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The art hive as a 'frame of belonging' for older adults

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ABSTRACT

Community leisure spaces play a critical role in supporting belonging, which, in turn, has a buffering effect on loneliness and social isolation for older adults. This study explored the role of art hives in contributing to belonging for older adults. Typically located in storefronts, subsidized housing, libraries, and museums, art hives are community spaces where everyone, particularly individuals prone to exclusion, are welcomed to make art and connect with others. Findings highlight participants' need for welcoming social spaces where they connect with people who care about them and suggest the value of such spaces extends beyond leisure activities happening within. The democratic nature of art hives contributed to participants' feelings of shared ownership and collective responsibility for hospitality. These findings advance our thinking about belonging and provide support for the creation of community leisure spaces that support older adults to engage in regular and meaningful social interactions around shared interests.

RÉSUMÉ

Les espaces de loisirs communautaires jouent un rôle essentiel dans le développement d'un sentiment d'appartenance, celui-ci soulageant la solitude et l'isolement social des personnes âgées. Cette étude a exploré le rôle des ruches d'art dans le développement d'un sentiment d'appartenance chez les personnes âgées. Généralement intégrés à des commerces, des logements subventionnés, des bibliothèques et des musées, les ruches d'art sont des espaces communautaires où tout le monde, en particulier les personnes sujettes à l'exclusion, est accueilli pour pratiquer de l'art et établir des liens sociaux. Nos résultats soulignent le besoin qu'ont les participants de fréquenter des espaces sociaux accueillants dans lesquels ils peuvent rencontrer des personnes qui se soucient de leur bien-être et suggèrent que la valeur de ces espaces s'étend au-delà des activités de loisirs qui s'y déroulent. La nature démocratique des ruches d'art a contribué au développement, par les participants, d'un

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sentiment d'appartenance partagée et d'une responsabilité d'accueil collective. Ces résultats font progresser notre réflexion à propos de l'appartenance et appuient la création d'espaces de loisirs communautaires dans lesquels les personnes âgées puissent régulièrement s'engager dans des interactions sociales et significatives autour d'intérêts communs.

Introduction

Increasingly identified as a major threat to both physical and mental health, loneliness is becoming a prevalent issue in our society (Angus Reid Institute, 2019; Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010; Menec et al., 2020). For older adults in particular, loneliness has been linked to depression and a diminution in overall health and well-being (Cacioppo et al., 2006; Courtin & Knapp, 2017; Luanaigh & Lawlor, 2008). Experiencing a sense of belonging, however, has a buffering effect on loneliness and social isolation (Sargent et al., 2002).

Belonging is a fundamental human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Hagerty et al. (1992) defined belonging as a relational phenomenon: 'the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that persons feel themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment' (p. 173). To feel a sense of belonging, individuals must perceive they are valued, respected, and have a fit with others (Mahar et al., 2013).

Individuals with a greater sense of belonging report being happier and having higher levels of wellbeing (Choenarom et al., 2005). Belonging is also associated with positive social outcomes such as larger social circles and enhanced peer support (Kitchen et al., 2012). Low levels of belonging can be as dangerous to our health as high blood pressure, obesity, inactivity and smoking, prompting calls to add insufficient social relationships to the list of risk factors that increase mortality (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015; Menec et al., 2020).

A sense of belonging is a key factor that contributes to the wellbeing of older adults. Nolan (2011) for example, contended that involvement, connection, and sense of belonging are crucial aspects of wellbeing for older adults. Maintaining social connectedness and deepening relationships often become a priority as people age (Scharlach, 2009). When older adults report a strong sense of belonging, they are more apt to believe they have the necessary coping skills to survive during times of crisis (Kissane & McLaren, 2006).

Since leisure is often social in nature, it is a prime vehicle for supporting belonging relationships (Mobily & Dieser, 2018). The inclusionary potential of leisure suggests that community leisure spaces can greatly affect a person's sense of belonging (Fortune, 2020; Glover, 2017; Whyte &

Sharpe, 2016). Leisure in older adulthood has a strong relationship to belonging because it provides 'an arena for the development of social networks that may mediate the impact of life events' (McGuire et al., 2013, p. 127).

Despite the important implications a sense of belonging can have on the aging process, relatively little attention has been directed toward the ways that older adults experience a sense of belonging within their communities, specifically in spaces that provide social leisure opportunities. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to address this gap by reporting on the ways older adults are experiencing belonging during their participation in community art hives.

Designed as community art studios where everyone, particularly individuals prone to exclusion, are welcomed to make art and connect with others (Timm-Bottos, 1995, 2016), art hives are typically located in storefronts, subsidized housing, libraries, universities, and museums. They are designed to create opportunities for dialogue, skill sharing, and art making among community citizens who differ in terms of socio-economic backgrounds, ages, cultures and abilities (Timm-Bottos & Chainey, 2015). With an understanding of the connection between belonging and older adults' wellbeing as well as the potential for inclusive leisure spaces to contribute to experiences of belonging, we set out to examine how older adults experience belonging within community art hives. Before we describe our research process and findings, we provide a review of the literature related to aging and belonging and the role of leisure spaces in supporting experiences of belonging for older adults.

Factors affecting the relationship between aging and belonging

Understanding the relationship between aging and sense of belonging can be complex since a range of factors influence the aging experience (Nolan, 2011). It is apparent, however, that age-related life transitions, such as from paid work to retirement and marriage to widowhood, can threaten older adults' sense of belonging and increase their vulnerability to social isolation (Nolan). Older adults are considered to be at risk of experiencing social isolation due to a diminution of opportunities to engage in meaningful social interactions (Dinkins, 2017; Guidry & Cukrowicz, 2016; Toepoel, 2013).

Social isolation, often determined by measuring contact frequency with family and friends, occurs when individuals' experience a lack of social contact that results in a diminished sense of belonging (Courtin & Knapp, 2017). Guidry and Cukrowicz (2016) referred to this diminished sense of belonging as 'thwarted belongingness', which occurs when individuals perceive they are not connected to others in a meaningful way.

Ageism has received increasing attention for its role in jeopardizing older adults' sense of belonging (Nolan, 2011). According to Angus and Reeve (2006), common stereotypes of aging depict older adulthood as a time of ill health, decreased physical and cognitive functioning, declining productivity, and increased dependence on others. These ageist stereotypes position aging as a problem and legitimize a perception of older adults as a 'homogenous group in subject positions which emphasize these stereotypical negative attitudes' (Phelan, 2008, p. 322).

While isolation and loneliness affect people of all ages, Courtin and Knapp (2017) and Toepoel (2013) highlighted an association between age and loneliness. Defined as a state of emotional distress resulting from unmet social needs (Bruce et al., 2019), loneliness may increase in old age due to reduced social networks, decreased economic resources and changes in family structures (Courtin & Knapp, 2017). Vanderhorst and McLaren (2005) found that diminished social networks in older adulthood not only increase the likelihood of loneliness, but also depression and suicidal ideation. Kissane and McLaren (2006) noted that life experiences more common in older age, such as widowhood, contribute to an increasing number of older adults living alone. According to a report by the Angus Reid Institute (2019), living alone puts individuals at a disadvantage in terms of social interactions that can contribute to their sense of belonging. Because of increased threats to belonging experienced in old age, Kissane and McLaren (2006) stressed the importance of family and community involvement for older adults since opportunities to connect with others and develop a sense of belonging can protect against loneliness. As we discuss in the following section, leisure spaces often present opportunities for community involvement that may lead to experiences of belonging.

The role of leisure spaces in supporting connection and belonging for older adults

Leisure spaces and activities provide important outlets for interaction, connection, and belonging in old age (Broughton et al., 2017; Jakubec et al., 2019; Mthembu et al., 2015). Positive social interactions in leisure settings generally contribute to the wellbeing of older adults (Ryu & Heo, 2018). In their study about belonging for older adults living in Canadian suburbs, Jakubec et al. (2019) noted that having knowledge about the 'goings on' and actively doing things in the community were essential for cultivating a sense of belonging. Andonian and MacRae (2011) identified sense of belonging as one of the three primary themes contributing to sustained social participation in older age. The authors described participants' sense of belonging as 'the engine behind engagement' (p. 8) brought about by ongoing social interactions with others.

Mthembu et al. (2015) found that leisure experiences could provide older adults with feelings of enjoyment, pleasure, and social support, all of which tend to increase their sense of belonging. Broughton et al. (2017) aimed to understand older men's experiences with social leisure in a coffee group and found that the group promoted social engagement and connectedness, which ultimately contributed to participants' sense of belonging and overall enjoyment. Gardner (2011) found that community social spaces, such as churches and seniors' centres, contributed to strong feelings of comfort and a sense of belonging for older adults who participated in her study. By offering opportunities for social interaction, friendship, and feelings of self-worth that come from being valued, leisure spaces, such as seniors' centres, have been found to be a safeguard against social isolation and loneliness in older adulthood, particularly for aging women who live alone (Aday et al., 2006).

Community leisure spaces where people can gather provide important social infrastructure to support belonging since relationships are more likely to grow when people interact regularly with others while doing things they enjoy (Klinenberg, 2018). While it is apparent in the literature that community leisure spaces have an important role to play with regard to supporting older adults' sense of belonging, it is not completely clear what factors are most conducive for promoting belonging within these spaces. The study we report on in this paper, focused on older adults' experiences at art hives located in urban settings, addresses this gap by illuminating a number of factors that are contributing to belonging. The following research questions guided our study:

(1)) What are the meanings and experiences of belonging for older adults who participate in art hives?
(2)) In what ways does an art hive create a space where one feels included and experiences a sense of belonging?

Research context and methodology

The study occurred at three art hive locations in Montreal, Quebec. After receiving ethical clearance from our university research ethics board, members of the research team met with facilitators at each art hive to explain the purpose of the study and invite the involvement of art hive participants. Art Hives are free inclusive community art spaces. Designed as 'public home places' (Belenky et al., 1997), art hives welcome individuals of different socio-economic backgrounds, ages, cultures and abilities to come and participate in art making together (Timm-Bottos, 2005; Timm-Bottos & Chainey, 2015). Belenky et al. (1997) defined public home places as 'places where people support each other's development and where everyone is

expected to participate in developing the home place' (p. 13). They further explained that the aim of public home places is to make 'society more inclusive, nurturing, and responsive to the developmental needs of all people – but most especially of those who have been excluded and silenced' (p. 13). Modeled after the concept of public home places, art hives are democratic in nature and everyone shares the dual role of teacher/student, all learning from one another in different ways (Timm-Bottos, 2006).

Although art hives are designed to be open and inclusive, some days and times have been set aside for particular groups at the request of community members (Timm-Bottos & Reilly, 2014). For example, one art hive introduced weekly art hive sessions specifically for older adults. These closed sessions enable older adults to claim space and experience a sense of mutuality with their peers.

The three art hives chosen for the study are those most frequented by older adults. The diverse nature of each of these art hives increased the likelihood that we could recruit older adults who differ in terms of cultural background, income levels, and health status. Two of these art hives are located in social housing complexes and are open one afternoon each week. Regular participants of one of these art hives include older adult residents of the housing complex as well as older adults living nearby. Regular participants of the other art hive include older adults living in the building and families with young children who live in the local neighbourhood. The third art hive is located in a university sponsored community storefront. This art hive is open to everyone most days of the week, but there is a dedicated time each week that is set aside specifically for older adults.

Data collection at each of the three art hives consisted of participant observation, arts-based projects, focus groups and individual interviews. The art hive facilitators at each site obtained verbal agreement from art hive participants for observations to take place and then communicated this agreement to the Art Hives Headquarters. The Art Hives Headquarters then issued a letter of support for the project. The first author observed the everyday life of the art hives and joined in making art alongside participants two or three times at each art hive over an approximate four-month period. These observations focused on art hive interactions and aimed to understand how the art making and the art hive space are contributing to participants' experiences of belonging. In order to actively participate in the art hive and minimize disruption to others, only mental notes were taken while onsite. Jotted notes were later used to capture key observations related to belonging and general impressions of art hive interactions.

Once informal relationships with the members of the art hive community were established, participants at each of the three art hives were invited to make art, individually or collectively, that depicted a sense of belonging. Art

hive facilitators agreed to assist with this aspect of data collection if participants required further encouragement or direction or had specific requests for art supplies. Questions suggested to guide the artwork include:

- What does belonging mean to you?
- What are some things that happen in your community that contribute to your sense of belonging?
- What are some spaces in the community to which you feel like you most belong? Please explain.
- What is happening and what else needs to happen in order to create a sense of belonging for older adults living in Montreal?

We initially conceived artwork would provide an opportunity for participants to reflect on, and share their own perspectives about belonging and if the process was done collectively, a shared vision of belonging could emerge. However, while some participants created artwork guided by their ideas of belonging, most participants preferred to continue using their time at the art hive to work on projects they had already begun. For some participants, time spent at the art hive was not for making art at all, but rather, for connecting to others through informal conversations. Given the independent and varied response to artwork focused on belonging, in this paper we report on data collected primarily through focus groups and interviews as well as observations related to belonging.

Focus groups and individual interviews were conducted by the first author with interested participants from all three art hives who provided written consent. The first half of the focus group engaged participants in a discussion about their artwork as applicable. The second half of the focus group examined perceptions of belonging and the ways in which their involvement in the art hive contributed to their sense of belonging. Sample questions include:

- When do you feel like you most belong?
- Are there spaces in the community where you feel a sense of belonging? Please explain.
- Are there spaces in the community where you struggle to feel a sense of belonging? Please explain.
- Can you describe how you feel when you come to the art hive?
- What happens at the art hive to contribute to this feeling?
- Can you tell me some ways your time spent at the art hive could be enhanced?

Nineteen older adults participated in the study. Nine participants were involved in the focus group at the first art hive, which lasted approximately

90 minutes. For this focus group, we invited interested participants to come to the art hive before it opened and provided lunch. Six participants were involved in the focus group at the second art hive, which lasted approximately 60 minutes. For this focus group, we invited interested participants to stay after the art hive concluded for the day and provided lunch. Two participants were involved in the focus group at the third art hive, which lasted approximately 40 minutes. At the participants' request, this focus group occurred during the art hive and we spoke in a corner of the room away from other participants. Two additional participants from the third art hive requested to participate in individual interviews because they were either not available during the focus group or they preferred an individual interview. These interviews took place in cafés away from the art hive on mutually agreed upon days and times. All focus groups and interviews were audio-recorded for purposes of analysis. In recognition of their involvement in the study, financial donations were made to each of the three art hives.

Sixteen women and three men participated in this study, which generally reflected the gender ratio of art hive participants. Since focus groups occurred at art hives that were either mostly frequented or exclusively frequented by older adults, we did not specify an age for inclusion. Most participants were over age 65 and either retired from work or not working because of health issues or disability. Two participants indicated they were in their late fifties and were still working. One participant held a dual role of art hive participant and facilitator. While we did not ask specifically about socioeconomic status, many participants spoke about living alone in subsidized housing, which indicated they are living on a limited fixed income. Participants were diverse in terms of cultural background and languages spoken. We use pseudonyms to distinguish between participants in the reporting of our findings.

The first author used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to analyze the focus group and interview data and compared this data with art hive observations. This process involved reading and re-reading each transcript and engaging in systematic data coding to identify aspects of data that were relevant to developing a better understanding how belonging is experienced and the factors that both enhance and hinder belonging. The first author then looked across interview transcripts to identify patterns of meaning. After identifying patterns of meaning (themes), preliminary interpretations of themes, the first author shared these with members of the research team (the other authors of this paper) in order to obtain feedback about how well each theme reflected the data. Their feedback resulted in slight revisions to theme names and their final descriptions.

Findings: how art hives become spaces of belonging for older adults

Focus group and interview analysis as well as art hive observations illuminated the vital role art hives played in the lives of older adults who regularly attended. Four themes were identified that capture how art hives become spaces of belonging for older adults: *needing social spaces; being welcomed into a nonjudgmental space; coming for more than just the art*; and *creating a shared space.*

Needing social spaces

Participants spoke about having limited access to social spaces in the community due to financial, health, and mobility-related barriers. The need for a social space such as an art hive seemed to be particularly high in the winter because as Linda suggested, winter can be a more desolate time of year: 'Over the winter I felt I really needed [the art hive] actually. I felt really depressed and out of sorts and I thought, I need something to pick me up. And it really did pick me up.' Christine also described a greater need for a social outlet in the winter because it is a difficult time of the year to get around: 'Especially in the winter when I'm shut in so much. I mean people can't get out, a lot of us don't have cars or our health is too broken.'

In describing her need for something to alleviate her social isolation, Sarah explained that the art hive provided her with a reason to get out and socialize: 'My interests are different from most people so I tend to isolate myself a little bit. So it was very good for me in that sense because it got me out, it got me socializing, it got me even back into doing some artwork.' Rebecca also observed how a man prone to isolation tended to find solace in the art hive:

> He comes every week, he comes, he talks, and he is somebody who has isolated himself and put his defenses way up. He has isolated himself and yet he still comes every week … he doesn't make art, but he comes in and sits and talks with whoever will talk with him.

During observations at the art hives, it was also noted that some older adults who come regularly do not make art and instead seem to be searching for conversation. Informal discussions between art hive participants suggested the art hive provided one of the only outlets for social stimulation, particularly for older adults who lived alone. During a focus group, Veronique spoke about having a need to get out because she lived alone; the art hive provided that opportunity: 'I'm really glad to have this place to need to go to – and I mean to need to go to. I really feel like I should be going … .I'm alone so I need to get out.'

Participants spoke about how the art hive has helped to fill voids resulting from loss or life transitions and provided a sense of purpose and engagement in their communities. In Martine's case, it was the loss of her husband:

> The space for me, it changed me because my husband died three years ago. So I found that distracted me. I loved my husband but with no husband, I have to love other things. This helped me recoup and now I help people in the building if they need anything.

For Reggie, the art hive helped to replace the sense of belonging he experienced while he was still working: 'I'm not working anymore but work also had a sense of belonging for me. Now that work is gone, it's about going out to see where else I can be part of something.'

Participants who attended art hives located in their residential buildings described these buildings as being otherwise devoid of a sense of community. Art hives were considered essential since the buildings where art hives were located lacked a stimulus for people to come together and socialize. As Ruby explained, 'Something's missing in this building – participation.' Edith was more direct in her dissatisfaction with the lack of sociability in her building: 'There's no warmth amongst the people in this building. There is no fraternizing . . . .there is no social life.'

Acknowledging that art hives fill an important social need for the people who attend, participants expressed a desire to have increased opportunities to access such spaces. For example, Sarah stated, 'I wish there were more art hives. I wish there were more days and hours available to visit something like the art hive.' Carla also suggested, 'Maybe opening from 9:00 until 12:30. I could certainly come here earlier and stay longer.'

Being welcomed into a non-judgemental Space

Generally described by participants as spaces where they feel welcome, art hives provided assurance that participants would be in the company of people who cared about them and were happy to see them. Joan spoke about the positive feeling associated with knowing people would be there to welcome her: 'Here, each time a person comes, we're all happy to welcome the person. So, even if you don't feel good and you come on Thursday, you feel great because it's like people are waiting for you.' Joan's sentiments were in keeping with what was observed during visits to the art hives. Individuals who enter the art hive are typically welcomed with a personal greeting and a warm embrace from the art hive facilitator and other participants. It was also common to hear participants wondering aloud about individuals who had not been to the art hive in recent weeks, suggesting that when regular participants are not there, they are missed.

Sarah equated feeling welcome with a sense of belonging: 'Well, actually the art hive, I really felt a sense of belonging there because I felt very welcomed.' Speaking about ways to ensure people know they are welcomed in the space, Rebecca stressed the importance of openness and invitation:

> Well, the first thing that came to mind was that it needs to be visibly opening doors, wide open. . . . .And so, just kind of being ready to talk with anybody who happens by and just welcome them in to come and join us and have a cup of coffee.

Participants appreciated the atmosphere created within the art hive. In addition to it being a 'pleasant' space where 'there is always coffee and snacks' (Mabel), participants described it as a welcoming and comfortable space where they received encouragement from others. As Sarah described,

> I came here, I feel very comfortable, and it's easy to participate . . . The people who are here have helped me to see art differently. That's one of the things the art hive does. There is a sense of modesty too. We're all modest and humble so that makes me feel very welcomed.

Farah similarly explained: 'There is a sense of belonging in this room because we are all here together working. That sense of belonging carries out because people get up, talk, encourage each other. It's a very nice feeling here.' Sarah clarified that her sense of comfort within the space stemmed from having no expectations or judgement placed upon her:

> It's a place where I can walk in and just plug myself in. I probably feel more like I belong there than many other places. A great part of it is a social aspect . . . .no expectations . . . .it's nice that I don't feel I'm being judged. No one's judging anybody, you know?

Veronique also spoke appreciatively about the art hive as being a non-judgemental space: 'It's not judgemental, it's very supportive and I feel very grateful to everyone who makes the wheels go round.' A supportive environment was observed during each visit to the art hives. Art hive participants regularly wandered around the room complimenting each other's work and drawing attention to each other's unique abilities.

Coming for more than just the art

While art making is the main leisure activity that happens within an art hive, some participants considered art to be more of a vehicle for establishing social connections within the space. As Reggie explained, socializing can be more of a priority than making art: 'I started coming to this art hive and they told me there is another art hive . . . but I find it interesting coming here because it's more for the socialization than the art.' Similarly, Mabel described art as a means to establish social connections: 'Friendship is important of course, meeting people is important. The art provides

a means to share all of that.' Carla also spoke about the social nature of the art hive: 'It's like you feel when you're going to meet a friend. Coming here is enjoyable and I look forward to it. And if ever you come and you're just uninspired, then the socialization piece kicks in.' Veronique spoke about how art and the social aspect of the art hive work in tandem: 'I enjoy the collaboration – for me it's one of the strongest expressions of belonging . . . .I don't know if I move more toward the people or more toward the activity, I think it's both.' Farah echoed this sentiment and used art as a metaphor to capture her sense of belonging within the space. She pointed to a frame she admired of artwork hanging on the wall and said, 'I think just being here together, just like a painting has a frame, this [space] is the frame of belonging.'

Some participants' connection to the art hive was not about art at all. When asked during the focus group if she created something, Edith responded 'Oh, hell, no.' Debbie followed with '[Edith] doesn't make things, but you're still a big part of the space.' Edith then retorted with 'Damn straight!' Later in the focus group, Eleanor and Joan discussed their shared love of books. Eleanor explained that she easily finds points of connection beyond art: 'There's other ways to find places to connect if there's no art included. I may not be artistically inclined, but I'm communicatively inclined.' Ruby also explained that the space for her was less about art than sociability: 'It's social too because I am not artistic. I'm really not . . . . But you like to come here and meet together.'

Acknowledging that the art hive space is flexible enough to be what people need it to be, Rebecca explained: 'At the art hive, it's loose. You can stop whenever you want. You can start whenever. You don't even have to make art . . . .There's one elderly woman from the residence who just does puzzles.' Reflecting on how the space is about much more than art, Debbie wondered if a name change might let more people know they are welcome to be in the space without necessarily making art ' This is great, but I think it scares people just to see the word "art".'

As noted, numerous participants come to art hives on a regular basis without making art. One regular participant, for example, could often be seen sitting and flipping through a magazine while teasing some of the other art hive participants. It became clear that the space meant something to her despite her expressed lack of interest in art.

Creating a shared space

It was apparent during focus groups and interviews that participants recognized how they helped shape the space within the art hive and played an integral role in creating shared space. Christa conveyed having a sense of shared ownership:

> I feel like the space belongs to everybody and we all have to participate in making it a pleasant place. Like we need to tidy up or whatever because it is for everybody and we have to make sure the place is respected.

The sense of shared ownership was also apparent when Lisa described her role in attracting more people to visit the space:

> When it started there were not many people coming and I remember we were talking with [the art hive facilitator] and … .I said, "We need some coffee. Coffee brings people." So we started with coffee … and then the people started to bring their little bit of food and it kept on.

Participants also discussed taking on responsibility for ensuring everyone felt welcomed and comfortable in the space. Martine, for example, described purchasing toys for children to use when they visited the art hive: 'What I like the most is when people bring their children … .They bring the babies sometimes. I love that. I even went to Salvation Army and got some toys. Everybody is using them.' Speaking of her partner's sense of connection to the art hive, Lucy explained that he often made things to help enhance the space:

> This is important to him. Coming here is the center of his social hub. And when he makes something he goes, "Oh, they'll like this. I should bring this in." And he creates all day … .one of the reasons he really gets into projects is because of here.

Rebecca described seeing a change in one of the art hive participants who took on a leadership role over time:

> Now he stays to clean up and I noticed he just started thanking people for showing up and for participating and he just sort of took on that role without being asked to. He really was one of the ones that you saw change happen the most, where he went from being this shy, tentative person to this really involved person.

For some participants, the shared responsibility derived from being in the space fostered a sense of reciprocity and acts of paying it forward. For example, Isabelle described using the supplies available within the art hive to make things for the benefit of others. After showing the group a winter hat she knitted, Isabelle explained,

> It's for homeless people. I've done about 50 this year, and all the wool comes from here … it was given to me by somebody that was here before and now I'm going to help some other person by giving it. So for me, that's the way to belong to a group. Somebody's giving and you give. I love this group.

Sarah highlighted the role that facilitators play in ensuring people know they are valued and contribute to the creation of the space: '[name of art hive facilitator] actually thanked me for coming the first few times that I came and told me that I was positive addition so that really made me feel like I belonged.' Joan made a comment that illustrated the sense of belonging people may feel when they realize others value them within the space. After

joking with another participant who teased by telling her she's talked about when she is not there, Joan laughed and retorted with 'You miss me when I don't come.'

Many examples of participants sharing in the creation of the space were observed throughout this study. Some participants assumed responsibility for enlivening the space with music by bringing in equipment and CDs. Some participants arrived early or stayed late to help with set up and clean up and often took initiative to organize art hive supplies. It was also common to see participants circulating the room with a card they purchased for another participant who was ill or in the hospital.

Discussion

The findings of this study suggest art hives serve as vital community leisure spaces that support belonging for older adults. It was evident that art hives provide some participants with their only means to stay socially connected to others in their community. This finding is not surprising when we compare it with initiatives aimed at supporting social connection. For example, community health centres in Ontario, Canada implemented a social prescribing pilot project aimed at connecting people to the social supports they need to enhance their health and wellbeing (Alliance for Healthier Communities, 2020). Nearly half of the individuals receiving social prescriptions were older adults living on a low income and social isolation was one of the main reasons for referral (Alliance for Healthier Communities, 2020).

Challenges with respect to transportation and physical mobility can increase isolation for older adults (Angus Reid Institute, 2019). We heard from participants in this study how these challenges negatively influence their ability to participate in community life, particularly during winter months. Constructing social spaces within the residential buildings where older adults live can help relieve transportation and mobility challenges to social interaction while simultaneously creating a sense of community within the residence. Speaking about their need for such social spaces, participants revealed ways art hives are helping to protect against social isolation and loneliness.

While participants did not discuss financial restrictions explicitly, it is worth noting that art hives become more accessible to more people because they are spaces individuals can enter free of charge due in part to the fact that materials and supplies are recycled, repurposed and donated. Social activities in the community can be expensive and financially inaccessible for many people so cost-free programmes pose fewer barriers to participation (Alliance for Healthier Communities, 2020). Some participants described contributing to the art hives by purchasing or donating supplies or bringing

refreshments to share. However, there is no requirement for people to contribute financially in order to participate. In all locations, art supplies and coffee are readily available through funding from grants and donations. It became clear during observational visits to art hives that financial accessibility made a positive difference to participation.

Financial accessibility is an important consideration when aiming to ensure community spaces are inclusive and positioned to support belonging. When it comes to leisure spaces and programs in particular, the cost of participating is a commonly identified barrier. Oncescu and Loewen (2020) observed that the leisure literature has mostly focused on initiatives, such as financial assistance programs, which are largely ineffective for supporting the participation of individuals living on a low income. In recognition of how leisure and culture contributes to mental health and sense of belonging, there have been calls for universally free access to public leisure spaces (c.f., Canadian Index of Wellbeing, 2016). Klinenberg (2018) argued that investing in social infrastructure, such as leisure spaces, helps promote frequent interaction in the public realm, which in turn supports the health and vitality of older adults at risk of social isolation. In this study, art hives serve as an example of the type of social infrastructure that provides freely accessible opportunities for frequent social interaction and meaningful participation, which helps to minimize participants' risk of social isolation.

While the accessibility of art hives makes it easier for participants to enter the space, they are unlikely to experience a sense of belonging if they do not also feel welcomed. Feeling welcomed is a key consideration for belonging (Fortune, 2020). In Gardner's (2011) study, older adults who spent time at a seniors' centre experienced belonging when they felt welcomed by centre staff and were able to forge close friendships with others over time. We observed in this study how art hive facilitators set a welcoming tone by ensuring doors were open, extending invitations to come in, and offering hospitality in the form of a cup of coffee and conversation. McKnight and Block (2012) called hospitality the signature of a connected community. Sharing food is one of the main hallmarks of hospitality (McKnight & Block, 2012) and participants in this study regularly acknowledged how having refreshments available contributed to a welcoming environment within art hives. Participants who brought food to share and purchased or donated supplies for the enjoyment of others in the space also shared responsibility for hospitality.

Spaces are more likely to be welcoming and contribute to belonging when they are free from judgement and are designed to be flexible in terms of their use. Judgement free spaces, for example, are necessary for the inclusion of a range of diverse individuals, and are particularly key for welcoming individuals who are at increased risk of stigma and social isolation (Alliance for Healthier Communities, 2020; Fortune & Arai, 2014; Trussell

& Mair, 2010). Spaces that are flexible in design are more apt to be shaped by users in ways that are conducive for social interactions and relationship development (Whyte & Fortune, 2017). It was evident from our findings that art hives spaces are being shaped by the individuals who use them rather than having a specific use imposed on them. In this way, art hives remain open to a variety of interactions and can contribute to belonging for older adults whose primary purpose for being in the space does not necessarily revolve around making art.

Relationships grow when people engage in social interactions on a recurrent basis while doing things they enjoy (Klinenberg, 2018). For some participants in this study, enjoyment came from art; for others, enjoyment came more from coffee and conversation with others. Given that art hives provide different experiences depending on what an individual needs, they have the potential to contribute to belonging for more people. Art hives are conceived as public home places, which means each one is designed to be a 'protected and safe place, both psychologically and physically, which invites community members to develop their unique voices and express themselves openly' (Timm-Bottos & Reilly, 2014, p. 103). Participants described being able to express themselves openly without judgement, which was a primary contributor to their experiences of belonging.

This study contributes to conceptualizations of belonging by both supporting and advancing current thinking surrounding this concept. While belonging is considered a vague concept that is under-theorized (Antonsich, 2010), there are number of commonly agreed upon conceptualizations of belonging. Mahar et al. (2013), for example, endeavoured to develop a transdisciplinary theory of belonging by conducting a narrative scoping review of academic literature. They determined that five elements are essential to our understanding of belonging. The first element, subjectivity, emphasizes belonging as a psychological construct that centres on feelings of fit with a system or environment. The second element, groundedness, refers to the need for referent group to anchor the subjective feeling. The third element, reciprocity, denotes a sense of relatedness or connectedness based on shared feelings and experiences. As the fourth element, dynamism describes the interplay between enablers and barriers that influence the extent to which an individual will experience belonging. The final element, self-determination, captures the importance of individuals having choice and control over their experiences of belonging.

Our findings provide additional support for the elements identified by Mahar et al. (2013). For example, participants spoke about feeling a fit within the art hive environment because they were welcomed and encouraged to be there. Comments related to feeling comfortable and finding it

easy to participate characterize participants' subjective feelings of belonging within the art hive. The elements of groundedness and reciprocity were evident when participants spoke about establishing social connections, working together, and having shared experiences within the art hive. The relationship between belonging and self-determination was highlighted in the ways participants could choose the nature and extent of their involvement within the space. Another important aspect of self-determination could be seen in the ways participants considered themselves to be integral to the creation of the space. The dynamic aspect of belonging was particularly evident in this study. Findings not only illustrate the interplay between enablers and barriers of belonging, they suggest it is possible to have a sense of belonging within a space and still experience social isolation outside of this space. Importantly, however, experiencing belonging in one aspect of life may offset experiences of exclusion and isolation in other aspects.

Practical implications

Not only do the findings of this study suggest a need for more social spaces in the community that can support experiences of belonging for older adults, they highlight practical implications for leisure providers who are interested in creating spaces conducive for enhancing belonging. Enhancing belonging entails designing community leisure spaces that are welcoming and inviting and do not impose barriers to entry. While investing in such social infrastructure helps to ensure greater access, it is also important to be intentional about supporting inclusion and belonging. Social spaces do not automatically become spaces of belonging. Rather, as we have seen in this study, nurturing belonging involves inclusive practices, such as welcoming individuals into community spaces, ensuring they are free to participate in ways of their choosing, and providing opportunities to contribute to the creation of a shared environment. Based on these findings, some ways leisure providers could create welcoming leisure spaces include extending invitations, offering hospitality, learning about people who come and personally greeting them, and discovering people's interests and abilities to help support connections based on shared interests. Findings also suggest that when leisure providers create flexible environments that enable individuals to choose their level and type of participation, it is likely to increase the extent to which they feel comfortable to participate. Related to this point, it is helpful for leisure providers to understand that the value of a leisure programme or activity is not necessarily the activity itself, but rather it' potential to serve as a vehicle for belonging relationships.

This study suggests that older adults are more apt to experience belonging within a space when they see themselves as being part of that space. This idea is in keeping with Hagerty et al.'s (1992) assertion that for belonging to occur, individuals need to feel they are an 'integral part of that system or environment' (p. 173). In this sense, when leisure providers create democratic spaces and ensure there are opportunities for individuals to contribute to shaping the space in meaningful ways, they are more apt to set the stage for experiences of belonging.

Implications for future research

This study points to the need for future research focused on identifying how best to support older adults in need of belonging to find social spaces to meet their needs. Our study is limited by the fact that we spoke only to participants who spend time at art hives with regularity. This sample makes sense given the purpose of our study, but as a result, our findings illuminate perspectives of participants who frequented these spaces. Future research would benefit from hearing the perspectives of more art hive facilitators who are undoubtedly key players in supporting belonging within art hives. It would also be important to hear from older adults who struggle either to find a sense of belonging in art hives or even struggle to find a sense of belonging within their communities at all. For example, it would be helpful to hear from older adults who have visited an art hive and never returned. It would also be helpful to hear from older adults who are isolated and do not experience any sense of belonging within their communities. We need to hear these perspectives in order to more fully understand what other types of spaces and practices could contribute to the belonging of older adults most at risk of social isolation and what types of support they may need in order to experience belonging.

We are still in the process of thinking about our approach to inviting artwork as data and plan to offer our insights related to arts-based methods in a subsequent paper. However, we have a few preliminary ideas regarding the low response to making art focused specifically on belonging. For example, observations highlighted how some art hive participants tend to work on the same project over multiple art hive visits and often immerse themselves in their projects. Other individuals who regularly come to the art hive do so to socialize rather than to make art. Despite participants being able to share the ways they experience connection and belonging at the art hive during focus groups and interviews, we heard from the art hive facilitators that many participants found the concept of belonging too abstract for creating artwork. Some also preferred the unstructured nature of the art hive and did not want to follow a pre-determined agenda. In some cases, participants initiated

artwork, both individually and collectively, guided by belonging but did not end up consenting to participate in focus groups or interviews.

Based on our experience, we can offer a couple of initial suggestions to researchers interested in using arts-based methods within a similar type of space. One suggestion is to have a group meeting with leaders or organizers (in our case, art hive facilitators) early in the process to get their ideas and suggestions of how such art projects could come to life. For example, art hives sometimes participate in community art exhibits around particular themes that matter to them and we may have been able to tailor our project around a forthcoming exhibit. A second suggestion is to have an arts-based project unfold in a more organic way by co-creating a project with participants after discussing and learning about topics of interest or concern.

Conclusion

Klinenberg (2018) highlighted the central role of community leisure spaces for connecting people around shared interests when he stated, 'contact and conversation remind us of our common humanity, particularly when they happen recurrently, and when they involve shared passions and interests' (p. 176). Art hives are prime examples of community leisure spaces that support recurrent contact and conversation while igniting shared passions and interests. We cannot afford to overlook the contribution such spaces can make to the enhancement of belonging, particularly for older adults who may be susceptible to social isolation and loneliness. Understanding the ways older adults experience belonging within these spaces and identifying factors that best support belonging will help to guide the creation of even more community spaces that can support belonging.

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