

The British Society of Gerontology's Creative Ageing Special Interest Group:  
Reflections on our achievements to date and aspirations for the future

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## **Introduction**

The British Society of Gerontology (BSG) was established in 1971 as a multidisciplinary forum for understanding situations relating to ageing, and how research can enhance and improve the lives of people as they age. The Creative Ageing Special Interest Group (SIG) was founded in February 2019 by Dr Emily Bradfield and a team of early career researchers. The SIG was established in response to a growing interest within the BSG that focussed on the intersection between the arts and ageing, outside of the broader field of arts and health. In creating the SIG, we aimed to bring together a wide range of gerontologists with creative practitioners and organisations to develop theory, research, practice and policy through a plurality of perspectives. As Emily said in an Ageing Issues (2019) blog:

*“Whilst researching Creative Ageing for my PhD at the University of Derby, I became increasingly aware of the wealth of activity that was taking place in this field, but that it was happening very much in silos. We wanted to provide a forum for people to come together collectively to explore and expand this blossoming field.”*

Over the past 18-months, the Creative Ageing SIG has become a vibrant community of interest which is cross-disciplinary, international and growing in stature, as the rapidly evolving evidence-base demonstrates the potential for creativity to contribute widely within the lives of older individuals and their communities (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts Health and Wellbeing, 2017; Hogan & Bradfield, 2018; Gordon-Nesbitt, 2019).

We aim to support a diverse range of members' interests with our aims being to:

- Share and advocate for high-quality research and best practice in creative ageing.
- Develop and support cross-disciplinary and cross-sectoral partnerships.
- Provide a forum for critical evaluation of methodological and theoretical development.
- Represent members' interests in connection to national and international policy initiatives.

We offer virtual and physical spaces for collaborative critical thinking, grounded in social gerontology. We also place a strong emphasis on supporting and mentoring emerging researchers in the creative ageing field through knowledge exchange and research mentoring.

Our Steering Committee represents a wide range of expertise from the creative ageing area, including: the arts and dementia; participatory arts engagement in later life; creative research methods; evaluation methods; synthesizing research evidence; care home research and arts-based approaches for care staff development.

**Emily Bradfield**, our chair, completed her PhD in Creative Ageing (University of Derby) in 2020 which explored experiences of participatory arts engagement in later life. Emily is particularly interested in the use of creative research methods. She is currently Director at

Arts and Minds, a small Cambridge-based charity which uses the arts to help people living with mental health challenges. Emily also works as a freelance arts consultant, supporting arts organisations with evaluation, combining her expertise in research and experience of working in the charity sector.

**Robyn Dowlen**, our vice-chair, is a Research Associate at the Centre for Cultural Value, University of Leeds. Robyn synthesises and summarises relevant research and help make it as accessible as possible to the cultural sector. Her current focus is an extensive review of research and practice relating to culture, health and wellbeing. Robyn comes from a background in psychology, having completed her PhD in 2019 which examined the ‘in the moment’ benefits of music-making for people living with dementia.

**Katherine Algar-Skaife**, our research (& Wales) representative, is a Research Fellow at the Dementia Services Development Centre Wales Research Centre, Bangor University. Her research interests lie within the intersection of arts, health and social sciences and therefore offers opportunities for creative, collaborative, and applied research methods. She completed her PhD in 2016 which focussed on the benefits of visual art for people living with dementia in care homes. Kat is the evaluation partner for Age Cymru’s cARTrefu project (a Wales-wide arts in residential care programme; see Algar-Skaife et al, 2017) and led the ‘Creative Conversations’ project which developed an arts-based programme to enhance skills of the dementia care workforce.

**Karen Gray**, our secretary, is a researcher with wide-ranging experience of evaluation research in the field of arts and health and has a particular interest in interdisciplinary research and practice that supports the health and wellbeing of people as they age. She has recently completed a PhD (University of Worcester) focused on the methodological challenges of evaluating arts-based activities for people living with dementia. Karen is currently exploring opportunities to further develop and apply a values-informed approach to the evaluation of cultural and leisure activities for both older people and other participant groups.

**Cathy Bailey**, our ethics representative, is an Associate Professor of Ageing and Wellbeing within Health and Life Sciences at Northumbria University. She is a social gerontologist, qualitative methodologist and an experienced participatory researcher. She has led on Public and Patient Involvement and works collaboratively with expert lay members. Cathy is also involved in research and evaluation, co-designed, delivered and developed with older adults, arts, voluntary, charitable and public sector partnerships. In particular this work co-produces creative outputs (e.g. fictional film, theatre, storytelling) to both engage public and professional audiences in the complexity of people’s lives and to start conversation on how to promote optimum quality of life for all.

We are an ever-growing special interest group and we are keen to grow our steering committee to embody the wide range of research, practice and policy represented within our membership. As well as our steering committee roles we have a Creative Therapies representative (Vicky Guise) and Blog Editor (Kate Dupuis) and are always open to developing new roles to represent the varied areas of expertise represented within our membership. The Creative Ageing SIG is viewed as an exemplar within the BSG’s collection of special interest groups.

## Activities to date

Over the past 18 months we have amassed a following of almost 1000 on Twitter (<https://twitter.com/BSGcreativeSIG>) and have published 12 pieces on the BSG's Ageing Issues blog (<https://ageingissues.wordpress.com/>). We now have just over 100 members that include an international mix of researchers, creative ageing practitioners and policymakers. We have also held several events, including our Inaugural Symposium at the BSG Annual Conference 2019 in Liverpool.

Our Inaugural Symposium focussed on developing successful partnerships within applied creative research. The symposium showcased a collection of arts-based, collaborative projects which had increased opportunities for creative engagement and social connections with older people. The presentations considered the strengths and challenges of cross-sectoral, interdisciplinary work which employed a range of methodologies, and highlighted areas of best practice and recommendations for further research. We were joined by representatives from Skimstone Arts and Manchester Camerata who shared their reflections of working with academic partners to evaluate creative projects for older people. The projects that were discussed included an industry supported doctoral programme (Dowlen, 2019) and the cARTrefu project (Algar-Skaife et al, 2017).

In November 2019, we held an event as part of the Economic and Social Research Council's Festival of Social Sciences at Z-Arts in Manchester which attracted creative practitioners and researchers from across the UK to share their reflections to the question 'What does creative ageing mean to you?' The programme included lightning presentations and a collage activity led by the Manchester-based artist Catherine Jack (See Figure 1).

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

We are currently planning another event in partnership with Flourishing Lives, a London-based coalition which takes a creative, relational approach to supporting richer, more independent lives for older people. This collaboratively organised half day workshop will bring together older people, artists and researchers in exploring what 'ageing creatively' means to them, how it might improve community and individual lives and how we measure, cost and evaluate its impact. It will involve short presentations, performances, discussion and an artist-facilitated creative activity. This event was planned to take place as part of Creativity & Wellbeing Week (18-24<sup>th</sup> May 2020) but due to the social distancing measures in place at the time is being rescheduled to later in the year.

We are excited to be running a virtual symposium at the British Society of Gerontology's 2020 Annual Conference this year, which will be accessible entirely online and recorded for the BSG's website. Our session will focus on creative methodologies within creative ageing research, and reflections from creative ageing practitioners, researchers and policymakers on how their practice has been impacted by the COVID-19 crisis, and how they are adapting in the short, medium and longer-term. The necessity to hold the conference online this year provides the opportunity for people across the globe, who might not otherwise have been able to attend the UK-based conference, to join the conversation.

## **Supporting early career researchers**

Our steering committee is made up of several early career researchers who are emerging within the creative ageing field and we are supported by those who are more well established within the field. A number of us have mentors through the British Society of Gerontology's mentoring programme and are members of the BSG's Emerging Researchers in Ageing (ERA). Kat Algar-Skaife will also be leading a workshop at the upcoming virtual BSG Emerging Researchers in Ageing 2020 conference, giving her reflections on managing a research project.

We are very interested in developing the network of early career researchers who have joined the SIG as members and will seek to engage in conversations with this group in order to showcase their innovative and creative research. In time, we hope to be able to embed ourselves within the BSG's mentoring programme to provide specific peer-support to those emerging within the creative ageing field.

## **Future directions**

We plan over the coming year to continue to facilitate critical conversations relating to creative ageing research through online discussions. Although the coronavirus pandemic has limited the ability for our steering committee and members to meet face-to-face, it has facilitated greater online conversation and has encouraged us to consider ways in which we can engage with our members digitally. We hope to provide further opportunities for digital networking for our members and facilitating conversations between a range of stakeholders who are interested in building future collaborative research projects.

We have plans in September to launch an online reading group which will take place quarterly. These reading groups will examine recent publications in the field of creative ageing, encouraging members to share their responses and reflections for their own research or practice. The field of creative ageing is growing rapidly, and these reading groups will foster an environment of supportive discussion and reflection, encouraging researchers to engage with the wide range of research and practice represented under the umbrella term of 'creative ageing'.

We are looking forward to being able to deliver a symposium at the BSG 2021 conference where we will once again bring together researchers, practitioners and policymakers for a collaborative discussion surrounding innovation in creative ageing research.

## **Final thoughts**

Overall, we have been astounded by the interest that the BSG Creative Ageing SIG has gained both in its membership but also through Twitter engagement over the past 18-months. We are a small team who volunteer our time to be able to run events and develop critical narratives relating to creative ageing. We hope that our membership will continue to grow and that over the next year we can develop our network and share the wealth of research and practice represented by our members. While we have members from many disciplines, we would particularly welcome expertise from clinical psychologists and health professionals who are interested in integrating creative ageing approaches within their clinical practice, or who are interested in using arts-based methods within research.

We are open to ideas for future collaborations, welcome new members and steering committee volunteers to help develop the future directions of the SIG. To find out more and to sign up to join the SIG visit our page on the BSG's website (<https://www.britishgerontology.org/about-bsg/special-interest-groups/creative-ageing>).

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Figure 1: Collages created by 'What does it mean to age creatively?' workshop participants

