Evaluating arts-based activities for people living with dementia: Challenges (and solutions)

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TAnDem

Alzheimer's Society United Against Dementia

The University of Nottingham
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Today

- Introducing the research
- Two definitions
- Practical and philosophical challenges
- Some problems you might recognise

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A question

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What is it about arts-based activities for people with dementia that might cause us problems when we try to describe, explain and justify the methods used to evaluate them?

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My research

- Wide-ranging literature review, including 'grey' literature

- Critical grounded theory approach

- Data collection and analysis (interviews)
  - Evaluation stakeholders (artists, arts managers, researchers, evaluators, funders and commissioners)
  - Experienced researchers and evaluators to explore concepts and themes

- Knowledge translation and dissemination

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What is 'evaluation'?

Different to research, but connected and complementary

Determining the value of something in order to improve it, make decisions about it, or to persuade others of its worth.

It's important if we want to be able to do more of the things that are valuable, better.

And, fewer of those things that aren't…

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Activity / Therapy?

Activity

Involves professional artist, health/care staff, educator, or volunteer working with…

Group or individual, in wide variety of settings

e.g. health and wellbeing, engagement, pleasure, education, social interaction, 'meaning', etc.

Therapy

Delivered by trained specialist therapist for…

Group or individual, often health or care setting

Treatment of clinical, physical or psychological conditions, symptoms and behaviours

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Practical problems

- Funding, skills and resources for evaluation
- Working out what, when and how to measure
- Recruiting and engaging with evaluation participants
- Defining and describing the activity
- Theorising why it might work, for whom, and where

More philosophical…

- Working across, with and between different disciplines and sectors
  - What is 'evidence'?
  - What is 'valuable'?
- Complexity of arts activity and settings for it
- Ethical issues – rights and responsibilities
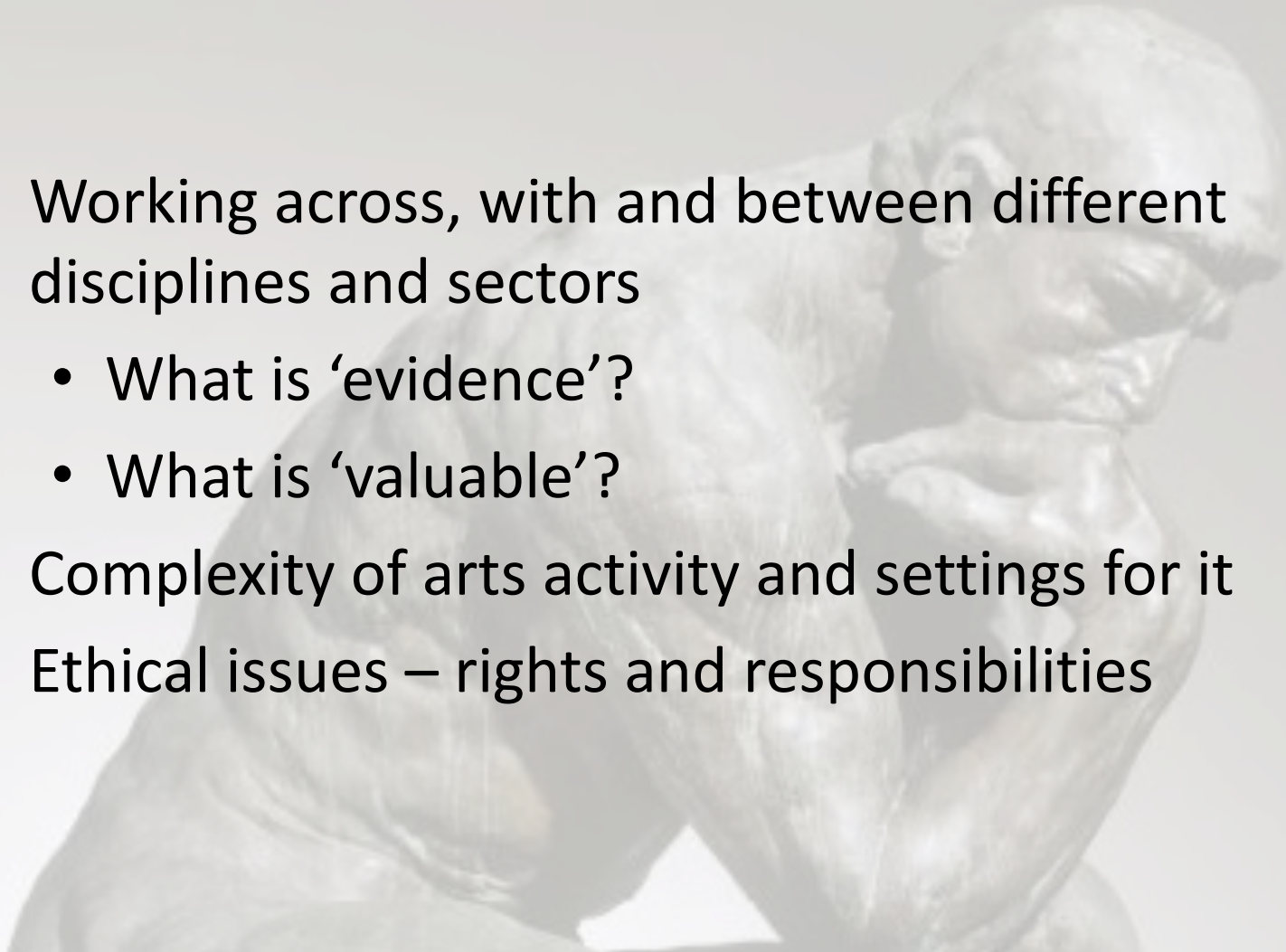
Some problems you might recognise

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'when you talk to people that aren't tuned in'

'…when you talk to people that aren't tuned in about this work, they think that you're just messing around and sometimes people will even say to you – "oh, is that volunteer work?"– you know. Well, no, I mean I've got to pay the bills […] it would be nice to have more of a vocabulary around it all, I think.'

(Arts practitioner)

'when you talk to people that aren't tuned in'

What might we be able to do about this?

- Tools to enable shared understanding of the purpose of evaluation, the spectrum of opportunities for it, and of how values inform both what people see and what they tell us?

- Planning and time for evaluation, engage a wider community, reflect, enable relationships and reciprocity?

- 'Professionalise', encourage debate around 'quality' of both arts, care AND evaluation practice?

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'obviously it isn't hot dinners, it is something that isn't hot dinners!'
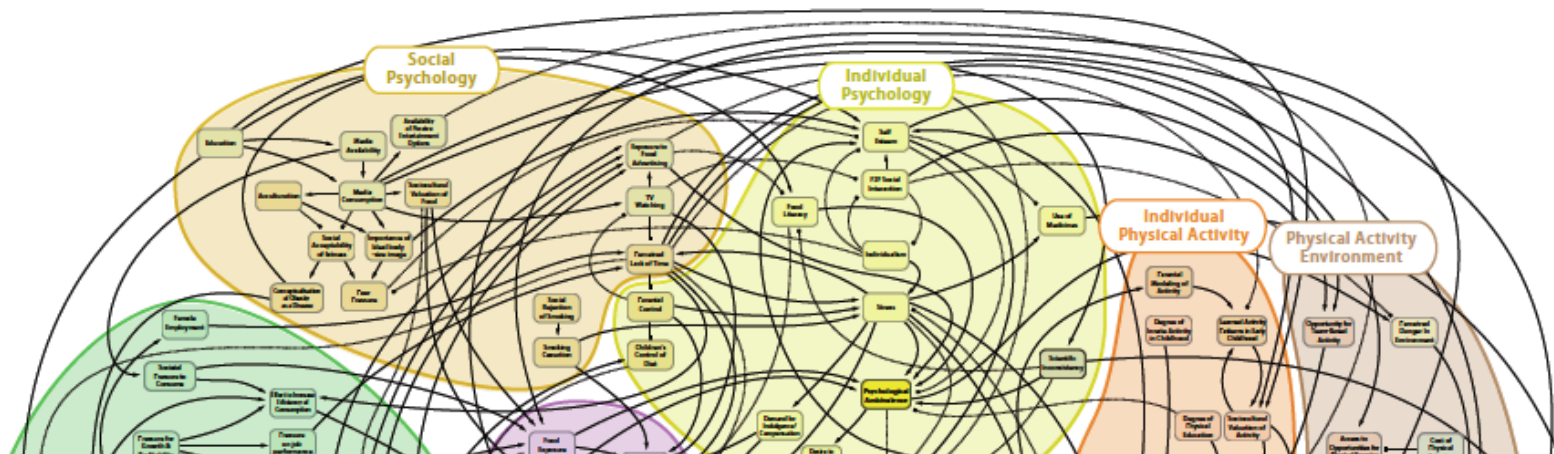
'*What is this thing that is having an effect on something else? [...] it changes all the time, it depends on the mood of the place, it depends on who comes, it depends... it doesn't seem to be one thing. But obviously it isn't hot dinners, it is something that isn't hot dinners!*'

(Dementia researcher)

'obviously it isn't hot dinners, it is something that isn't hot dinners!'

What might we be able to do about this?

- Realist approaches – what works for whom, how, and in what circumstances?

- Systems thinking – how does the activity interact with the system around it?

- In larger evaluation research projects – explore different staged designs, e.g. stepped wedge?

- Explore models of reflective practice that might help us understand the complexity better?

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'the projects aren't designed with evaluation in mind'

'Because it's a very pragmatic area, and the projects aren't designed with evaluation in mind, you end up with this kind of, quite a messy picture.'

(Academic researcher/evaluator)

Convergence (1952), Jackson Pollock

'the projects aren't designed with evaluation in mind'

What might we be able to do about this?

- Standard reporting frameworks that can be used to describe activities and projects?
- Core outcomes sets for arts activity in different settings?
- Work with funders to enable synthesis of results across multiple projects?
- Further exploration of ethical implications of evaluation research with people with dementia?

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Next steps

Knowledge translation

Publication

www.worc.ac.uk/dementia

Thank you

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