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Solway, R., Thomas, L., Camic, Paul M. and Chaterjee, H.J. (2015) Museum object handling groups in older adult mental health inpatient care. *International Journal of Mental Health Promotion*, 17 (4). pp. 201-214. ISSN 1462-3730.

Link to official URL (if available):

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14623730.2015.1035520>

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Museum Object Handling Groups in Older Adult Mental Health Inpatient Care

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14623730.2015.1035520>

Abstract

Purpose: Emerging evidence indicates that museum object handling sessions offer short-term benefits to healthcare participants. This study aimed to further understand psychological and social aspects of object handling in mental health inpatients .

Design: Older adults (N = 42) from a psychiatric inpatient ward with diagnoses of depression or anxiety took part in a series of object handling group sessions with 5-12 participants per group. Session audio recordings were subjected to thematic analysis.

Findings: Five main themes were identified: “responding to object focused questions”, “learning about objects and from each other”, “enjoyment, enrichment through touch and privilege”, “memories, personal associations and identity” and “imagination and storytelling”. The first four were congruent with literature associated with positive wellbeing and engagement outcomes but the fifth was a new finding for group contexts.

Research implications: Limitations include the relatively small sample and variable week-to-week group attendance. Audio recordings did not provide information on non-verbal communication and how objects were handled. Future studies should control for attendance and examine effects of multiple sessions over time, ideally with video recording.

Originality: This study offers preliminary support for museum object handling as a group intervention in mental health care with potential to develop therapeutic aspects of the sessions. Findings indicate that object handling is a novel yet effective intervention with potential for conferring additional advantages by conducting sessions in group settings.

Article classification: *Research paper*

Keywords: anxiety; depression; group session; inpatient; intervention; engagement; museum object; older adult; wellbeing

Introduction

The role of the arts in promoting health and wellbeing in clinical settings is an area of growing interest. Staricoff's (2004) review of medical literature found evidence of arts interventions producing beneficial therapeutic and medical outcomes including reduced use of medication, decrease in length of hospital stay, reduction in anxiety and depression and lowering of blood pressure and hormonal indicators of stress. Museum object handling can be considered an arts intervention and has a long history of association with health benefits (Classen, 2007). Recently, the practice of museum using collections to promote wellbeing, health and social inclusion has increased and often involves taking objects from the museum site to other settings, including hospitals (Ander et al., 2013), yet there remains a lack of research into the use of museum collections in hospitals and care homes.

Research into museum object handling sessions

Chatterjee and Noble (2009) undertook a pilot study whereby 24 hospital inpatients received one-to-one museum object handling sessions from medical students. The sessions used loan boxes with a variety of objects from university museums. The purpose of the study, to enhance patients' wellbeing and staff communication skills showed an overall improvement in patients' perception of their health status and wellbeing. Qualitative analysis found patients felt positive about the sessions which in turn benefited relationships amongst staff and patients. Chatterjee, Vreeland and Noble (2009) carried out bedside museum object handling sessions for 32 hospital inpatients following a similar procedure and found that self-report measures of life satisfaction and health status increased after the sessions and two major themes of education and reminiscence were identified through qualitative analysis. Lanceley, Noble, Johnson, Balogun, Chatterjee and Menon (2011) undertook qualitative research that focused on experienced nurses carrying out one-to-one object handling sessions

with female oncology patients. The analysis found that object use facilitated discussion with participants who used objects as vehicles for emotional disclosure and communication, suggesting future therapeutic applications for object handling. Paddon, Thomson, Menon, Lanceley and Chatterjee (2013) noted that thinking and meaning making opportunities were utilised by hospital patients participating in museum object handling sessions in conjunction with significantly enhanced measures of happiness and wellbeing. Ander et al. (2012) used grounded theory to analyse museum object handling sessions carried out with a range of healthcare participants, identifying key outcomes termed “engagement processes” such as learning about objects and “expressions of wellbeing” such as eliciting memories leading to a renewed sense of identity (p. 234). A qualitative study carried out by Ander et al. (2013) on the impact of object handling in two healthcare settings, neurological rehabilitation and inpatient mental health highlighted eight themes contributing to the success of the sessions, including enhanced conversational and social skills and enjoyment.

Theoretical perspective for museum object handling

From a theoretical perspective, several psychological phenomena are potentially associated with museum object handling. Thomson et al. (2012a) posited that in physically holding objects, a “triple coding” (p. 66) effect occurs. Triple coding draws on dual coding ideas about memory (Paivio, 1986) and the contiguity effect described by Clark and Paivio (1991) where the combination of verbal and visual material enhances memory processes. Triple coding adds the sense of touch and suggests that the multisensory combination of holding, looking and talking about objects has the effect of stimulating cognitive processes. Lanceley et al. (2011) cited Melanie Klein’s psychoanalytic approach as underpinning their observation that museum objects potentially hold symbolic meaning for participants for whom physical items may act as “a repository or container for projections of different and difficult states of mind” (p810). Thomson et al. (2012a) postulated that communication in the

sessions is enhanced by verbal and non-verbal dynamics between facilitator, participant and object, analogous to the triangular relationship in art therapy theory linking client, therapist and artwork.

One of the first studies to use material objects in a therapeutic intervention for people with mental health diagnoses (Camic, Brooker & Neal, 2011) posited that physical objects could be helpful in acting as a “psychological bridge” between the inner psychological world and outer environment. (p34). Rowlands (2008) found that individuals in older people’s healthcare described their use of material objects as vehicles to express their identity implying that the impact of museum handling sessions in older adult mental health settings may be a fruitful area for further investigation.

The present study

The present study aimed to address gaps in the literature detailed above by posing the research question “what are the psychological and social aspects of a museum object handling group held in an older adult mental health setting?” Two further questions were considered: Firstly, whether benefits associated with wellbeing and engagement, such as enjoyment, tactile stimulation, recalling personal memories and identity highlighted in previous research involving one-to-one sessions (e.g. Paddon et al., 2013; Ander et al., 2013) would be present in group settings. Secondly, whether focusing exclusively on group interventions would highlight dynamics within group processes that support enrichment and therapeutic benefits brought about by museum object handling sessions.

Method

Participants

Participants (n = 42) were recruited for the Heritage in Hospitals research programme¹ from an older adult inpatient ward in a United Kingdom (UK) National Health Service (NHS) psychiatric hospital. Participants were of mixed gender (29 women), social background and ethnicity with a diagnosis of clinical anxiety and/or depression. Nine group sessions were held with five to 12 participants (mean = 6.9) per group. Twenty participants attended a single group session; the remaining 22 participated in two to five sessions, determined by preference and discharge date. Exact details of patterns of attendance were unavailable beyond that which could be inferred from audio recordings. Ethical approval was given by an NHS research ethics committee and written consent was obtained from participants.

Procedure

Each group session used one loan box from a university museum. Box contents differed across sessions but adhered to health and safety regulations. The object handling sessions were facilitated by a museum professional, mostly joined by an occupational therapist. The protocol involved publicising the sessions in advance and then recruitment on the day of the session. Each session began with a general introduction and further explanation as requested. A facilitator led activities and asked questions about handling and discussing the objects. The sessions were recorded using a digital audio recorder. The protocol was based on Ander et al. (2011) for one-to-one sessions but adapted for group sessions; audio recordings of nine sessions were collected for subsequent analysis, reported here.

Data Analysis

¹ Funded by: name of research council award (removed for review)

Thematic analysis. An inductive thematic analysis was conducted (Braun and Clarke (2006), using Atlas.ti qualitative data analysis software (Friese, 2012) comprising: (1) Initial code generation using line-by-line coding of each transcript; (2) theme development where coded data was reviewed for clusters of similar or overlapping codes, identifying those potentially representing themes significant to the research question and representative of patterned meaning within the data; and (3) potential theme review using a recursive process checking themes against collated data and then against the entire data set to ascertain if themes had sufficient data support (i.e. whether they “cohered together meaningfully” and had “clear and identifiable distinctions”) (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 91) using Yardley’s (2000) four core principles for conducting qualitative research (sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency in data analysis, impact and importance).

Results

Five overarching themes were identified, comprising 16 subordinate codes (Table 1). Quotes from transcripts illustrate examples from these themes and codes. Numerical references are included for each quote, with transcript and line number (e.g. 5:16 refers to transcript from fifth session, line 16) and participant (e.g. P1, P2, etc.) or facilitator (F).

Table 1 here

Responding to object focused questions

Questions and tasks related to objects posed by the facilitator followed the principle of guiding discovery defined by Ander et al. (2011) that entailed the facilitator remaining in an expert position, holding correct information. Within the group, however, participants collaborated on investigating objects without the facilitator, a process of genuinely shared exploration where neither held specific prior information. Engaging with the questions and

activities promoted social interaction as participants discussed task parameters and sometimes looked to break the rules.

Guided discovery, guessing games and questions. The facilitator posing questions, setting tasks and inviting guesses or deductions; the participants' responses. This code includes the facilitator confirming or correcting guesses.

F: "Any guesses about how old it might be?"

P1: "Pass"

P2: "Two thousand years"

F: "Two thousand years good, good bid anybody else got a guess?"

P3: "4,000 years"

P1: "I'd have said a bit older than that" (2:91).

Shared exploration and discovery. Participants sharing observations, thoughts and hypotheses about an object with one another.

P1: "I would have said that's a mineral so you are saying that it is an animal."

Talking about the task including rules and rule breaking. Including participants reminding each other of rules and discussing the parameters of the task:

P1: "I wasn't listening to her about what we are actually doing"

P1: "See what we think because I think I know quite a lot about it so I don't want to influence you" (2:52).

Also included is discussing whether the task is easy or difficult:

P4: "I'm lost on this one, I'm not too good with insects" (3:21).

Learning about objects, learning from each other

Participants were educated about an object through facilitator expertise and sharing their knowledge, observations, speculation and impressions . The vehicle for education/learning was in focusing sustained attention on a particular object in terms of its physical properties and the emotional, intuitive or symbolic reaction it provoked. Handling increased participants' intellectual engagement with the object and raised curiosity as to its provenance and wider history. Another aspect of this theme was when the object acted as a literal and vivid link to the past, which participants expressed as a profound experience.

Learning new things. Participants acquired new skill or knowledge to use:

F: "But there is one clue that tells you it isn't a goat's horn, because goat's horns are always straight and sheep's are always curved" (3:36).

The facilitator or participant gave facts or information:

F: "[describing a fossil] well it is probably closer to stone now than the bone because over the millions of years it is trapped in, it becomes stone essentially it changes its chemical make-up" (6:155).

F: "A snail bit horrible but then you take that out and it becomes a beautiful shell."

P5: "Isn't that a mother-of-pearl"

F: Yes it is" (11:53)

Participants were curious and asked the facilitator about the object:

P9: "But why the two holes in the projections, what were they for?" (8:30).

Careful examination of the object. Participants described the physical properties of the object such as its weight, colour, shape and reactions to those properties:

P10: “[examining abalone shell] It’s a beautiful colour on the inside” (13:43).

P12: “Yeah I am surprised how heavy it looks, it didn’t look that heavy in the box”(13:12).

Participants shared their impressions and emotional reactions to the object:

P13: “[examining Egyptian bronze figurine of the cat goddess ‘Bastet’] I respond with emotion to art, I think that is symbolic of something strong for that tribe or for those people, I know I’ve been taught nothing right I say I’ve never got, but this is symbolic of we are strong there’s our baby hold on and protect the baby” (2:65).

P14: “[looking at puma skull] It’s scary!” (4:92).

Story of the object: Questions were asked about the history of the specific object being handled such as how or where the object had been found:

P6: “So how did the museum come by it then?” (6:55).

P15: “Do you think in this country, do you think you’d find things like this in this country?”

P5: “Not sure”

P15: “No be interesting to find out if they know where it came from” (11:73).

An exclusion criterion was not to assign generic information about the objects to this code.

Bringing the past alive. The object provided a tangible connection to ancient peoples and past worlds:

P1: “I mean to think somebody’s hands made this from nature” (2:104).

P6: “when you think that it’s not that somebody had to actually work all these tiny little marks into the copper first it’s quite a job I think” (3:164).

Participants discussed picturing the object as complete (artefacts) or alive (natural history specimens) and speculated about its original context or habitat, including the value and/or possible function..

F: “[while handling a fossilised shark (Megalodon) tooth] It’s an ancient huge shark like a giant shark kind of related to the great white but I think even bigger”

P1: “Gracious”

P2: “Amazing” (2:132).

Enjoyment, enrichment through touch and sense of privilege

Mention was made of feelings of enjoyment and other positive emotions associated with object handling and group participation; touching objects added a novel dimension of physical stimulation. Another level was mental engagement with the objects in terms of interest and sense of privilege in having licence to handle heritage objects. The facilitator framed the opportunity as in effect an initiation to an exclusive club of individuals permitted to touch the objects. Enjoyment at being involved in the social processes of the group was indicated by instances of humour and running jokes, recapping on shared group history and demonstrations of commitment to the group such as making requests for future groups or trying to prolong the sessions.

Enjoyment. Participants explicitly commenting on positive aspects of the experience.

P1: “I really enjoyed it”

P3: “Thank you very much”

P2: “Very interesting” (2:190).

P16: “It’s been absolutely fabulous” (5:99).

P17: “[about volcanic rock (obsidian)] it’s very interesting” (12:26).

Sense of Privilege. This was evoked by being able to physically touch the rare and uncommon museum objects;

P7: “Wow I can’t believe I’m holding one of these things [a flint axe head]” (7:28).

P18: “I was saying it’s lovely to be able to handle things that normally you would just see behind a glass cabinet in museums and it’s great to be able to actually pick them up” (11:189).

The sense of privilege was emphasised by the facilitator:

F: “Well now you can say you have handled some Halifware now it’s called Halifware from Mesopotamia” (11:112).

The age and condition of the objects contributed to the unique experience of handling them:

P6: “[holding fragment of statue] It’s not bad for nearly two and half thousand years old” (6:57).

Touch. Touch enriched the experience in terms of tactile stimulation through physical contact with objects:

P1: “Does it make a difference being able to really look at things in your hands, texture and weight?”

P2: “Oh yes, yes it’s excellent” (5:40).

F: “Run your fingers over it”

P20: “Very smooth” (7:43)

Touch was a transformative experience for some participants:

F: “It’s quite interesting to ask people whether they like to hold the objects too rather than just [look at them]”

P2: “It’s a bit better to hold, it takes you right away, right away from here, it takes you to another place” (2.192).

P11: “There’s something lovely about touching things”

F: “Yes you do appreciate the touching that”(13:60).

Group culture. There was a relaxed feeling in the groups, with both facilitator and participants making humorous asides:

P8: “[commenting on contents of loan box] “Can we get a few diamonds in there!” (2:119).

F: “[commenting on the figurine of Bastet] She is the Goddess of fertility among other things”

P1: “No!”

F: “Fertility and children and women and also sunrise and the moon”

P1: “She had a busy day! [laughter]”

P2: “What did she do in her spare time? [laughter]” (2.148).

Recapping what had happened contributed to developing an inclusive group culture:

F: “[commenting on emu egg] Well I think that was very good because you got that it was an egg shape and kind of egg texture sort of it’s got this texture on it and [participant’s name] said she thought perhaps there was an animal inside of it and it had been perhaps blown out...” (6:11).

Some participants made suggestions and requests to improve groups:

F: “Well I’m glad because I bought a box with an Egyptian object because I remembered you wanted Egyptian so I’m glad you came for that bit of it”

P21: “Oh yeah I love anything Egyptian or Greek” (7:215).

P10: “I think you probably know half of what I say anyway cos I love this stuff but I’d actually go either for a slightly longer session if we could get it or you know have the same amount of time but with slightly fewer objects”

Memories, personal associations and identity

Various qualities of personal meaning making were expressed. A continuum of overt to tenuous or subtle associations with objects had the capacity to trigger memories and links with aspects of participants’ lives, including reflections and recollection of personal histories, wider family networks and current situations. Issues of identity and aging were raised as participants drew on their personal resources, such as hard-won expertise.

Objects as memory triggers. Participants voiced personal recollections of experiences related to similar or identical objects to those present in the sessions. These included reminders of present associations:

P21: “It’s exactly like pot I have on my dressing table. Which I use to keep to keep rings in” (4:8).

And times further in the past:

P3: “No, no but I’ve seen, once I found one as good [referring to a flint axehead]”(2:37).

P20: “[natural history specimen turtle shell] I was once bitten by something like it” (7:121).

More subtle properties of the object such as colour or where it originated had capacity to trigger memories of personal experiences and the forging of connections to wider family members:

P17: “[looking at sodalite mineral sample] When I was a child they had medicine bottles in that colour, that’s what it reminds me of” (12:47).

P1: “Nefertiti that’s sort of Egyptian isn’t it”

P 2: “Yes”

P1: “My daughter went to that when she was at school she learned all about it” (2:158).

P10: “My grandfather was out there in the First World War in that area” (12:97).

Objects as prompts for disclosure. Although some items identified within this code could conceivably have been allocated to “objects as memory triggers”, a decision was made to preserve this separate code to capture participants’ disclosure of personal information, such as thoughts about health issues stemming from the handling of an object:

P11: “It’s a bone (fossil ‘ichthyosaur’ spine bone)”

P6: “Yeah, yeah it’s a vertebrae bone”

P11: “Oh it’s heavy”

P6: “I would never guess that”

P11: “I’ve had two of mine joined together” (6:151).

Talking about regrets or difficult memories:

P1: “My first degree don’t tell anybody it was half a degree. I got away without a first class honours degree actually. I have done a lot since”

F: “Oh right well it sounds like you are very knowledgeable about other things lots of things and there’s a range of students these days”

P1: “I think you are one of the first persons, people I have ever told that apart from my wife and family of course” (2:76)

Or the process of recovery from mental health issues:

P19: “The trouble is in our situation I think you just hope one day the emotions are stirred again and that might be the beginning of the way back” (13:69).

Objects as reminders of identity. Issues of identity were raised as individuals drew on their skills and knowledge to engage intellectually with the objects:

P1: “Clearly it’s part of my business to know things like that I was an engineering geologist” (2:8).

In the following excerpt the male participant relates to the object he is handling in terms of his current role and by comparing his own resources with those of the artefact’s creator:

P20: “[studying an etching of Teddington Wier] The thing that fascinates me cos I am learning to be a web designer... they teach you how to work with layers for images

electronically and to get that kind of layered effect so you can see the gate above is on the ship the boat the clouds it's like them all it's very, very difficult to produce electronically" (7:211).

Thinking about the age of objects could provoke thoughts about aging, such as a sense of growing older and having lived through historical change:

P2: "Because they had turtle soup in my lifetime" (2:170).

P9: "When we were growing up when our children were growing up [there was] no television" (13:14).

Or an appreciation of the broader passage of human history:

P8: "Like you know when you go back to oh gosh was it Mesopotamia we were talking about they discovered things like mathematical principles that we in the West did not have until after the medieval period, all of that knowledge that has been lost and re-lost" (7:216).

The context of learning about the objects in groups with a facilitator mirrored other academic environments:

P1: "I'm behaving like the teacher now not the engineer" (2:14).

P6: "I always seemed to be in the top for history, as my youngest daughter is" (3:74).

Imagination and story telling

Anecdotes and narratives emerging from conversations about objects were grounded in popular culture or personal knowledge and experience; stories were shared by individuals to the group. Conversely, humorous imaginative fantasies about objects used a template of dynamic social interaction whereby an individual would share an imaginative speculation and

others would collude by spontaneously allocating themselves a role in the fantasy to expand the fiction as a whole.

Storytelling. Distinct from telling stories about memories and personal histories, narrative connections between objects and popular fiction or myths were made:

P21: “[handling a nautilus shell] A nautilus”

P15: “I think there might be a submarine called the Nautilus too”

P21: “There is yes Jules Verne in one of his novels named a submarine Nautilus and from that I think one of the navies started naming their submarine the Nautilus” (8:102).

P4: “[handling ichthyosaur bone] I remember reading something years ago they thought they were always talking about the Loch Ness Monster every few years and one of the candidates for the potential Loch Ness Monster was an ichthyosaur” (6:152).

The stories took the object being handled as an initial reference point:

P19: “[after handling turtle shell] And very briefly I have a great story that I acquired from Stephen Fry on the tortoise front when Darwin was in the Galapagos Islands they found one of those many species of giant tortoise they had at the time...” (7:188).

And excitement at imagining the point of discovery:

P5: “It would be exciting to find something like that wouldn’t it?” (2:103).

The group would work collectively on transforming an object by imagination:

P11: “It’s like an ashtray”

F: “Yes [laughter] that’s what somebody else said anybody who smokes I think automatically thinks”

P8: “As used by Julius Caesar on Thursday 21st of March” (6:140).

P21: “[handling small mineral sample] It’s like a pork chop [laughter]”

F: “That’s exactly the shape it’s a good description”

P19: “It’s like a pork chop I’ve never heard that before”

P20: “Yes this pork chop is 40 million years old [laughter]”

Discussion

Wellbeing and engagement processes

It is important to note that the museum object handling interventions described are primarily intended to provide therapeutic benefit to participants, rather than an exclusively educational agenda about heritage objects (Chatterjee et al. 2009). Nonetheless, the present study highlighted “learning about objects, learning from each other” as a major theme which maps onto findings in the extant literature. For example, grounded theory analysis by Ander et al. (2013) cited learning new things an element of museum object handling that enhanced participants’ feelings of competence and confidence. Additionally, Paddon et al. (2013) reported that a large proportion of session conversation involved learning and highlighted the code “guessing game” (p. 40) closely related to “guided discovery, guessing games and questions” indicated above.

Previous studies that have contrasted individuals examining photographs in comparison to actual items suggested that the physical presence of an object enriches the experience (e.g. Thomson et al., 2012b). The act of taking an object into one’s hands can be a

powerful experience (Samuels, 2008) particularly in the context of a hospital environment where opportunities for tactile stimulation are often minimal for long periods of time (Ander et al. 2013). Activities involving touch in moulding clay have been associated with health and wellbeing benefits (Timmons & MacDonald, 2008) with participants citing touch as enriching the sessions. Thomson et al. (2012a) suggested that the combination of visual, tactile and verbal information engages a triple coding effect that enhances memory encoding and wellbeing. A central tenet of cognitive stimulation therapy for people with Alzheimer's disease is the use of multisensory methods, associated with increased cognitive processing and establishing new connections in the brain (Spector, Woods & Orrell, 2008). It is feasible that handling and discussing museum objects results in equivalent levels of cognitive processing (Paddon et al. 2013) although mapping neuropsychological change falls beyond the scope of the present study. Participants indicated that "a sense of privilege" enhanced the experience. Chatterjee et al. (2009) suggested having licence to physically hold rare and unusual heritage objects is an important feature of museum object handling. Participants reported enjoyment in the sessions that paralleled findings by Ander et al. (2013) where sessions were seen to promote positive emotion. Beneficial outcomes have been partially attributed to the sessions providing distraction, from normal ward activities (Chatterjee & Noble, 2009) and from negative emotions (Ander et al., 2013; 2012).

A further aspect of using objects is that their inclusion in collections implies a "museum-worthy" quality (Chatterjee et al., 2009, p174) that participants would be curious about, coded as "the story of the object". While found objects of low economic value have been successfully used in therapeutic contexts (Camic et al., 2011; Romano, McCay & Boydell, 2012), Lanceley et al. (2011) suggested there is therapeutic value in using objects from outside participants' everyday experience which may be ascribed a broad range of psychological meanings unencumbered by present-day associations.

Maroevic (1995) posited that museum objects may be perceived in a multi-layered manner that includes conceptual levels. Participants associated objects with personal memories and experiences as seen throughout the literature on object handling (e.g. Paddon et al., 2013). For some participants, the great age of objects provoked thoughts about “the nature of time, change and the participants’ place in the world” (Ander et al., 2013, p.212). Note has been made of the facility of object handling to enable participants in healthcare settings to share information about their premorbid lives (Ander et al., 2013) and explore the meaning of their particular illness or health problems (Lanceley et al., 2011), reflected in the present study in codes “objects as prompts for disclosure” and “objects as reminders of identity”. It can be argued that opportunity for meaning-making in healthcare settings plays a vital role in adjusting to illness and other stressful events (Park, 2010). The hospital context can entail a loss of personal attributes and individuality, with periods of boredom, introspection and illness or diagnosis dominating an individual’s personality (Ander et al., 2012; Watkins, 1997). The facility in the sessions for participants to share memories and personal qualities from other parts of their lives may bestow benefit to the individual and enhance communication and understanding with staff (Ander et al., 2013).

Group processes

A further research question enquired if focusing exclusively on group interventions would highlight particular group dynamics that supported enrichment and therapeutic benefits engendered by object handling sessions. The theme “imagination and storytelling” captured interactions not documented elsewhere in the literature, in particular the use of role play and fantasy. Chatterjee et al. (2009) referred to “imaginative touching” (p169), for instance, making stabbing motions with a flint dagger. Participant collaboration in telling fantasies or stories about objects was a novel finding. Digby (2006) regarded object-based story telling as “part of the human condition” (p181). In terms of applied psychology and clinical gains, two

interpretations are of relevance. The first is that mental health issues in older people are often associated with isolation and breakdown of social networks, and peer support cited as a potentially beneficial factor (Forte, 2009; Smyer & Qualls, 1999; Woods, 1999). This aspect of the object handling intervention might have provided benefit in terms of building social networks and reducing isolation. Furthermore on long-term hospital wards “social interactions with people other than close family and ward staff are important in feeling ready to live outside the ward and return to independence” (Ander et al., 2013, p212). This conclusion resonates with ideas from art therapy where material objects are incorporated into a unique group culture (Case & Dalley, 2006). A second interpretation is that the nature of the fantasies expressed may provide the basis of therapeutic work if viewed from a psychological perspective; for instance Lanceley et al. (2011) linked a desire for participants wanting to keep objects to psychoanalytic ideas of transitional objects (e.g. Winnicott, 1953). A recurring motif was imagining discovering the object, which could be considered in light of the “discovery and engagement” domain of relationships, to found objects suggested by Camic (2010).

Limitations

One of the limitations of the current study was the relatively small sample size, which indicates that caution should be exercised in applying results to wider populations. Another consideration was the exclusive use of audio recordings, that did not provide information on non-verbal communication such as facial expressions and how objects were handled, the different ways in which participants handled objects was noteworthy (Chatterjee et al., 2009). A further limitation lay in the recording quality; during group discussions, some voices were inaudible. The data from quantitative studies that underpins a central assumption of this study, that the processes identified enhance wellbeing, does not include longitudinal data, all gains reported were only measured in the short term.

Implications for further research and clinical practice

Given the beneficial nature of the intervention indicated by this study, further quantitative research to assess the impact, including longitudinal and randomised control trials would be worthwhile, with a non-intervention group experiencing life as usual. This study offers cautious support of the potential for this novel intervention to improve wellbeing through increasing positive social interaction and providing physical and mental stimulation for people with anxiety and/or depression. In light of personal memories and reflections participants shared in the sessions, there is potential to develop a therapeutic dimension to the intervention. Although the use of material objects in therapy by clinical psychologists is largely unknown, there is an unexplored potential in using object handling in groups as a therapeutic intervention, compatible with a range of psychological models. The findings presented here are tentative but emphasise participants sharing knowledge, working collaboratively and interacting socially as positives in the groups. Having a service user co-facilitate the sessions may further enhance levels of engagement and beneficial social dynamics in the groups.

Conclusions

This study explored psychological and social aspects of museum object handling groups held in an older adult mental health inpatient setting. Thematic analysis of audio recordings identified five overarching themes describing how handling and discussing museum objects evoked potentially beneficial and therapeutic processes including enjoyment, learning, socialising, interest in the objects and active participation in groups. Interacting with objects triggered memories and may have given participants opportunities to renew aspects of their identity not routinely obvious in the healthcare setting, results in keeping with literature associating sessions with wellbeing and engagement outcomes. A new finding highlighted

object-based story telling that spontaneously occurred in sessions. These findings contribute to a growing body of evidence indicating that museum object handling is a novel yet effective intervention with potential for conferring additional advantages by conducting sessions in a group setting.

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