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## 'You don't take things too seriously or un-seriously': Beyond recovery to liminal and liminoid possibility in a community arts and mental health project

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“You don’t take things too seriously or un-seriously”: Beyond recovery to liminal and liminoid possibility in a community arts and mental health project.

## **Abstract**

Recent years have seen a renewed interest in integrating creative activities into statutory mental health practice in high income countries. In this article we offer an exploratory analysis of an arts project delivered within UK mental health services, Creativity for Enablement and Wellbeing (CREW). Drawing on data collected for a process evaluation of the project, we suggest that conceptualising CREW as liminal and liminoid provides a helpful way to articulate the processes, atmospheres, relationships and practices of the project. Through this theoretical lens we identify CREW as a mode of engagement comprising looseness, possibility and, collectivity, all brought together through a unique community event, the showcase. We explore CREW’s mode of engagement through three themes: “carving out a liminal space”; “looseness and experimentation” and “from liminal to liminoid”. Implications for service delivery are discussed, focussing on how CREW managed to create a transformative space of liminoid possibility rather than a recovery journey delineated by service-defined imperatives.

## **1. Introduction**

Recent years have seen a renewed interest in integrating creative activities into statutory mental health practice in high income countries. ‘Arts on prescription’ programmes, for instance, have grown in popularity, particularly in the UK (Bungay & Clift, 2010) and Scandinavia (Jensen, Stickley & Stigmar, 2017). These are part of a wider ‘social prescription’ movement to link statutory, clinical services to community based cultural and social activities (Bertotti, Frostick, Hutt, Sohanpal, & Carnes, 2017). An integral part of the evidence base for such developments has been drawn from participatory community arts practice, access to which has been consistently linked to improved mental health (Hacking, Secker, Spandler, Kent, & Shenton, 2008; Stickley, Wright, & Slade, 2018).

White (2010) argues that this shift towards participatory and creative therapies promotes a research agenda premised on exploration rather than a rigid adherence to outcome driven approaches often prioritised in evidence-based practice. Nevertheless, there has been a tendency for research to focus on outcomes rather than process (cf. Clift et al, 2009). In this article we add to the process-orientated literature in participatory and community arts, offering an exploratory analysis of an arts project delivered within UK mental health services. We explore the possibilities offered by the concepts of liminal and liminoid for articulating the processes, atmospheres and practices of the

project, as well their broader potential for orientating and research in arts and health, through providing a holistic theoretical account of the healing power of creative activities.

### **1.1 Creativity for Enablement and Wellbeing (CREW)**

CREW was an art and music project in London, England which ran from 2016-18, funded by Barnet, Enfield and Haringey Mental Health Trust (BEHMHT). The project was a joint enterprise between Jon Hall, music therapist and founder of Outsider Music, and Ben Wakeling, artist and founder of The Outsider Gallery London. The facilitators ran three ten-week long projects which provided an hour a week of music and art activities for participants. The sessions were run in a local Recovery College, where an art and music studio were set up. Each cohort ended with a 'showcase' event, comprising an art exhibition and music performance, open to the public. Three cohorts were funded, two consisting of adults referred from Community Mental Health Services (CMHT), and one of young people referred from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). All participants were therefore current mental health service users, judged by care coordinators to be likely to benefit. Whilst sharing some similarities with social prescribing (Bertotti et al, 2017), and community arts programmes (Sayers & Stickley, 2018), CREW differed through being delivered in statutory mental health services. Whilst CREW was a non-clinical and holistic intervention, it was a more sheltered approach than usually found in social prescription.

An ethnographic process evaluation (Liebert et al, 2018) noted that the stated aims of the facilitators were to engender: a responsive space; relationality and support; the expression of self and the telling of stories. This evaluation found that CREW had significant benefits for participants, service providers and the wider community. It identified that CREW affected participants through three key processes: experiencing expression, imagination and collectivity. Services and the community, meanwhile, were found to be affected by CREW through experiencing and appreciating community, creativity and healing. The evaluation conveyed a strong sense of CREW as having been a highly positive, transformative and unique experience for participants, as well as the service providers and the community members who attended the showcase. Participants' accounts glowed with the benefits of the CREW project, saying it was an "enriching" experience which "rewards their lives", acting to both "give you your voice" and "allow your voice to be heard", offering a "place where people are nurtured", "everyone was included" and that they were "able to do more than I would give myself credit for" and find "the freedom to actually express myself", providing a "nice release from a lot of tension". CREW overall was: "a lot better than all [the services] I've had". Community members and service providers echoed these sentiments, describing the showcase as "amazing", "inspirational",

“incredible”, “astounding”, “powerful”, “healing” “a life saver”, and “visceral, really human, and really unapologetic” in an “really amazing open space, sort of liberatory space”.

Through the evaluation process and reflecting on the project afterwards, we collectively have found it difficult to 'pin down' the atmosphere of the CREW project, and the power of the showcase events. We use 'atmosphere' here, following Anderson (2009) in the sense of “the collective affects ‘in which we live’” (p. 77). The concept of atmosphere thus attends to the intersubjective, felt-sense of a space or place (Böhme, 2017), here that created by the CREW project, which forms a part of structuring the relationships and experiences of participants. If important qualities of the project remain difficult to articulate, this poses a challenge for disseminating and reproducing CREW.

The project certainly bears similarity to approaches which have been thoroughly theorised. Liberation arts, for instance, also often centres on art events showcasing the work of usually marginalised people, sometimes theorised as providing 'public homeplace', a fulcrum between individual and social experience with mutual transformative potential (Watkins & Shulman, 2008). Community music therapy (Proctor, 2011) shares a focus on collaboration, seeing music, or the more active “musicing”, as an intrinsically human activity which both affords and requires collaboration and interaction. Peer support approaches have a similar ethos of mutual learning, and respecting experiential routes to expertise (Repper and Carter, 2011). McNiff (2004) meanwhile locates the level of change in art therapy as lying as much in the atmosphere or ambience as the person, seeing his role as facilitating an intangible interaction between the embodied self, the environment, the artistic materials and the image. The 'Outsider' language used by the facilitators also recalls outsider art (Maizels & Cardinal, 1996), and music (Chusid, 2000). Whilst these art forms also centre art and music made through distress and madness, outsider art is generally not a collective practice. Drawing on these resources can only help to describe elements of CREW. The project did not sit neatly in any of these traditions. We instead here provide a holistic theoretical account of what held together the processes of the project, and enabled the powerful experiences detailed in the evaluation to emerge. We theorise CREW as a liminal space and the showcase as a liminoid event, as a way to articulate the relationships, processes, atmospheres and transformations of the project. This theoretical framing can contribute to, and expand, existing accounts of community arts and mental health.

## **1.2 Liminal, liminoid and performance**

First coined by Van Gennep (1909) in his classic ethnographic study of 'Rites of Passage', 'liminality' also meaning 'threshold' describes an in-between, ambiguous and loose state, usually characterised

by a flat, communitarian relationality and facilitated by an expert or guide (Turner, 1969; Turner, 2012). Van Gennep originally conceived this state as the middle phase of a rite of passage, coming after 'rites of separation' which mark departure from usual norms, and before the 'rites of incorporation' where a new self or role is settled and re-aggregated into the community. The liminal phase is therefore that which contains the 'passage' or transition, and so has attracted authors interested in processes of change and transformation (Stenner, 2018, Stenner & Zittoun, 2020). Victor Turner (1969)'s work was foundational in understanding liminality as a concept with a contribution beyond formal ritual situations. He conceived of liminality as 'non-structure', emphasising the communitarian relationality of liminal situations, arguing these enabled transformations (personal and social) due to "the doffing of masks, the stripping of statuses, the renunciation of roles, the demolishing of structures" (V. Turner, 1988. p. 107). Liminal flat relationality within 'non-structure' has also been linked to an experience of 'communitas', a sense of profound collective connection and joy (E. Turner, 2012). Importantly, both V. Turner (1969) and E. Turner (2012) emphasise that these relations of equality and connection rely on the overall authority of the guide who curates the liminal space, facilitating and structuring this experience for others for a limited period. The equality experienced in liminal space is not absolute, therefore, although it does also avoid the "tyranny of structurelessness" (Freeman, 1972).

V. Turner (1982) argued that many forms of art, music and performance can also have liminal-like qualities and have the potential to evoke liminal experiences in others. He called such forms of art *liminoid*, arguing that that liminoid art was often characterised by personal expression and that it was not bound to liminal spaces or times - you can encounter liminoid art at home. The liminoid is more centred on a person or group sharing their creative output with the world, which could express or evoke a liminal sense of, for instance, ambiguity, 'non-structure', or communitas. Turner noted that liminoid works of art are "often part of social critiques or even revolutionary manifestos" (p. 55). Liminoid forms of art and performance thus hold transformative and critical potential as a medium for social change, creating the conditions and imagining the possibilities of alternative social arrangements or futures. Liberation and critical forms of theatre and art practice which have social and political change as their central purpose - such as Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 1985) or liberation community arts (Watkins and Shulman, 2008) - therefore share this liminoid quality of critique. Perhaps separating these explicitly political forms of art practice from the liminoid is a quality of ambiguity and playfulness; the liminoid is more of an invitation than an instruction (Bucknall, 2016), offering possibilities rather than settled meaning.

## 2. Methodology

The data drawn upon in this article were collected for the evaluation of the CREW project, conducted by staff and students of the University of East London. The project was ethically approved by the host university. Informed and ongoing consent was secured for all formal data collection. The evaluation was also approved by the relevant NHS trust. The evaluation team used a mixture of ethnographic and qualitative methods. During each cohort, both participant observation and semi structured interviews were conducted. At the showcases, recorded attendance reached 250 over the three events. Researchers gathered 46 'voice pops' (short interviews) and 67 postcards answering the question "Dear [gallery name] tonight made me think of..." were collected to record reflections from attendees. The final data set also consisted of nine 'case study' interviews with participants, conducted close to the time of the showcases and inviting participants to reflect on their time in the project. Four staff interviews were also conducted; two with the facilitators of the project, and two with care coordinators who had referred participants.

For this article, the textual data set was analysed in line with the procedures of Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initially the first author collated the data set and thoroughly familiarised herself with the data. Re-readings were structured to begin with different data items each time to avoid the first data item continually framing an interpretation for the rest of the set. The first stage of the analysis was primarily inductive; transcripts were coded at the semantic level to begin with to organise the data. Following this initial, inductive analysis of the data, the first author sought relevant theoretical concepts and frameworks that could help to further illuminate the emergent themes. A key thread through the data was the ways participants talked about their journey through CREW and the changes they experienced. The concept of a "rite of passage" was drawn upon to account for the nature of these temporal, spatial and social journeys.

As this emergent conceptual avenue was defined and refined, the broader relevance of liminality was identified and expanded upon in the analysis. Overall, we thus took a 'binocular' (Frosh & Saville Young, 2008) approach to analysis, a dual deductive-inductive approach aiming to preserve the semantic content expressed by the participants, while acknowledging the dynamics of our theoretical interest in liminality. Through this process we conceived of liminality as a 'sensitising concept', proposed by Blumer (1954) as an alternative to positivist 'definitive concepts'. A sensitizing concept seeks to orientate and elucidate, providing not "prescriptions of what to see" but rather "directions along which to look" (p. 7). There was also variety in how we treated the different data, mindful of the different contexts of data collection and varied possibilities for participant engagement.

The showcase postcards, for instance, were analysed mainly at the semantic level, as there was so little contextual information available, albeit still integrated into our overall theoretical frame.

### **3. Analysis**

Building on the findings of the evaluation, we here explore *how* CREW engendered the atmosphere, relationships and - often profound and potent - individual and collective experiences described by participants. We argue that CREW can be understood as providing a liminal space “betwixt and between” clinical and community spaces and their associated, if differing, pressures. Within this liminal space a loose and experimental atmosphere was created by the facilitators which provided a range of possibilities for participants, experienced as invitations rather than imperatives. Finally, we discuss how the community showcase events helped to translate these liminal qualities of the CREW workshops into a liminoid event, a potentially transformational engagement with both community and clinical spaces.

#### **3.1 Carving out a liminal space**

Throughout the dataset, both participants and service providers commented on ways in which CREW was distinct from clinical services. This was despite the project being offered under the auspices of statutory provision, commissioned by the NHS. Firstly, other recovery services were described as illness focussed, characterised as: “Everyone smoking and staring up into space talking about their symptoms and side effects”. In CREW, by contrast, a relaxed, flat relationality was described; it was “really chilled” and feeling that “I don’t feel like lower status” unlike when “talking to a doctor”, and that it “felt like a gang of you know people having fun”. The overall atmosphere was described as “so accessible and comfortable and it’s just comforting”:

Adam: “Everybody is creative so everybody is here for the same reason, you’re not in a group of all different people, everybody’s here because they’ve created something on the project and you know it’s great. Everybody’s happy about what they’ve done I think”.

This sense of collectivity and ‘communitas’ (E. Turner, 2012), where participants see themselves and others as refracted through their shared creativity and common humanity rather than only through the lens of their diagnoses or label (Deegan, 1996) can be seen as a profound experience of ‘social inclusion’ (Sayce, 1999; 2015) or ‘mutuality’ (Spandler & Lewis, 2017). Participants were, however, keen to draw distinctions between CREW and generic community spaces, including superficially similar community art provision:

Clarissa: “[I have done] art classes and stuff like that but they’re not specialised for people who are suffering with mental health issues [...] So you sort of feel like it’s just more comfortable when you’re around people if you’re going through something. They don’t say it but you know they’re all there for the same reason”.

Distinctions between CREW and other community spaces were also noted by attendees of the showcase events. This could be seen in comments highlighting how unusual the experience of the CREW showcase was; attendees commented that: “It’s unlike any other sort of art that you’d go to in London” as well as it being “extraordinary really and very very moving and touching”, as well as “very brave and spoke from the heart about things that we don’t often have the courage to speak about”. The fact that the “bravery” of the art and performance in the showcase was commented upon indicates that attendees recognised that the experiences aired through CREW - of distress, madness and service use - were not easily expressed or made visible in normative community and public space (Parr, 1997; 2011). Without stigma (Sayce, 1999; Sirey et al, 2001) or the normative privatisation of distress (Parr, 1997; McGrath, Reavey & Brown, 2008), “bravery” would not be needed to make and share art and music expressing experiences of distress.

Stenner (2018) argues that liminality is experienced as a ‘this is not’ situation, as “during liminal experiences our usual ‘representations’ fail us, and new ways of going on are required” (p. 49). CREW can here be seen to position itself as a ‘this is not’ space in two directions; it is neither a clinical nor a community space and repudiates the conditions of both. Whilst being officially located within statutory services, CREW explicitly rejected the need to employ a diagnostic or medical gaze. As Jon Hall commented: “everyone deals with their mental health individually [...] and you throw creativity into the mix with that as well and it’s very difficult to determine, “right that’s your box”. At the same time, these accounts highlight ways in which CREW also sheltered participants from often hostile experiences in generic community spaces. A project such as CREW, provided it can be created and sustained, can be seen to act as a “safe haven” (Pinfold, 2000) in which the experiences of *communitas* and creativity described above could be nurtured. These liminal experiences were forged within the context of shared experiences of distress, without being wholly defined by labels or “boxes”. We can also see from these accounts the craft needed to create this space in between the (potentially) stigmatising and limiting forces of both clinical/medical and community/public understandings of distress and madness.

### **3.2 Looseness and experimentation**



A key way in which the facilitators of CREW carved out a differentiated space was through softening and lifting expectations, whilst opening out and offering possibilities. Throughout the dataset there were comments on the comparative looseness and openness of the CREW experience. This was a feature actively curated by the facilitators, as Ben Wakeling commented: “you need to be able to drop paint on the floor, it’s ok if you wanna throw paint at a wall. A room where anything can happen is quite a powerful thing to have”. Indeed, ‘it’s ok’ could be seen as an overall ‘affective atmosphere’ (Anderson, 2008) of the CREW project, and of liminality itself. Whilst CREW provided an overall structure – ten sessions followed by a showcase – the ways in which individual participants took up the project or made sense of it were unmandated.

Participants valued this loose quality of the project, with Callum commenting that: “it’s like a good place where you don’t take things too seriously or unseriously, you can have a future if you want one or you don’t have to have one in the specific area if you don’t want one” Similarly, Aaron commented that he had: “gained a sense that what I’m doing doesn’t matter that much, which is nice.” These may sound like nihilistic comments, but as Woods, Hart & Spandler (2019) point out, narratives of recovery are often framed within “entrepreneurial, future orientated, outcome and goal-focused modes of subjectivity” (p. 16), which can position ‘recovery outcomes’ such as hope or transformation as imperatives to be achieved within pre-set parameters. They also link this observation to wider social imperatives that frame ‘success’ as financial participation and linear progress (Fisher & Lees, 2016).

In CREW, these pressures to perform to pre-defined outcomes or ‘match up’ to a set of standards were experienced as being lifted, creating a sense of possibility without imperative:

Sara: “You don’t necessarily have to do anything or bring anything to the table. They sort of... open your drawers and get all the pens and pencils out and paper and... it’s all inside you. They just get it out”

Within this loose space, characterised by the liminal quality of experimentation and “doffing of masks” (V. Turner, 1988, p. 107), participants took up the possibilities offered by CREW in multiple ways. Adam commented he had “always wanted to write a song” and found with the facilitator “there to help me along” he was able to fulfil this ambition, overcoming feelings “very self-conscious” to be able to “just create” and be “glad to be there”. He “wrote about somebody that I actually knew that died of a drug overdose”. Yusuf, on the other hand, wanted to convey a specifically political message of “be wary of your leaders, whether it’s a fascist leader like a dictator”. Other participants saw the main purpose of the project as emotional development, with Valerie saying that it had “helped me to be more outgoing [...] to talk [...] and make my voice heard”.

These accounts communicate a plurality of meanings available to participants in CREW, paired with a sense of inconsequentiality which several participants commented enabled them to overcome initial feelings of being 'self-conscious' taking part in the creative activities. Perhaps most crucially however, was that also communicated by the 'it's ok' affective atmosphere of CREW was the possibility of refusing all these meanings. As Stacey said: "Yeah Jon would be like, sing about how you feel or whatever and I'd be like I don't want to, I just want to sing".

Stacey here explicitly refuses to take up the facilitators' own understanding of one of the purposes of CREW as a process of 'storytelling'. Jon Hall commented: "I encourage people to share their stories [...] and I think music is a great container for those stories"; Ben Wakeling similarly noted that: "our approach is to build that relationship and eventually start teasing out their personal story". Crucially, however, Stacey's understanding of her engagement as 'just' singing, refusing a narrativization of her experience (Woods, 2011), was also allowable within the project. This wide range of possibilities was also visible in the showcase event, where some participants performed their own songs, and others famous songs. Again, the pervading atmosphere of 'it's ok' valued the person over outcomes, echoing Blencowe et al (2015)'s description of the "craftwork of participation" as "setting the stage" and "holding things open" (p. 405) rather than prescribing pathways. Such an approach values the mode of engagement – here we would argue a liminal form of experimentation, ambiguity and possibility – over the content of outcomes.

### **3.3 From liminal to liminoid**

The 'showcase' events at the end of each iteration of CREW, were a particularly compelling feature of the project. Comprising a live music performance and art exhibition, the showcases were characterised by high production values. Attendees commented on the "quality" of the art as "what you'd see in a gallery anyway", a "real exhibition", the music as "absolutely stunning", "like being at a gig" and "awesome", and the whole event as being "very well put together" and "not patronising". The showcase was hence solidly positioned as a cultural event, mobilising the authority of established artistic genres of outsider art (Maizels & Cardinal, 1996) and music (Chusid, 2000) to make a claim of validity, integrity and dignity (see Blencowe, Brigstocke & Noorani, 2018) of the participants and their art.

It was notable that the adjectives used to describe the event by attendees reflected its positioning as a cultural event led by celebration not deficit. Comments included: "great night, music is fun", "an amazing night", "a great evening", with one postcard summing up their experience as: "great art and performances, meeting nice people and making new friends and having a thoroughly good time".

These are all sentiments associated more with leisure, entertainment and culture, rather than service use, distress or illness. CREW participants also discussed their outputs in cultural terms, with several referring to their “album” or “CD” produced in the project, rather than framing their creative outputs as therapeutic or medical. As Yusuf said:

“One of the pictures that I did draw I'm gonna use it as the album cover of my actual music CD... [It] means the self, it means everything that I think, everything that I am. [...] I really liked it a lot because like now at the end of the 10 weeks I have an album basically and that's such an accomplishment... It's actually more of an insight to who you are than it is as an accomplishment to others... Just the lyrics that I've actually mustered up by myself, and I feel like yeah, it's solid.”

The “actual music CD” produced by Yusuf during the project seems to offer a “solid”, tangible cultural object which can traverse the context of its creation. Through ‘solidifying’ the liminal experiences of CREW as liminoid works of art – CD, album, painting, song – CREW offered a way for participants to share these experiences with the wider community in a form which is widely valued and recognised. Jon Hall described one such experience of expression, catharsis and recognition:

Jon: In the live performance she was shaking so much her body was going backwards and forwards. And I did think ‘oh I hope this is ok’. But afterwards someone came up out of the audience and said ‘I love that song can I buy it?’. And I said ‘oh I just so happen to have a CD here!’. And we sold it [...] I don't think she could quite believe it.

In this quote we can see how having a tangible object - here a CD - enables a process of expression and recognition (Campbell & Jovchelovitch, 2000) which is somewhat removed from the self; a cultural exchange which is deeply personal. One service provider who attended the showcase commented on how the shared cultural language of the showcase – the liminoid artworks themselves plus the high production values - helped to shape the mode of engagement of attendees:

“There's this idea that if you exhibit works by people who have mental health problems then you're pushing this Victorian basket-weaving agenda of “look at them”, but I think it's actually much more interesting what's happening here because what we're seeing is people going, “Well actually look at me”. It's very much work that is like a mirror and I think a lot of people go like, “Actually I feel like this” or “These are the sort of things that I would make, or I would want to make”. And I find people's interaction with the work [here] isn't “This is the work of an Other” but it's highly relatable.”

As this service provider comments, the starting point of the relationship between performers, exhibitors and attendees was shared human experience, enabling the participants in CREW and attendees of the showcase to meet on a shared footing of common humanity and empathy (see Ho et al, 2017). Certainly, experiences of ‘communitas’ (Turner, 2012) were prevalent in the showcase postcards, which often included reflections on a sense of shared humanity, connection and “love”. When asked what ‘tonight made me think of...’ comments included: “How good it is to be a person and how a genuinely functioning community exists”; “Life! How hard it is until you meet the right people to help see you through. Kindness and the power of friendship”; “How lucky I am to live in a world of diversity and beauty. You are all wonderful souls!”; “My feelings, my relationships w/animals + other humans, things that happen inside singing + songs”. These comments are extraordinary, conveying the power of the collective experience of the showcase, as it extended and refracted outwards the liminal qualities of the CREW project, providing a transformative experience for the wider community, as much as the participants themselves.

This is not to say that experiences of distress and madness were pushed aside in the CREW showcases, papered over with joy and communitas. Instead, attendees of the showcases commented on how the experience was “very emotional. It’s definitely from a place that you don’t normally see”, meaning the experiences of distress, madness and service use aired and explored through the art and music were more usually marginalised or less visible. The CREW showcase, in contrast, was described as: “very touching. It was like you could see the emotions. It was so transparent [...] It was beautiful”, indicating the power of the showcase in providing a forum to share experiences of distress and madness. Indeed, sharing these often hidden experiences seemed to be part of what generated feelings of ‘communitas’, with attendees of the showcase commenting that the experience had led to a reflection or reconfiguration of their own understandings of distress: “Thank you for this, made me reflect, feel very emotional and drained me of a lot of stuffs I need to get rid of, it was amazing!”. Similarly, other attendees reflected on the social treatment of mental health: “it makes you realise that mental health is one of those things that isn’t talked about a lot, but actually it’s out there, it’s everywhere, and lot’s of people you might know have gone through it”. Such reflections were also often expressed in inclusive ‘we’ language: “We all suffer from mental health problems, some more strenuously than others”; “That we all suffer, some more visible than others”. Experiences of ‘communitas’ detailed above, therefore, could be seen to be underpinned by an expanded version of humanity in which distress and madness were encompassed as part of the full range of rich human experience. As one attendee put it: “The celebration of life. The dark side and the light.... People in general are so complex but this exhibit shines wonderful light on the complexity of the human”.

#### 4. Conclusions

We outlined in our introduction how we found it hard to ‘pin down’ the atmosphere of CREW, and we suspect that this position may be shared by others seeking to share, create and interpret similar work. We suggest that conceptualising CREW as liminal and liminoid (V. Turner, 1969; 1982) provides a helpful contribution to community psychology practice by providing a way to articulate and account for the processes, atmospheres, relationships and practices of such a project. In our analysis we have explored how these elements interact to create a differentiated space characterised by looseness, experimentation and communitarian relationships, generating a sense of complex common humanity. Through these liminal and liminoid encounters we have argued that space was made for participants and attendees to experience transformations in their experiences, understandings and perceptions of themselves and/or others, and the wider meaning of distress, madness and/or service use. Reflecting on the experience of CREW through this lens provides several “directions along which to look” (Blumer, 1954, p. 7) for both service providers and researchers.

Firstly, the quality of looseness, the sense of invitation to a range of possibilities for both participants and showcase attendees, is an important counter to a tendency towards structure and imperative in statutory services. Friedli (2013) has demonstrated how seemingly emancipatory or benign concepts, such as ‘wellbeing’, ‘strengths-based approaches’, or even ‘happiness’ (Friedli & Stearn, 2015) can become coercive if mobilised by the state as imperatives to be achieved (or failed) by individuals. The lifting of such expectations was actively welcomed by participants in CREW, a crucial component of the ‘it’s ok’ affective atmosphere of the project identified as so central to its potency. The positivist logic of evidence-based practice often moves us towards specifying and attempting to replicate specific outcomes, which can in turn become reified into imperatives. Lifting the frame of analysis from the individual to the processes of the project or group, attending to form over content, can perhaps help to avoid such a tendency. We have thus argued elsewhere that CREW should be seen as a ‘mode of engagement’ (Liebert et al, 2018) rather than a model; a way of working which maintains open possibility, invites (Buckley, 2016) rather than instructs, placing participants and showcase attendees on a shared footing of common humanity, or ‘communitas’ (E. Turner, 2012).

Key to this ‘mode of engagement’ is a strong praxis of careful, relational, reflective practice. The facilitators of the project actively cultivated, monitored and sustained the liminal space of the project, helping to guide participants through the process of liminoid art production, as well as curating the final showcase to a professional standard. Creating a relaxed, informal, yet supportive and safe, space pushing back against contexts of both clinical services (Sayce 1999; 2015) and often hostile community settings (Parr, 2011), whilst also attending to the personal experiences of the participants, was a

delicate and careful process needing constant attention, adjustment and communication. This is highly specialised work unlikely to be replicated in generic community settings, for instance to which service users may be directed to in social prescription (Bertotti et al, 2017). The craftwork involved in creating and nurturing CREW through the various stages of the project is not to be underestimated. One lesson to be drawn from CREW could be how to utilise a position within statutory services to facilitate containing spaces in which to deliver more creative or liminal work. We can see from the data that CREW's ambiguous position as both inside and outside statutory services enabled it to both provide a contrast to usual clinical services whilst also gaining legitimacy with a clinical audience.

A related reflection from the CREW project is the importance of collectivity, in both the sessions and the showcase. The tendency towards individualisation in mental health services, intensified through both cuts to services and the personalisation agenda, has been noted (Taylor, 2015). CREW, by contrast, mobilised collective experiences of 'communitas' (E. Turner, 2012), as well as the core social process of refracting and reflecting our experiences through the eyes of others, during both the sessions and showcase. The collective context also opened out the possibility of multiple experiences of the project, including experiences which were not narrativized as a 'journey of recovery' (Woods, Hart & Spandler, 2019) or other expected forms. Art and music have both been argued to more easily connect with, and enable expression of, emotional and hard to articulate aspects of experience than language (Boden, Larkin & Iyer, 2019). At the same time, both are always profoundly social and collective (Bull, 2005); through recording, drawing or painting, CREW enabled participants to make their mark on and with collective culture, to have what Blencowe et al (2018) call "experiences and performances of objectivity" (p. 218). Without the collective context of the sessions and showcase, which enabled these individual cultural contributions to be recognised by others, this process would lie unfinished.

Finally, the CREW showcase offers a constructive kind of community engagement, which we have characterised as a liminoid community event. Bearing similarity to liberation arts (Watkins & Shulman, 2008), as well as participatory (Blencowe et al, 2018) and community (Van Erven, 2001) theatre, the showcase nevertheless comprised a unique combination of emotional immediacy, high production values, lightness, looseness, and multiplicity. Mobilising art and music as both collective cultural forms and modes of individual expression, the showcase events were able to forge an encounter between participants and their wider community where participants and attendees alike were invited into the possibility of reconfiguring their experiences and understandings of distress, madness and service use. Positioning itself as a cultural rather than mental health service event also enabled the CREW showcase to retain a liminoid quality of ambiguity. Attendees were invited (Buckley, 2016) to take up

the event in multiple ways, whether as a show, as an evening out, as political, as personal, as education, as entertainment, or indeed, as none of these. We have argued here that this quality of open possibility was crucial in enabling CREW, in both the sessions and the showcase, to carve out a space which resisted the potentially limiting forces of both diagnostic, deficit thinking and community stigma. Instead, the project allowed alternative understandings of distress and madness to emerge, be shared, and shaped. Similar liminal and liminoid qualities, therefore, have potential relevance beyond only mental health contexts, but in any situation where, for people faced with limiting, destructive or dehumanising contexts and narratives, “new ways of going on are required” (Stenner, 2018, p. 49).

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