A fresh look at dementia

Patients’ experience of dementia is the inspiration for an interdisciplinary team occupying the Hub at Wellcome Collection.

“Dementia is not just one thing,” points out Professor Crutch. “The condition might diminish someone’s ability to participate in one area of the arts but they may still be able to enjoy other artistic activities. Hence it may be possible to match activities better to patients. “That might enable more people to engage with something that is of benefit and positive to them.”

For the first three months, the emphasis will be on building conversations between scientists, artists and people with dementia, in order to map out specific projects. “It will be a genuine collaboration, where all the parties share their understanding of each other and the design of the experiment and the way it is communicated to the public.” The initiative will work with support groups established by Professor Crutch and colleagues, as well as multiple national partners to bring in people with dementia from across the UK.

Professor Crutch’s team has organised successful public events at the Science Museum and other cultural venues, and engagement with a wider public will be central to the Hub initiative. “Although the project is inspired by dementia it’s not solely about dementia,” he points out. “We want to take advantage of some of the insights gained by scientists and people with dementia to help others who may be affected too.”

“We’re interested in working together with artists to co-design participatory music or artistic or other activities which will include an experiential measuring component, so we can at least think about how we should be quantifying or evaluating these sorts of activities.”

This strand of work will have policy implications, as the funders of dementia support services currently use a wide variety of criteria to judge whether an activity is worthwhile. For some, participant enjoyment is enough; others require evidence that participants have improved clinically.

Ultimately the team hopes to generate toolkits and methods to support the design of arts-based activities, as well as insight into the factors underpinning successful projects and how impact can be measured. One particular challenge will be to find ways to capture impact ‘in the moment’, during the activity itself.

A further aim is to explore how different forms of dementia affect participation.

“A lot of hip-hop artists, that’s basically the activity itself.’” 

Becky: “It’s not about us stating facts, pointing fingers and giving information – it’s a two-way thing to bring out the best in people and help them hear their own mirrors. Hip-hop has been a beautiful vehicle with which to do this. Many people think mental health and hip-hop are two separate worlds, but they’re not, they’re so intertwined and we just help people see this.”

Akeem and Becky situate Hip Hop Psych within a psychosocial model of mental health, which recognises the multiplicity of biological, family and social factors affecting mental wellbeing. The lyrics of artists such as Tupac, Eminem and Kendrick Lamar provide a wealth of material to kickstart conversations about such influences. They are even an entry point to concepts such as epigenetics and transgenerational effects, or depressive rumination and the role of the default mode network.

Research opportunities as well as teaching and working, the pair also have an interest in developing psychotherapies better tailored to young people. “As educators,” says Akeem, “we have a keen interest in neuroscience and young people – her day job as a Senior Research Manager on the Neuroscience in Psychiatry Network, which is using brain imaging and other techniques to explore the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Hip Hop Psych is providing a way to expand her research interests.”

An early idea she had was to scan the brains of ‘freestyle rappers’ – performers who make up lyrics on the hoof, often in response to words thrown at them from the audience. In 2012, just such a study was reported, revealing characteristic patterns of brain activity associated with freestyle rapping. “It’s mind-blowing how people will throw a word at someone and they’ll just rap it,” says Becky. “Now there’s neural circuitry proof that they are different.”

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“In the late 1970s, urban New York City was beset by problems – poverty, social decay, drugs and violence. In this unpromising environment, disaffected youth created a new genre of music. Hip-hop provided a channel through which young urban black people could articulate their frustrations. Over subsequent decades, hip-hop exploded in popularity. Now it is being used to engage young people with key issues in mental health – and even introduce neuroscientific concepts as complex as the default mode network.”

Consultant psychiatrist, Senior Clinical Tutor and hip-hop fanatic, Akeem Sule turned to hip-hop in an attempt to persuade more medical students to specialise in psychiatry. He ran into Becky Inkster, a clinical neuroscientist and a die-hard hip-hop fan, at a hip-hop event in 2002, and their paths crossed again in Cambridge in 2014. Akeem mentioned the success he was having using hip-hop in teaching, and the two resolved to do more to exploit its potential. So Hip Hop Psych was born.

Hip hop is a perfect vehicle for opening up dialogue with young people about challenging subjects, suggests Becky. “Hip-hop is so loud, so bold, so raw that it can make it easier for teachers to talk about difficult things in mental health from the heart.”

Crucially, it is rooted in personal experience and social context. Hip-hop lyrics are often highly personal, a deeply raw form of self-expression. “There’s an assumption that anything you write must be true to the individual,” Akeem points out. “That’s why in hip-hop they hate ghost writers. If someone is writing lyrics for you, that could destroy your career out.”

In his day job, Professor Crutch strives to improve understanding and treatment of dementia. But he stresses his work goes beyond biological mechanisms (important though they are): “We also want to engage in a form of research where the world so much is now recorded digitally for posterity on Facebook, Instagram and the like. In his day job, Professor Crutch strives to improve understanding and treatment of dementia. But he stresses his work goes beyond biological mechanisms (important though they are): “We also want to engage in a form of research where the world so much is now recorded digitally for posterity on Facebook, Instagram and the like.”

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