

CommonHealth Briefing Paper Series: Paper Number 8

Project 5 - Focus 50+

Dr Fiona Henderson,

Researcher,
Glasgow Caledonian University

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This briefing paper summarises findings from Project 5, Focus 50+, which aimed to understand what impact social enterprise activities had on the health and wellbeing of participants aged over 50, and how that impact was created.

Focus 50+ worked with three organisations offering activities to people aged over 50:



LifeCare is an Edinburgh-based organisation which has delivered a range of services and activities for over 75 years. Amongst the activities and services they deliver are homecare and registered home support services, befriending, a café and day centres for older people.



Orbiston Neighbourhood Centre is located in Bellshill and was established in 1993 to serve one of the most deprived areas in Scotland. They provide a range of activities to older people in the local community, including a café, befriending, a men's group, a food co-op and day care for older vulnerable people.



Lingo Flamingo was launched in 2015 and works across Scotland to deliver language classes to older adults in community settings with the aim of delaying the effects of dementia and reducing cognitive decline.

Outline of the study

Focus 50+ collected qualitative data from people aged over 50 describing the impact their participation in social enterprise activities had on their wellbeing. The study involved participants in the social enterprise activities of our three social enterprise partners and included clients, carers, volunteers and staff. Data collection took place across 12 months, and the Focus 50+ researcher spent considerable time observing and interacting with participants in each social enterprise from April 2016 and to April 2017. To supplement the data generated from observation, in-depth interviews were carried out with 43 participants including staff members, clients, carers and volunteers aged over 50.

One problem faced by researchers investigating the impact of activities on the health and wellbeing of older people is the diverse nature of ageing. Age-associated declines in health and wellbeing reflect each individual's unique life experience and circumstances. This not only makes drawing conclusions from research complex, but also offers challenges to social enterprises as they strive to offer activities which will benefit diverse groups of older people. For this reason, Focus 50+ research included participants in a range of social enterprise activities including day centres, befriending, men's groups, language classes, and cafes.

Purpose and Self-Worth

The potential of social relationships and networks to positively impact older adults' health and wellbeing has been widely recognised in the academic literature and has been directly correlated with decreased mortality i.e. the stress created by chronic loneliness can lead to premature death (Holt-Lunstad et al, 2015). Focus 50+ found that participating in social enterprise activities enhanced participants' social connectedness (see Jane's quote), sense of purpose (see Sarah's quote), and in some cases their feelings of self-worth and confidence (See Isabel's quote), regardless of the individual's role in that activity i.e. staff, clients, volunteer or carer.

"I can't see the telly...I can't recognise their faces or their voices even...I'm always glad that (my befriender) comes because I used to be able to see my family... they don't come to see me now" **(Jane, 98, Client)**

"It's a reason to get up in the morning...that sounds quite sad really doesn't it?! As if that's all I've got! But for me it's a real opportunity to make a difference in peoples' lives." **(Sarah, 58, Staff)**

"I have been terribly housebound because of.. agoraphobia...and general poor mental health. I had been withdrawing from society a lot. So it's made me come out of myself and made me make the effort, because I know people are...not reliant upon me, but appreciative of what I do." **(Isabel, 56, volunteer)**

These findings are comparable to the positive health impacts identified in other areas of CommonHealth Research (see Briefing Papers 3, 4 & 7). Developing this insight further, Focus 50+ also aimed to uncover how such positive wellbeing effects were generated, and evidence emerged that participants adopted specific strategies to maximise the positive wellbeing effects they gained from participation.

Social Connections

Every social enterprise activity in Focus 50+ was found to offer individuals an opportunity to connect with others they would not otherwise met. Evidence emerged that such new encounters also provided individuals with a chance to compare themselves to others, and that this comparison strategy was used by people in all roles. This correlates with Social Comparison Theory, which Wills (1981) demonstrated can be used by individuals to improve their subjective wellbeing. Through a process known as downward social comparison, individuals were found to have improved wellbeing through comparing themselves to someone less fortunate than themselves. Focus 50+ found evidence that participants in all roles made this kind of downward social comparisons between themselves and others. These comparisons could be grouped into three dimensions; social connectedness, physical functioning, and cognitive abilities. Even when aware of their urge to

make this downward negative comparison, as shown in Jessie's quote, the compulsion to make herself feel better by comparing herself with others she encountered was too strong:

"It sounds a bit like I'm comparing myself to them but I'm not, but it just lets me see how well off I am in reality to some of the other people that we do go and visit." **(Jessie, 61, staff)**

Had Jessie not been involved in this social enterprise activity, she would not have been exposed to the individuals who enabled her to make such comparisons and in turn improve her own subjective wellbeing. This and other evidence from Focus 50+ showed downward social comparison was an important strategy participants applied during social enterprise activities to benefit their subjective wellbeing.

Subjective Younger Age and Identity

To further understand how participation in social enterprise activities improves wellbeing, Focus 50+ revisited people's perceptions of their own ageing process. Research has shown there are positive health benefits to feeling younger than your chronological age (Kotter-Grühn et al, 2016), and this perception has been termed subjective younger age. Focus 50+ observed study participants used language to distance their self-identity from other older people they met, as highlighted by Marilyn's experience of volunteering in day centre:

"...I actually quite enjoyed old people's company. I actually found...I could talk to them. I could play games with them...I found I got on really well with these old people."

(Marilyn, 70, volunteer)



Marilyn referred to the clients she encountered as 'old people'. Through referring to the clients in this way, she used categorising statements (i.e. 'them'; 'old people') which disassociated herself from them. This strategy of distancing herself protected her subjective younger age.

Becoming 'us'

The social enterprise activities studied in Focus 50+ facilitated participants' shifting self-perceptions of their own social identity through the accessible informality within the activities, where roles were fluid and the context was dynamic and evolved to suit their needs. Individual participants could and did move freely between roles. For example Malcolm, a client in the Men's Group, was also a volunteer in the same centre on a different day, despite suffering from dementia. He was not categorised by his diagnosis, but was instead given purpose and identity by his friends in the Men's Group and by the organisation itself on his volunteering days.

However research shows that simply placing 'similar' people in the same activity does not necessarily create a supportive group. Research shows inconsistent findings from manufacturing supportive groups based on one common characteristic, such as when group members are all 'older people' (Masi et al, 2011). Focus 50+ findings gave greater insight to what enables a successful group to be formed. The study discovered that the restructuring of social identity exhibited by individuals like Malcolm and Marilyn also occurred at group level through shared social identity. Where individuals in a social enterprise activity not only shared one or more characteristics with others (e.g. lived in the same community; supported the same football team) but also shared a similar traumatic life experience, they were found to form groups with supportive bonds which developed their own shared identity. 'They' became 'us'. For example, this strong group formation was observed to happen organically amongst one group of men participating in the Men's Group who had all coincidentally experienced the loss of their wife.

Summary – relevance to the CommonHealth programme

Focus 50+ provided evidence that community-based social enterprise activities for older people used the following mechanisms to deliver social support and wellbeing benefits for older participants:

- Accessible informality within social enterprise activities enabled participants to shift roles and adopt strategies to enhance their self-perceptions of their own identity and capabilities;
- Bringing together people who would otherwise not have met facilitated the formation of new support groups and social connections which directly benefitted participants health and wellbeing;
- Fluidity of social enterprise activities enabled multiple sub-activities to emerge simultaneously, such as a language class that became an unintended support group for carers and the Men's Group that helped with bereavement.



In conclusion, Focus 50+ found evidence that social enterprise activities have a beneficial impact on the health and wellbeing of participants aged over 50. It also provided evidence of how that impact was created. It achieved this by discovering a) the strategies people use to maximise the wellbeing benefits they received from participation in social enterprise activities; b) the opportunities those activities gave individuals to create new identities for themselves; and c) the ability of social enterprise activities to evolve organically to meet participants' needs.

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Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for mortality: a meta-analytic review. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 10(2), 227-237.

2. Kotter-Grühn, D., Kornadt, A. E., & Stephan, Y. (2016).

Looking beyond chronological age: Current knowledge and future directions in the study of subjective age. *Gerontology*, 62(1), pp.86-93.

3. Masi, C. M., Chen, H. Y., Hawkey, L. C., & Cacioppo, J. T. (2011).

A meta-analysis of interventions to reduce loneliness. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 15(3), 219-266.

4. Wills, T. A. (1981).

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