



2. Communities and participants

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Defining Communities

There are many different types of communities. Usually, however, a community is made up of a specific group of people that share something between themselves (Cohen, 1985). Communities can be formed by people over time through working together, sharing interests, or living in the same neighbourhood; alternatively, they can be formed through long-term generational bonds or an imagined common nationhood (Anderson, 1983). Different communities can be based on diverse types of connections, with relationships at personal or group level and a varying level of commitment among community members (Douglas, 2010). Communities can involve complex relationships, hierarchies and inter-

dependencies, but can often be much simpler and temporary. Usually, they are somewhere in between. Often, the very elements that hold them together will also serve to distinguish them from others (Mitchell, 2012).

We refer to many social groups using the name 'community' even though these groups may have very different characteristics. For example, people who live in a tiny agrarian village are called a community, but so are the citizens of a modern town (Elias, 2012). And while communities are often defined through their formal, informal or geographic structures, it may be more useful in a creative context to look at what commonalities exist between individuals that can define them as communities.

Generally, people are drawn together through circumstances or interest, broadly as can be seen below:

- Common interest-related;
- Common culture;
- Common circumstance;
- Common geographical location;
- Common generation;
- Common profession.

When looking at communities from the point of view of creating a socially-engaged arts project, other characteristics also come into play. The real-life, day-to-day situations of a community are important - for example, their well-being in general, need for creative projects or economic situation.

The Autonomia Foundation project Eltáv - Megnyílik a bánya (Departure - The mine opens) (2015 - present) works with Roma communities of Szúcs-Bagoly-lyuk in Northern Hungary, and shares skills in financial planning and management through theatre projects and training. Thus, the context in which the community lives, with a high unemployment rate and social stigmas, is given skills which can be used in daily life, and the opportunity to work with greater social cohesion through a common capital scheme.
www.autonomia.hu/en/programok/eltav-megnyilik-a-banya

Also to be taken into account is the fact that communities are not static organisations. A community may be in a state of flux for a variety of reasons - for example, through the gentrification of a particular area, or the influx of a large number of people coming to live in a town. People making up a community may be in different circumstances over time - they may have moved, have different interests or other commitments. This will affect how a project works with participants over time, and who may choose to take part in a creative project.

The University of Local Knowledge (2000 - present), a Bristol-based project by Suzanne Lacy takes, as its starting point, the forms of knowledge existing differently in diverse communities, and through the metaphor of the university seeks to support community esteem. The project team recorded 1,000 short video pieces, revealing the bodies of information stored in the daily lives of residents.

These videotaped "texts" were assembled into categories, or "courses,;" thus the "university" is produced through the knowledge of its residents: rabbit hunting (animal husbandry), raising children as a teen mom (adolescent psychology), growing organic vegetables (agricultural studies) and maintaining classic cars (mechanical engineering).

www.suzannelacy.com/university-of-local-knowledge

Small communities exist within wider communities, and an artist may choose to work only with that specific group within a broader community, for example, older women, or a group within an LGBTQI community.

The project Ser Mulher, Aqui (Being a Woman, Here) (2012), was conducted with a small group of women in the municipality of Sintra, Portugal. The project used theatre practices to work towards its objectives, one of which was the development of the women's assertiveness within social interactions.

Even within what may look like a close community, some groups can be isolated, and have very little agency, even if they are living physically in a supportive community.

The Maltese project Collective Memories (2015 - 2016) worked specifically with a number of elderly Maltese living in care homes, and with adult Filipino communities, who work mainly as carers. Through multidisciplinary activities and participatory actions, the project offered an exchange of cultural understanding which may not have taken place without the

project, and increased the value of memories and story-telling within the small group.
www.criticalinstitute.org/collectivememories

A socially-engaged project can, itself, create its own community by building connections between people.

Roma Mentor Projekt (2015 - 2016) drew its participants (Roma children) and its mentors and artists from the same community, thus building a network within a larger community, while also keeping a familiar and safe atmosphere for the participants. The following can be included as an example: from the same community – artists, older or successful people can mentor or work with younger people, while keeping the familiar and safe atmosphere. At the same time, since the project's role models came from that community, their achievements were something that the children themselves could aspire to.
www.rmp.bhimrao.hu

A community can also be created through a project linking those who do not necessarily live close to each other.

The pan-European Theatre Festival Crossing the Line (2014 - present) brings together artists with intellectual disabilities from across Europe. The project forms a community through the process of performing for one another, critically evaluating each other's work, and participating in the festival as colleagues. Thus, the 'community' which existed in locations around Europe was created as one collaborative

group through the project.
www.crossingtheline.eu/the-festival

Identity(ies) in a community

When working with communities and individuals, it quickly becomes apparent that a person's 'community' does not define them entirely - people are not 'single-identity' holders. Identity and a sense of belonging can be intersectional - people can belong to different communities, either at the same time, or as their circumstances change. This open and inclusive approach is especially relevant to projects with a strong pedagogical basis. Discussions about gender, race, class and sexuality and their 'intersections' are not only important in relation to local participants or students but also to artists and other educators or programme leaders (Hatton, 2019).

Identity politics refers to a political approach that typically aims to secure the political freedom of a specific constituency marginalized within its larger context (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/identity-politics>). Those with shared identity politics can form a community with common philosophies and aims, within their broader communities.

Hierarchies, connections and different relationships exist within a community, adding to the different dynamics within which an artist works. In recent times, new communities and networks have also come to exist through internet technologies, creating networks and social movements that would not have been possible a few years ago (Castells, 2012). This intensity of relationships and hierarchies may mean that certain groups within a community may not feel comfortable with other groups, or may feel less ready to share personal or emotional information when other sections of that community are present. An artist entering a community will need to:

- get to know its different individuals and personalities, being sensitive to the dynamics within the group;
- identify those who direct or lead the community. This may not be easy, possibly because of the complex web of connections and the changing nature and dedication of local leaders that make up a community (Charlton, 2013);

- understand conflicting or contradictory views held by different members of a community, and possibly the contexts in which they exist;
- avoid making presumptions about a community, and therefore risking alienating possible participants, and causing tensions in the artist-community relationship, particularly at the beginning of a project.

Often, local 'leaders' or NGOs can help out with understanding power relationships and variability within a community and can also assist in selecting community-based control and treatment groups in projects making use of experimental design.

Which community to work with?

An artist or researcher may choose to work with a particular community for many different reasons, personal or otherwise. Below are some links which may exist between an artist and a community which may prompt the collaboration.

- **Personal connection** - an artist may have a particular link with that community or local area;
- **Institutional connection** - an organisation may commission the artist to create a project with a particular community;
- **Socially-led** - an on-the-ground organisation may already work with a particular communi-

ty, and may bring the artist in to work there through a project or an artist-in-residence;

- **Community-led** - the community itself may recognise the need to engage with the arts, and may set up the project through a grass-roots initiative;
- **Site-specific** - the artist may consider locational identity, and how it relates to the artistic choices within the project (Kwon, 2004);
- An interest in subcultures and subculture groups, like skateboarders, tattoo enthusiasts or specific fashion groups;
- **Open-door policy** - a project can also be very open and invite anyone who is interested in taking part.

The Italian project Arte Migrante has formed open, weekly meetings, welcoming students, migrants, homeless people, workers, the unemployed, young people and elders, and promotes inclusion through art. During these meetings, a meal is first eaten together, then participants have the opportunity to share their performance(s) with those present, sometimes in small groups.
www.artemigrante.eu

First approaches to a community will usually involve getting to know their circumstances, their localities, and speaking to people in the community. Some communities may be familiar with arts projects, and may be open to working with an artist. Others may not be

used to social engagement through the arts, and may be less willing to participate.

The artist's approach to the community should always be made on an equal footing - without a hierarchical imbalance (Wright, 2018). While an artist may have skills to impart (e.g. specific skills such as drawing or dancing), it's important that the knowledge and skills of the community are acknowledged, and, where relevant, brought into play during the project. Addressing the specificities of alternative systems of knowledge does not only value and communicate to others this knowledge; it can also challenge prevailing hierarchies and paradigms.

The artist group WochenKlausur worked with a group of unemployed women in an area of high deprivation in Glasgow called to create a Women-led Workers' Cooperative (2012 - 2013). Following research and conversations with local organisations, the project was set up to encourage the women - an under-represented group among entrepreneurs - to start a cooperative and, by doing so, establish their own employment in the neighbourhood. Possible business structures as well as business ideas were discussed, as well as needs within the community. The women's business idea was to sell 'meal bags': bags with the exact portions of fresh vegetables and ingredients according to simple recipes - so that healthy cooking at home is made easier. Training and community support were provided, along with continuous on-site support to assist in the process.
www.wochenklausur.at/projekt.php?lang=en&id=41

Identifying a community's needs

Some communities may come with very specific needs and challenges. Several techniques and conversations may allow the artist to understand a community and to begin to identify that community's needs.

- **First conversations** - preliminary conversations with community leaders will provide an overview and some first impressions of local contexts;
- **Casual conversations** - informal introductions and exchanges with local people and potential participants will give a more on-the-ground feel for the community;

- **Workshops** - bringing some groups together to discuss what is needed and brainstorm ideas may also provide information;
- **In-depth** - some individuals in the community may be able to provide more nuanced and sensitive information through deeper conversations;
- **Community-led** - allowing participants to lead the discussion may turn up unexpected thoughts and insights. Identifying a community's needs alongside them can serve to build a stronger trust between artist and participant, and allow the community to have ownership of the project.

Communities may also have more immediate, practical needs, like some of the below.

- **Translation** - if participants don't speak the same language;
- **Cultural mediation** - if participants come from very different cultures;
- **Transport** - if participants can't easily get to the project's venue;
- **Child-care** - if participants don't have someone to look after their children;
- **Other assistance** - depending on the needs of participants.

Challenges in socially-engaged art

A project may not always go exactly as planned, and participants may not be able to give as much commitment to a project as the artist had hoped. While there are no ready-made solutions to a reluctance to participate, at times certain suggestions can be made to encourage individuals to take part. While some people can be encouraged to take part, individuals' wishes should be respected, if they genuinely don't want to be involved.

- Practical reasons: participants may be short of time or money, or may not have access to transport.

- Ask: Can the project offer some kind of income? Can transport be provided? Can future income streams come from the skills learnt in the project?

- Suspicion of the arts: individuals may be unsure of what will be asked of them, and may see the artist as someone 'strange' who will ask too much from them.

- Ask: Can more information be given? Can a trial activity be offered? Can the fear of the arts be lessened? Can a previous participant talk about their experience?

- Past experiences: negative, or unfulfilling past experiences with arts projects may make individuals reluctant to risk their time again;

- Ask: Can the artist find out what made the past experiences negative? Can a more positive activity be offered?

- Suspicion of outsiders: a community may be reluctant to open up to people from outside their group;

- Ask: Can the artist spend more time with that community? Can a sense of trust be built over time? Can a participant take part anonymously?

- Cultural: participants may not feel that they fit into a group that is predominantly made up of people they perceive as 'different' from them;

- Ask: Can the participants become more familiar with each other? Can activities be arranged so that everyone feels comfortable?

The project NSFW (2020 - 2021) interviewed people living with HIV in Malta. Because of the

stigma still surrounding the condition, participants may not have been willing to take part in an open context. Therefore, interviews were carried out anonymously either online or over the phone, with care taken to protect participants' identities.

Challenges might also arise once a project has already started. Depending on the group, conflicts or trust issues may surface, or participants may remain engaged in the project. Some very specific projects may involve communities that have gone through extreme trauma, and the artist may need additional support for themselves and for the participants. While it is difficult to predict what may develop, an artist can seek help from other community members, stakeholders, mentors, or colleagues if a project runs into difficulties. In some kinds of research projects, especially projects carried out within an academic framework, often such stakeholders or gatekeepers are already included as part of the project from the initial stages.

Columbian artist Doris Salcedo created a site-specific work in response to the vote to reject a peace deal between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia in 2019. The 7,000 metres of white fabric across the public plaza bore the names of victims lost in the country's 52 years of civil war. Sumando Ausencias (Adding Absences) invited volunteers to inscribe the names of over 2,000 war victims in ash on individual pieces of rectangular fabric, which were hand-stitched together over the course of a day to form a massive, stark shroud.

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