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Precariousness and groundedness in arts in mental health

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Converge is an organisation at York St John University (UK) offering classes in the arts and other subjects for people experiencing mental ill health. During the winter of 2013-2014 I attended Converge dance classes as a researcher-practitioner to facilitate an action research inquiry with the group. I hoped to come to some collaborative, reflective understanding of the processes that were occurring for and between participants and facilitators within the practice. Each week I brought a selection of tools for reflecting upon our work, including pencils, paper, a dictaphone and an instant camera. I also took part in the sessions, experiencing the practice and making my own observations. The Converge dance students would go for coffee after each session and agreed that I could join them and use the time for research: these moments of reflection became a key part of our research cycles. At first, each week's reflection was triggered by my observations, and people seemed unsure what to offer and were reluctant to begin reflecting on their own experience without a prompt from me. However, one week I could not attend the dance session but had time beforehand to drop off the reflection materials. I gave the camera to one of the participants and explained how to use it. When I returned during the coffee break afterwards, there were several photos of moments from the workshop that participants felt meant something to them. Through discussion it emerged that the meaning was not in the image in itself, rather it was held in the thought of the photographer and the photograph simply anchored those thoughts to a particular moment in time. This anchoring proved particularly fruitful when a participant explained that his photo had emerged blank. In this case, the photographer went on to describe how he had intended to capture an exercise they do each week:

> *It's called balancing over a precipice and it's this lovely moment where everyone is kind of teetering on one leg. Everyone together is wobbling in this precarious moment. Their legs are strong on the ground but their bodies are wobbling. It has this chaotic form of precariousness and groundedness. There's a tension to it.' (Field notes, November 2013)*

Together we made a mind map with precariousness at the centre, prompted by the blank photograph. People talked about how the idea related to a kind of risk-taking within their own practice. They described different ways this happened: through exposing one's self through performance and through both being relied upon and relying on others in the group creative process.[1]

The practice and research of arts in mental health is inevitably affected by existing policies, discourses and practices in mental health more broadly. Contemporary treatment practices still emphasise bio-medical psychopathology and the use of technological interventions above consideration for an individual's personal context and values (Bracken et al. 2012, 430). This approach locates the mental health service user as an object upon which interventions are enacted rather than the subject of his or her own experience and journey through mental ill health. Whilst there are shifts in mental health care towards recovery models of practice (Department of Health 2012), there remains an emphasis upon the individualisation of both care and responsibility for recovery (Harper and Speed 2012, 14-15). Such an

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approach mirrors a neoliberal agenda which negates societal and governmental responsibility for creating the conditions where illness becomes less likely and recovery more possible.

Researching applied practice in a mental health context, an experience so transient, subjective and 'messy' (Hughes, Kidd and McNamara 2011, 186), whilst untangling it from the discourses of mental health, is highly challenging. This is further complicated by the way successive governments have

> [I]nstrumentalized art to fulfil policies of social inclusion […] In this context it is crucial for art practices to tread a careful line between social intervention and autonomy, since demonstrable outcomes are rapidly co-opted by the state. (Harvie 2011, 118-119)

The collaborative action research approach explored here attempted to challenge impact agendas and subvert traditional power dynamics between the researcher and the researched, although this proved problematic. Notably, in the account of the dance class above it was only when I stepped out of the workshop altogether that participants began to make their own spontaneous reflections. This methodological challenge highlights the difficulty of taking a truly collaborative approach in a context where such dynamics are not in the everyday experience of the particular community. It also illuminates the difficulty of collaboration for the arts practitioner within the community. Much research and practice in this sector aims to highlight the impact of participating in the arts by servicing the individualization of care ideology critiqued above. This poses a particular challenge for both the practitioner and researcher if they are to avoid the mitigation of practice by covert neo-liberal agendas. However, progress can still be made toward a democratic epistemology inspired by the development of collaborative approaches in both practice and research.

As part of the same study I also worked with Out of Character Theatre Company. They emerged from the first theatre course offered by Converge and are now a resident semi-professional touring theatre company at York St John University. During my research with the company, we explored the different modes of working as a theatre company, through playing, developing work, rehearsing and performance, a cycle Out of Character repeat several times throughout the year. I set the task of making a scene: a series of images which depicted what was happening during these different modes of working. One of the scenes, exploring the devising and developing phase of work, depicted a group of people, straining and balancing to reach something in the centre of a circle with some kind of invisible boundary. They would stretch and reach, supporting and holding each other, seemingly avoiding some unseen edge in order to reach this object(ive). Eventually, by helping each other, and straining towards it, they retrieve the object and congratulate and thank each other. When reflecting on this image, the rest of the company talked of 'precariousness'. It struck me how remarkably similar this scene was to the image described as an important moment in the dance workshop: the reappearance of the notion of precariousness and the image of working at the edge of something.

Both the research cycle from the dance workshop and the image created by members of Out of Character suggest the significance of risk-taking and how that risk-taking might often be relational in the context of creative group practice. The image of the edge as metaphor for creating new work, and the significance of one's relationship to others as a factor in facilitating that creativity, suggests that that the group may provide the 'groundedness' to enable the necessary 'precariousness'. This duality is striking in the wider socio-economic context of precarity and perhaps points to performance practice as a potential site of resistance. Michel Foucault argued that discourses are constructions of power and that they are tools used to oppress and control. However such discourses can also inspire resistance to such power (Foucault 1978, 100-101), and my suggestion here is that the images in both the dance and theatre workshop illustrate the emergence of such resistance through the relationship between precariousness and groundedness. Nicholas Ridout and Rebecca Schneider suggest that relational arts practices that facilitate a precarious kind of playfulness may indeed provide the grounds for such resistance:

> [P]recarity's "positive qualities" — leaning away from habit, stepping outside of comfort zones, chancing the speculative and uncertain act of critical thinking — can be used to undermine or interrupt neoliberalism's negative, fear-mongering mode of precarity that imposes insecurity for the many in the interest of enormous wealth for the few. Deploying precarity to critique precarity might in some ways be reminiscent of Brecht's deployment of the alienation effect as a form of materialist critique. (2012, 9)

Converge was born in a neoliberal climate, offering potentially high impact, low-cost complex interventions for those with mental ill health, financed in partnership between the NHS and York St John University. However, the courses provide the people who access them with an opportunity to step out of the role of mental health service user in many ways. Courses are taken up through choice, they are not prescribed or mandated as deemed appropriate to a particular psychopathology. At the time of writing there is no time limit or course limit dictating how people participate, unlike many other services within, and peripheral to, mental health services. Further, Converge students are supported to become facilitators or peer-mentors and go on to be employed as peer support workers. That said, Converge risks colluding with neoliberal governmental policies which potentially place the mental health service user in an ever more precarious position by reinforcing the responsibility of the individual to recover and negating the role of the struggle for social justice in such recovery. Antithetically, Converge may provide the space for communities of resistance: a pocket of social space where collaborative community thrives and, in so doing, perhaps challenges precarity with precarity.

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[1] I have used italics to denote the sections of this article concerned with moments of precariousness in the practice taken from field notes and materials from the research cycles, including writing, mind maps and photographs. Non-italicised text denotes the critical analysis of these reflections.