors to going to London and doing (an event at) the Igen Trust... We met different organisations, from The Orb, which is really good in Knaresborough, and ... it was Chapel FM from Leeds we met, and we met Arts Network from London... we met loads of different people who are doing the same thing... because they’re nicking some of our ideas, because they like it – like theatre and all that, they want to do it in theirs.” (Frances)

Still other respondents described their ‘branches’ as more intangible – a sense of creative potential and the open-endedness of their own development and that of others:

“It’s actually opened up a lot of doors. Normally you think of things closing down. But actually, you know, in a few years you don’t know where I’ll be.” (Lorna)

Crucially, interviewees explicitly identified the company structure, within which they experience ‘being known’, as the stable basis from which they had been able to take independent, new and brave steps in their recovery and life journeys:

“Out Of Character feels like it’s been like a stem line through that, and then I build my confidence up here, and then building my confidence up here allows me to go, Ooh I might try the community theatre, because I know Juliet from Out Of Character, that might help.... Everything can change, but Out Of Character has that consistency and I think....It’s like in a performance when you’ve got one person staying still and you have loads of people running across, and it’s so nice because you have that still person, and then that’s what makes it work.” (Margot)



## **Discussion**

It is clear from members of Out Of Character that 'being known' as part of this particular established troupe leads to a sense of being valued and included. Further, it is suggested that 'being known' and the cluster of ideas grouped around it (being heard, becoming reliable, balance and flow, openness, the performance journey) represent a coherent collective analysis of what 'a sense of belonging' means within this specialist theatre company. They might also be considered as a 'fleshing out' of the recovery factor of Connectedness within Leamy et al's (2011) CHIME model, and how it interacts with the factors of Hope, Identity, Meaning and Empowerment. The relatively frequent mention of conflicts and disagreements within the company is significant as it highlights the fact that these findings are not specific to a uniquely harmonious troupe but to a fallible one, in which resilience and tolerance for stress are regularly called upon.

The range of career and life developments captured within the cluster 'branching out' point to the recovery process interviewees and focus group members were experiencing. While no simple causal link can be attributed, participants themselves felt the company to have played a vital supporting role. In this regard it is interesting that none of the interviewees or focus group members, even those whose artistic careers or recovery processes appeared to be increasingly established, expressed a readiness to 'move on' from the company; rather they saw it as an ongoing support to their wellbeing, and a community to which they securely belonged.

As acknowledged in the Methodology section, the prevalence of 'branching out' was arguably a predictable finding, given the use of a 'tree' device for eliciting narrative data in the questionnaire design. Less predictable was the explicit linkage members made between these significant changes in their lives and the conviviality, pleasures,

responsibilities, *and* the management of interpersonal tensions in a theatre company.

Margot's articulation of the moments preceding a performance eloquently conveys these interactions:

“The beautiful moments before you perform [...] All these kind of moments – the arguing backstage – the working up towards something together and going through all those kind of adrenaline moments and nervy moments, and then doing the performance together and having that special time on stage, and then just singing as loud as you can in the car on the way home!”

What is harder to disentangle is the extent to which these themes are specific to belonging to a specialist theatre company, as opposed to any theatre intervention in mental health, or simply belonging to any long-term community or group. It could be hypothesised that the themes of ‘being known’, ‘balance and flow’ and ‘becoming reliable’ could arise in any group with a shared purpose (such as a sports team). Aspects of ‘being heard’ appear to be specific to theatre devising processes, although the confidence and empowerment this engenders are likely to become more embedded in a long-term company. Other themes seem quite specific to the specialist theatre company: the ongoing potential to create ‘good out of bad’ through the ‘performance journey’, and the opportunities it offers for ‘branching out’ into ongoing community-based and professional engagement in the arts. Given the role attributed to injustice and marginalisation in mental ill health by Johnstone et al (2018) and others, the activist role of the company's performances also appears to be important, in that they provide a forum for challenging fundamental injustices affecting mental health service users.

Since the concept of recovery has been embraced by the mental health care sector, it has continued to be contested and amplified. The CHIME framework provides a desired endpoint for people, but leaves abundant space for discussion as to how it

should be reached. The critical psychology perspective represented by Cromby (2011), Harper and Speed (2012), Binkley (2011, 2014) and Johnstone et al (2018) is that the onus for recovery should not be mainly on the individual, since societal factors are the main causes of mental distress. An interesting adjunct to this position is that of Crawford et al (2013), who propose that recovery should be understood primarily as a relational rather than an individual process, and to be successful must provide for the mutual enrichment and development of all groups who are party to the mental health system. They suggest a special role for the arts in this 'mutual recovery':

Creative practice could be a powerful tool for bringing together a range of social actors and communities of practice in the field of mental health, encompassing a diversity of people with mental health needs, informal carers and health, social care and education personnel, to establish and connect communities in a mutual or reciprocal fashion to enhance mental health and wellbeing. (2013:55)

This articulation resonates with the views of interviewees and focus group members in this research, who posited 'being known' in the theatre company as a stronghold within their lives and recovery processes. This should perhaps lend weight to critical perspectives on resilience and recovery, suggesting that resilience is less a property of individuals than of supportive, enduring communities.

## **Conclusion**

This research tracks the impact of long-term engagement in a theatre company on the mental health of its members. In an era of individualisation of mental health services and wariness of creating dependency, a long-term, specialist theatre troupe may seem anachronistic, redolent of paternalism or socialist approaches. In a specialist theatre company there is no time limit to membership, support comes from within the group

and it is rare that direct focus is placed on individual mental health problems, the shared aim being rather to create good theatre.

Yet this research finds that ‘being known’ within an established company provides the conditions for people to ‘branch out’. Vital caveats are that theatre companies can just as often be the site of discord and unequal relationships, and that there exist other long-term models of arts, sports or education provision which may offer similar benefits. It cannot be assumed that the findings of this study are applicable to other theatre companies, let alone to other troupes, teams or long-term learning communities.

Nonetheless, this small-scale study can claim to raise the possibility that ‘connectedness’ is an under-valued component of the recovery model, and to point to the need for comparative, larger-scale research into projects with such a ‘troupe’ or ‘team’ structure. Should its findings prove to be widespread, they would seem to pose a challenge to institutions in the mental health and educational worlds to develop and resource these models, even where this entails resisting the short-term, individualised approaches that are currently prevalent in mental health.

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## Figures

Figure 1. Intersecting emphases of specialist theatre companies.



Figure 2. The 'trunk of the tree': simplified mapping of 'Being known' thematic cluster.

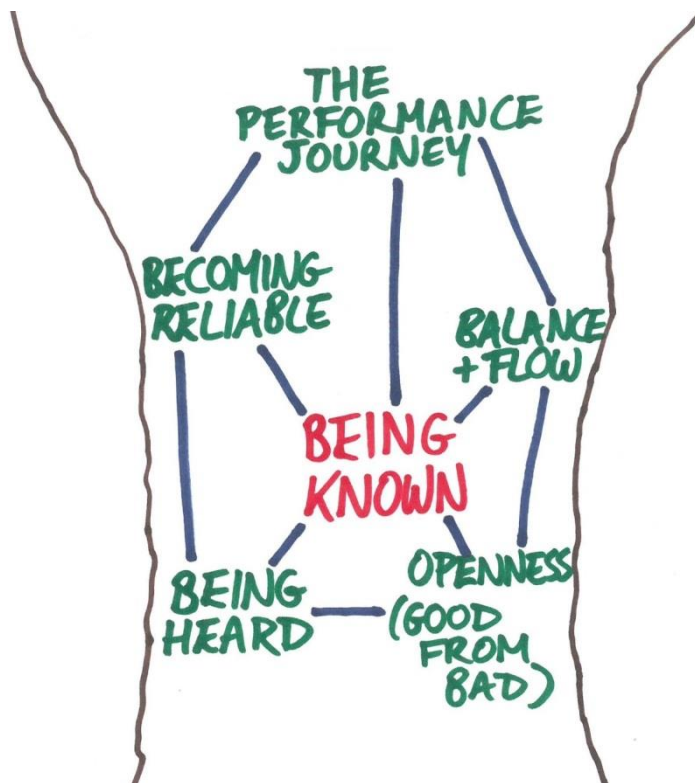


Figure 3. 'Roots' and 'branches' of involvement in the company.

