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Neurodiverse Worlds: Articulating the Subjective Experience of Autistic Girls Through Music, Sound and Movement

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Background

Autistic Spectrum Conditions (ASC) in women and girls are frequently under-recognised or misdiagnosed, as diagnostic criteria derive from observations of core behaviours of autistic males (Carpenter et al., 2019). An accumulating body of research supports a "female" autistic phenotype, where distinctive neurodivergent characteristics are masked by intentional imitation of neurotypical behaviours ('camouflaging') (Bargiela et al., 2016). Although a number of projects within autism research centre on benefits of participatory arts with relation to diagnostic criteria (deficits), far fewer profile/support qualities of autistic subjectivity *per se* (including lived experiences of autistic females), reflecting a medical rather than social model of disability.

Aims

The study reported (a pilot project exploring the use of music, sound and movement as creative tools for probing the lived experience of autistic girls, together with their perceived value in negotiating everyday life) is part of a larger AHRC-funded mixed-methods interdisciplinary project, informed by an ecological approach, exploring the identities and experience of autistic girls through participatory arts (drama and media arts).[1] The project's overarching aims are to explore: 1) what participatory arts can contribute to understanding/ documenting the subjective experiences of autistic girls; 2) the role participatory arts practices play in enhancing psychological well-being; 3) how autistic experience can gain visibility through arts and media practices.

Method

6 girls with an ASC diagnosis (aged 11-16), from a specialist school (UK) for autistic girls participated in an 8-week workshop series (including ensemble music-making, foley and sound design, sound walks, multisensory den-making) led by two experienced arts practitioners (a music specialist and a physical theatre/movement specialist). Semi-structured interviews were conducted at start/end points of the project (analysed via inductive thematic analysis). Standardized baseline measures were collected at start/end points. (Social Self-Efficacy Scale (SSES); Creative Self-Efficacy (CSE); Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS); Healthy and Unhealthy Music Scale (HUMS)).

Results

The original project start date (18/01/2021) was delayed by the pandemic. Revised project dates were 26/4/21 to 21/6/21. Data analysis ongoing with preliminary findings available c. late June/early July.

Conclusions

The therapeutic value of participatory arts regarding clinical improvement with relation to ASC diagnostic criteria is widely acknowledged. However, located within an ecological perceptual framework and informed by 4E approaches to cognition, participatory arts merit greater application as insightful tools with which to validate and support 'a different sense of embodied self, a different way of being in the world to that of a neurotypical person' (Shaughnessy, 2020: 52).

References

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[1] Playing A/Part: Autistic Girls, Identities and Creativity. (A collaboration between the universities of Kent and Surrey.) PI: Professor Nicola Shaughnessy, School of Arts, University of Kent UK https://playingapartautisticgirls.org/

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