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CLAY TRANSFORMATIONS: TRANSFORMING LIVES THROUGH MUTUAL RECOVERY



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BACKGROUND: Clay Transformations is one of several projects within a wider research programme called 'Creative Practice as Mutual Recovery'. All investigate the way in which creative practice can establish and connect diverse communities and promote 'mutual recovery'. Mutual recovery extends the concept of recovery beyond one focusing only on mental health service users to include those who work with them and the wider community. It also encourages diverse means of promoting mental health and well-being, particularly through involvement in creative practice.

AIMS: Clay Transformations has aimed to evaluate the impact of attending clay workshops on diverse groups of participants and the way in which this attendance promoted 'mutual recovery'. With this aim in mind, the project ran 24 workshops in three eight week blocks.

METHODS: A total of 42 voluntary participants took part in the workshops including artists, practitioners and mental health service users. The evaluation of the workshops adopted a mixed methods approach including participant observation, focus groups, 1-1 interviews and reflective logs. The Secker Social Inclusion Measure and the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS) were also completed by participants during the first, middle and last session of each block of workshops and 6 months after the sessions ended.

THE INTERVENTION



Project artists

Clay workshops were run by two artists. Stephen Jon (left) specialised in clay sculpting and mask making and Sandy Bywater (right) was a more traditional 'potter'.



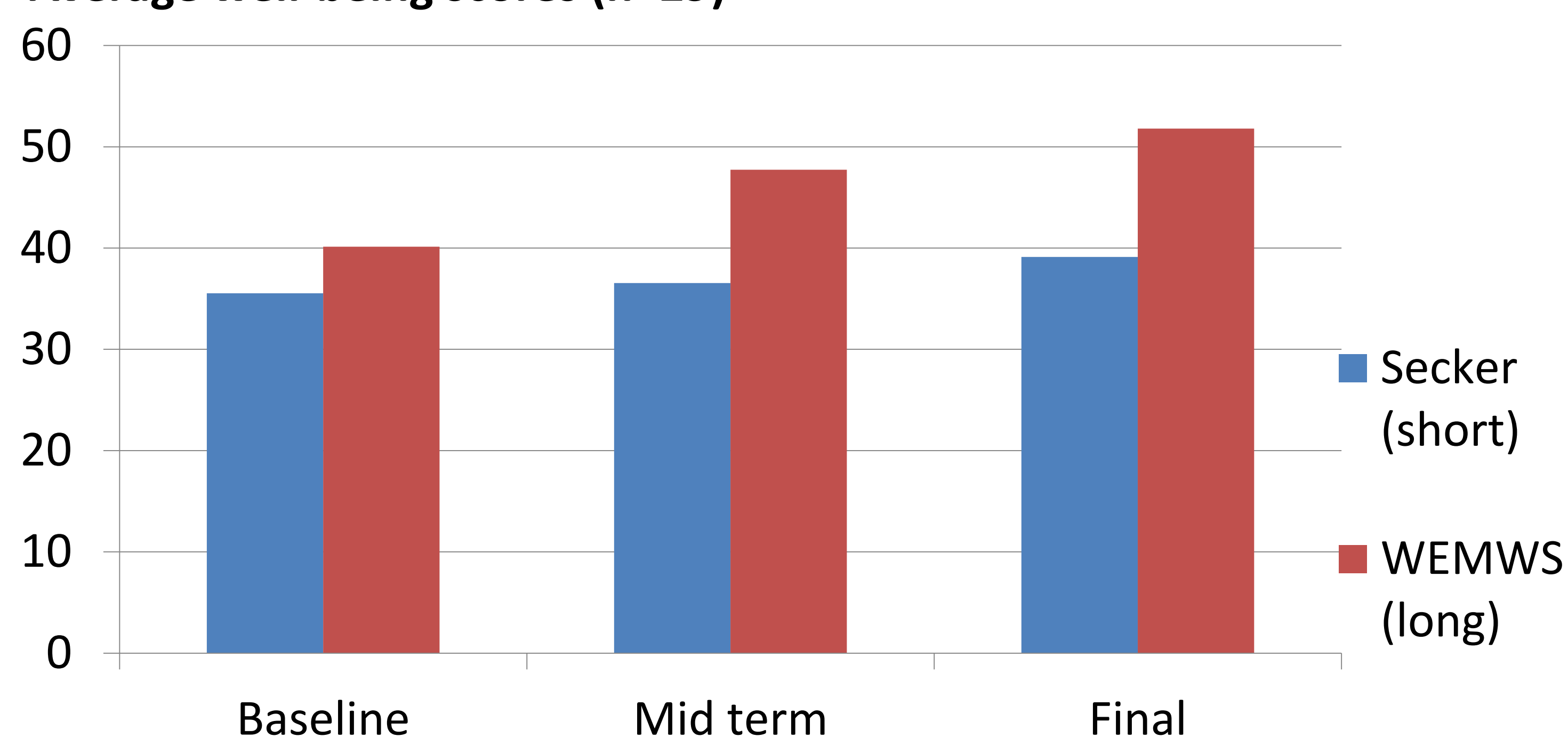
Exhibitions of work

Workshops were followed by two exhibitions of work at The Institute of Mental Health, University of Nottingham (left) and at Rufford Abbey Country Park, Nottinghamshire (right).

QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

Baseline midterm and final well-being measures (n=29) showed an average improvement in participant's social inclusion and psychological well-being during the workshops. Follow-up measures (n=15) taken 6 months after the workshops ended showed that these improvements had been partly sustained (Secker 36.7; WEMWBS 48.4) with average well-being still exceeding baseline levels.

Average well-being scores (n=29)



QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

All participants claimed to have "enjoyed" the workshops or found them "therapeutic". Within this theme, five separate issues emerged:

Being in a group

"I've noticed that because we were having a shared experience and working on the same tasks, that does kind of help in getting to know people"

The diversity of group participants appeared to facilitate these processes:

"I think it's good for our mental health to have that mix rather than a hierarchy. I think it addresses the power thing that can be an issue"

The features of working with clay

"I think you can just pick up some clay and start playing around with it whereas having a blank bit of paper in front of you can be a bit more intimidating"

The process of creative practice

"Coming to each session has given me much needed 'space' to relax, switch off from my anxiety and be creative. Being in a group has been wonderful too"

The outcome of creative practice

"I had never thought of myself as being creative in any manual sense. Being able to say that I liked how a finished piece looked was an unexpected delight"

The potentially sustained and lasting impact

"I have to keep doing this and maybe even other art forms as well. It has been hugely beneficial, more than I ever imagined at the start, a poor, agitated creature, willing myself to leave and never return"

CONCLUSIONS

While involvement in creative practice can be beneficial in itself, these benefits can be enhanced if this practice takes place within a group setting, helping to promote participant's well-being and 'mutual recovery'. However, the efficacy of these interventions must be proven if appropriate funding is to be maintained. In this respect, questions still remain on the "therapeutic" impact of being in a group on one hand and in engaging in creative practice on the other as well as on the relative benefits of different forms of creative practice and the optimal way in which these benefits can be sustained in the longer term.

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Argyle, E. and Winship, G. (2015) Creative practice in a group setting, *Mental Health and Social Inclusion*, 19 (3), 141-147
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