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Art activities for job counselling in care institutions

Abstract

Art and art-based methods play an increasing role in care institutions, and research on the impact of the arts on well-being is rising. Two artists facilitated art activities for 21 staff representatives in three care institutions in Finland. The aim was to enhance work satisfaction and well-being. Workers were somewhat prejudicial about art but that their attitudes towards and understanding of art became progressively more positive in the process. The interviews show that most participants felt that the artistic activities lifted their group spirit at work, affected their individual well-being and helped them find new methods for their own work. The participants felt that the art activities could be structured as regular job counselling at their workplaces. This research points to the need for further effort and research into incorporating artists and artistic activities into stable roles in care organisations, with a structure similar to that of job counselling.

Key words

art in organizations, community art, art-based action research, care institution, job counselling

Introduction

Art-based activities can improve health and well-being; however, while artistic engagements have significant positive effects on one's sense of health (Fancourt & Finn, 2019; Stickley & Clift, 2017), artists do not have a stable role in Finnish social and healthcare organisations. The significance of the effectiveness of art lies in the freedom that artistic expression gives to its maker and experiencer, an outcome based on non-knowledge and in which each person is sufficient in themselves (Bergman et al., 2021). The impact of art and culture, whether aesthetic, cultural, social, educational, economic or relating to health and well-being, would not exist without the personal experience of art generated by encounters with it (Crossick & Kaszynska, 2016). Therefore, the idea of the art encounter, the meaningfulness of the art experience and the accessibility of art need to be included at the heart of the debate on well-being through art and culture (Lehikoinen et al., 2020).

This article is the result of the project “WorkArt: Art-based Methods for Enhancing Well-being at Work in the Social Sector,” funded by the European Social Fund and the Lapland Center for Economic Development in Finland. In this research, our focus group was on workers in social and healthcare units, and the aim was to support their work satisfaction and well-being through artistic and art-based activities. The project itself was part of a long-term arts-based action research (ABAR) to develop the use of the arts in social work and the healthcare and well-being sector. The data for this article were collected from group interviews organised for the participants of the art activities. In this article, we analyse the participants' thoughts and feelings about the artistic activities implemented in their work community.

While the impact of art and culture on well-being has been increasingly recognised, major changes have also taken place due to organisational and administrative changes in health and social services. A 2023 reform in Finland shifted the responsibility of services from municipalities to larger regions. In 2016–2021, the large-scale Finnish research project ArtsEqual advanced several recommendations for intersectoral cooperation (Ansio et al., 2017; Koivisto et al., 2020). Job descriptions in the social and healthcare sectors are constantly being developed in a more independent direction, with the importance of encounters being emphasised at all customer interfaces. Cultural well-being refers to the individual and communal shared experience of art and culture linked to human well-being (Houni et al., 2020; Lilja-Viherlampi & Rosenlöf, 2019). The central idea of cultural well-being is that people are creative and self-expressive beings with cultural needs and rights at every stage of life, a view increasingly emphasised in the social and health sectors (Nuutinen et al., 2021).

The main question in this article concerns the effects of artistic interventions and art-based actions on the participants of the WorkArt project carried out by the art and design faculty at the University of Lapland, Finland. The project took place in 2021–2022 and produced a survey of the potential of arts-based methods in organisations in the social and healthcare field (Oinas et al., 2022). The first author of this article, Niina Oinas, designed and facilitated the art workshops alongside community artist Sinikka Kyllönen. The artistic activities were facilitated for 21 staff members from three organisations.

The work community as a stakeholder of community art

Socially engaged art and community art have existed in Finland for several decades, and while both are increasing in scope, they continue to hold a fairly marginal position in the art field.

The discussion around arts-based methods originates from social discourse relating to the political activism of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s when citizens were encouraged to actively reflect on their reality and jointly implement social change (Lehikoinen & Vanhanen, 2017). The term community art became more widespread in Finland in the 1990s (Kantonen, 2005). The tradition of community-oriented interactive art in Finland is variously called community art, social art and new public art (Kantonen, 2005). Art events and activities have been used to rehabilitate, involve and integrate people from different life situations. Studies on the quality and impact of such activities have been carried out in various areas, such as services for older people (Jumisko et al., 2013), support for work communities (Rönkä, 2013) and the effectiveness of arts-based methods (Rantala & Jansson, 2013). The bases of the WorkArt project were the interest in community art, arts in organisations and the view of health and social care units as communities.

At the start of the 2020s, a number of mechanisms and structures were introduced to support artists in the context of social sectors. For example, since 2015, the Finnish Cultural Foundation has been distributing *Taidetta kaikille* (Art for All) grants to support projects in hospitals, prisons, reception centres, substance abuse and child protection units, service homes, day centres and homes for the elderly. Moreover, experts at the national organization, the Arts Promotion Centre, in Finland have been developing activities to support new forms of art, and through this, cultural well-being specialist services were implemented in 2020 with the aim of making the work of artists a valued part of well-being and health promotion activities. A major turning point in the understanding of arts and culture in the development of social sectors outside of the arts was the 2019 World Health Organization's (WHO) report *What is the Evidence on the Role of the Arts in Improving Health and Well-being? A Scoping Review* (Fancourt & Finn, 2019). This publication contains more than 900 research reports and is frequently cited when discussing arts, culture, health and well-being in Finland.

According to Berthoin Antal (2011), artistic interventions can help transform organisations and bring people, processes and products from the field of arts into many kinds of organisations, both public and private, and in a variety of fields or industries. The potential benefits of applying arts in organisations are diverse. Barry and Meisiek (2010) examined the concept of workart and considered whether an art collection in an organisation and artist-led interventions can be beneficial in directing attention away from immediate work concerns towards alternative ways of thinking. Schiuma (2009) found that business interactions with the arts can be used to enhance value-creation capacity and boost business performance. The potential benefits of art in organisations are such that policymakers and funders are investing in art; however, openness in the process is at the core of arts. According to Berthoin Antal (2011, p. 152), “artistic intervention whose exact process and outcome were to be known from the outset would hardly be worth engaging in.”

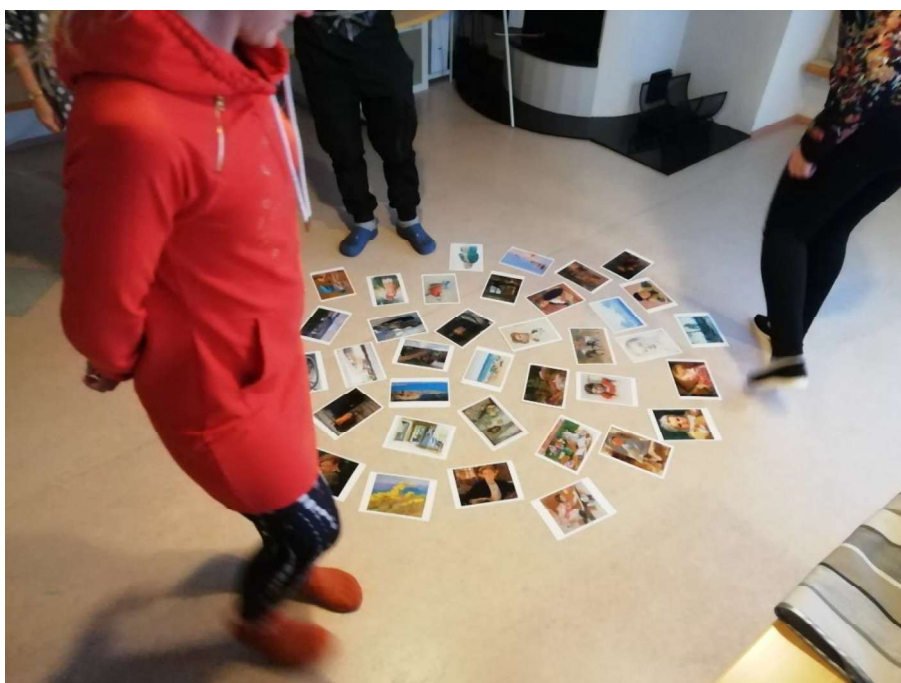
In Finland, several research projects have examined arts in organisations. The large-scale TAIKA project (2008–2013) promoted art-based methods in working life in Finland and studied the impact of long-term art activities in more than 20 workplaces, with a total of about 600 participants taking part in long-term art projects (Rönkä, 2013). In addition to lengthy processes, short-term well-being days were carried out in 15 work communities. The study showed that art can bring changes at the levels of the work content, work culture and organisation (Rönkä, 2013). Well-being-generating arts initiatives in the social, health and cultural sectors employ some artists in Finland, but there are only a few entrepreneurial community artists and artist collectives as practitioners (Huhmarniemi, 2013).

There is increasing research interest in arts and arts-based methods in care institutions. It has been shown that the quality of arts-based methods in elderly care depends on the construction of the professional identities and competencies of those working in the field (Huhtinen-Hildén, 2014). Some studies have been conducted in Finland to promote the use of art in care institutions. For example, in Strandman's (2013) study on care institutions, the participants reported that they experienced the services as relevant, meaningful and functional. Her results draw attention to the relevance of co-planning art activities. The results of a literature review (Nuutinen et al., 2021) showed that changes in working life and the professions were leading artists into a range of communities. In elderly care communities, professional artists have become agents of change and innovators of working practices, where respectful and appreciative interaction, presence and encounters are at the core of their professional competence (Nuutinen et al., 2021). Although recent research on the effectiveness of the arts has focused on elderly care, this effectiveness has also been identified as an important method in, for example, mental health support in schools (Hautala, 2008). Collaboration with these new fields requires from artists efficient communication skills, courage to take risks and the ability to listen to organisational members.

Work counselling first appeared in Finland in the 1950s, originally in the context of social work, the church and therapeutic nursing (Keski-Luopa, 2001). Early work coaching then became a form of guidance and training provided by a more experienced worker to a younger colleague. According to Paunonen-Ilmonen (2001), the general objective of job counselling is to increase the professional knowledge and skills of the person being counselled. Moreover, the objectives can be mental and personal growth, clarification of professional identity, support and reinforcement and emotional support (Paunonen-Ilmonen, 2001). The aim is to develop the individual characteristics, professional values, knowledge and skills of the supervisee(s) and work development from the supervisee's point of view (Ollila, 2004). Guidance is continuous, regular, of a predetermined duration, voluntary and based on an agreement between the supervisor and the person(s) being supervised. Traditionally, job counselling has been word-based, involving a great deal of talk, and offered by a person with the requisite qualifications.

ABAR as a research approach

ABAR is a research approach that guides the progress of research in the cycles of action research and uses art as a catalyst for development work (Jokela, 2019; Jokela et al., 2015; Jokela et al., 2019). Art serves many purposes in research. In the WorkArt project, art was implemented for the development of work conditions, and ABAR provided a wide opportunity to collect data in visual form, such as the documentation of dialogic and artistic processes and artistic outcomes. The main motivation for the action was to get participants to explore new ways to develop themselves, meet other community members with a new perspective and consider their custom ways of working as well as new, more creative alternatives. In the WorkArt project, art provided a reason for participants to gather together for organisational development. During the process, the participants were encouraged to consider what art is and how individuals can find their own relation with art.



Picture 1. Play with art pictures as a warm-up exercise before the community painting process.

Art workshops were arranged in three care institutions. One of them was a service home for elder people, one of them was a local association working with people suffering from memory issues and one of them was a national association working among young people and people who had social issues. The workshops were built as a process, starting from getting to know each other through the imaginary journey and opening up about everyone's cultural backgrounds. The second workshop included a community painting exercise, which made all the participants communicate together visually. The last workshop was built around playful drama exercises and word art process. The workshops were planned and organised by two community artists who listened to and respected the participants' hopes and feelings.



Picture 2. The participants were impressed with the result of their community painting.

There were four groups in this thematic interview, with a total of 21 interviewees ($N = 21$). The groups were formed according to working communities, and art-based interventions were implemented in all groups. Two of the interviews were implemented in face-to-face situations, and two of them were arranged in Teams videocalls. The interviews were conducted eight to 10 weeks after the last artistic intervention. One of the groups was interviewed immediately after the last workshop, and all interviews were recorded, anonymised and thematically analysed as the research data of this article.

The effect of the art-based actions

Hiltunen and Rantala (2013, 2015) noted that art-based activities can enable organisational cultures to become more open to further development when participants can apply the experience gained in art workshops to their own work practice, using them to strengthen group coherence, express ideas better and become emotionally more engaged in their jobs. Many of the participants of the WorkArt project also recognised new tools and ways of thinking in relation to their own work. As one of them stated, “I have taken this suitcase thing as a concrete tool to my own work.” Another stated, “I’ve been processing how we could use them in our own work, and the ideas have brought a smile to our faces.” Some of them reflected that they had noted the effectiveness of the arts-based methods but that they did not feel ready to apply them to their own work: “I feel that I don’t have enough control over the art to dare to use these methods.” Some of them would have benefited from longer series of artistic activities to gain skills and capabilities as practitioners and facilitators of such activities. However, the aim of the WorkArt project was not to make artists useless as socially engaged artists have expertise to facilitate artistic processes in organisations. The participants could gain capacity to, for

example, reflect on their own experience through artistic expression and use arts-based methods in managing and planning their own work.

Through the artistic process, some participants learned to see art from a new perspective and found art forms that fascinated them, even if they had previously felt that they were not personally interested in art. As some of them stated, “Just great. It was surprisingly fun. At first, I was like, ‘Ääh...what’s this again?’ But then it’s nice to have something different and liberating.” The participants found new ways of seeing and making sense of art, and this positive attitude towards arts opened them up to new experiences: “maybe I had a preconception of the word art. But this was a good experience. [...] I believe that this will not be the last experience.”

Artistic action can be defined as revealing established roles, discussion habits and routine behaviours as well as an aid to finding new perspectives (Rönkä, 2013). The impact of artistic activity has been reported to strengthen communities by promoting a liberated atmosphere, transparency, interaction, trust and the ability to tolerate diversity within the work community (Rönkä, 2013). In this study, a positive effect on community spirit and togetherness were evident both during and after the interventions. Before and at the beginning of the art activities, the atmosphere was very tense, even characterised by scepticism among some of the groups, but the activities enhanced the group spirit and the dynamics between the participants. “There was certainly some dynamic improvement during that painting process,” one of the interviewees reflected, with another concluding that “it is important to have something more than just the job that welds a team together.” The participants achieved new ways of seeing their workmates and themselves, and the possibility of getting to know workmates was appreciated: “It’s important to get to know other colleagues in more ways than just through work.” Similar results were observed by Strandman (2013) when art-based services were carried out by a collaboration of art museums, artists and healthcare units, which the participants experienced as a chance to step into “another” world.

The joy of doing art together with a new agenda was raised in the conversations. In two of the groups, there were new organisational employees who felt that the art interventions and the whole process had made it very easy for them to settle into the team: “For me, it was like a flood during those couple of weeks in terms of how important it is to belong to a group and to be accepted.” Some of the interviewees had noted the importance of a sense of unity to the collaboration: “Without this project, it would have been slower for our team to come together. [...] It has changed our thinking in the sense that we need to continue to invest more in the team, in our team, working together.” Some participants claimed that while at work, they need to mostly be available to customers, and thus, the value of artistic activities was to be together with workmates.

In an ideal case, all community members would participate to the whole process together. However, in the WorkArt project interventions, some stakeholders were absent due to illness and other similar reason. Also, in one of the organisations, participation was voluntary, and thus, some did not participate. The results differed from those of organisations where everyone was expected or demanded to participate by their supervisors. Having art activities in slots of short time periods was a disadvantage for some, so the participants suggested greater regularity, for example, one session per month. They considered the benefits of integrating arts into job counselling practices: “It’s good to have some kind of regularity and irregularity. However, this would be quite different from job coaching, which is another issue, but I can see that alongside it [art-based action] would be good.” A participant noted the value of arts if

incorporated into work coaching: “This supported well the issues raised in the work coaching, for example, cooperation skills and well-being.”

The main goal of the WorkArt project was to increase the positive effects of artistic interventions and art-based activities for well-being and job satisfaction. Observations of the interventions and analyses of the interviews showed that the facilitated artistic actions met the goal. Most of the interviewees mentioned that the process supported their own well-being, and they reported positive effects in their job satisfaction. Some stated as follows: “I got a nice feeling, the environment was safe, it was easy to be there, there was a lot of emotions, a lot of laughs”; “The guiding approach was influenced by the fact that you [artists] approach it differently, a softer approach. The way of thinking feeds creativity. Artistic approach empowers, your own creativity was sparked by this activity”; and “I noticed that when I was expecting this kind of thing to happen, the work week went nicely.

Discussion

In the 2020s, the art and culture field has become a more familiar partner for the social and healthcare fields. As increasing amounts of research have shown that art has widely positive effects on human health and holistic well-being (Fancourt & Finn, 2019; Lehtikainen et al., 2020; Stickley & Clift, 2017), artistic actions have increased attention on traditional caring institutions. This cross-sectoral development has made many positive inroads in recent years in Finland, but more research and new points of view from both groups of actors (artists and people working in more traditional caring institutions) are needed to achieve a more stable recognition and place in these working fields. This research shows signs that art as a method can be an effective partner in job counselling. These signs serve as encouragement for further research on art as a stable partner in job counselling in the social and healthcare fields.

The interviews show that prior to the interventions, the care institution workers had some prejudices about art as a topic; however, their attitudes towards and understanding of art as a subject gradually became more positive. Most of them felt that artistic action lifted their group spirit at work, that it had an effect on their individual well-being and that it helped them find new methods for their own work. In particular, those working as social counsellors said that because of the art interventions, they learnt new methods and came up with new ideas for their own practice. The participants gained agency to make an impact on the working cultures of the care organisations. As Salonen and Rouhinen (2015) explained, culture is an imprint on human activities and actions: People do not only imbibe cultural traits as part of themselves and their way of life but also shape the culture in which they live, including in work communities.

In two of the groups, the theme of job counselling was frequently mentioned. Both of these groups felt that artistic action had given them a way to let go of worries in the work field and that it supported the job counselling arranged at their workplaces. Some members even said that these artistic actions felt more effective than the traditional, verbal job counselling. Job counselling is a regular component of support for workers in the fields of social and healthcare in Finland, while artistic activities and arts-based methods are rare and marginal. The development of job counselling methods and structures provides opportunities to enhance satisfaction for social and healthcare workers, and art provides new opportunities to develop job counselling. In Finland, job counselling was developed in the 1950s, and it has had a stable role in the social and healthcare fields. The aim of traditional job counselling is to develop the individual characteristics, professional values, knowledge and skills of the supervisee(s) and

work development from the supervisee's point of view (Ollila, 2004). However, there were no structures, such as regularity in the arts activities described in this article. Collaborative art processes imply that the community must trust the artist; therefore, it is important to follow agreed timetables and activities.

Artists of the 2020s are generally highly educated, often considered hybrid artists (Karttunen, 2017); therefore, a regulated working life is often a self-evident value that reflects their professionalism. Similar to the social and healthcare sectors, which are regulated by strict laws, art professionals are also guided by perceptions of art and related norms, which are largely derived from within the sector (Kangasmaa & Männikkö, 2021). The community arts approach emphasises interactions and open processes, with a focus on resource-driven development rather than critical thinking. In art-based methods, all options are both open and equal, and makers, experiencers and participants determine the goal or process to which they wish to commit themselves. Therefore, it can be stipulated that art offers possibilities rather than ready-made answers. This research shows that there is great potential for art-based action to be implemented as a stable and regular part of social and healthcare units; however, this needs to be developed in a cross-sectoral manner and over the longer term. Both sides (artists and care institutions) need to do development work together to generate the full potential of artistic action and allow art to bloom in these cross-sectoral fields.

As this research shows, artistic action and art have been found to be a highly effective and important aspect of creating new ways of working, thinking and maintaining contact in traditional fields of care institutions. To get this fruitful cooperation to a stable and sustainable level, there is a need to address artists' working role, salary questions and, for example, co-working skills. There is also a need for organisational managers and workers to recognise the value of artistic work.

The interviewees variously mentioned that the artistic process seemed effective but that the time period appeared too short for a deeper or even permanent effect. The workers and participants in the WorkArt project hoped to arrive at some stable and regular way to involve art or artistic action into their working life in the future, a desire which translates into further development and research into how to fulfil this goal.

One challenge in this artistic intervention was to enable the engagement of the whole working community in the process as the various organisations had distinct ways of engaging. One of the four work managers made participation voluntary for all the workers. Two of three participating organisational managers had told employees that they were obliged to participate in this project as a condition of their work, while in one the participation was volunteer based. There were differences in the participants' show of commitment to the whole process; attitudes towards artistic action and its possibilities were better recognised in the organisations where management took the process seriously and committed to it as the head of the working community. Some participant told that the process had awoken feelings of inequality in the working community: Some of those who wanted to participate were not able because of working timetables, and some of those who did not participate had the biggest challenges in terms of job satisfaction. They could have benefitted most had they been able to participate. From a community arts point of view, challenges appear when the whole community cannot participate in the process. In the future, there should be more attention on planning artistic activities to avoid harm to the community spirit. For the implementing body, it is easier and more ethical to produce the artistic process if the whole community is involved or at least everyone has a real possibility of getting involved. In the social and healthcare sectors, many

organisations are built on the basis of three work shifts, which causes a huge challenge in terms of offering art equally and ethically to all workers.

Conclusion

Arts-based action research was organised in three care organisations in Finland to support well-being at work. Interviews were conducted to analyse the impact of the activities and the participants' reflections on their experiences of increasing well-being and job satisfaction. The artistic activities transformed the participations' attitudes towards art and gave them new perspectives on themselves and others. Despite the short duration of the activities, the stakeholders maintained that the process had some positive effects on them: 1) new working methods had been identified for their own work, 2) community spirit and togetherness had increased, and 3) job satisfaction was enhanced as art-based action supported the participants' well-being in work by supporting half of the work of job counselling. This research shows that there is great potential for arts-based action to be implemented as a stable and regular part of social and healthcare work; however, it needs to be developed in a cross-sectoral manner and over the longer term. The structures of job counselling offer a model of how artistic activities could be structured in care organisations. There is a need for further development and research to establish artists and art-based actions into stable roles in care organisations.

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