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"I had my three camps": An ethnographic study of the transformation of stigmatizing attitudes.

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Introduction:

This paper explores the experiences of community members, people with and without mental illness, who came together to make art in the context of a community arts studio. Art making has been shown to have an effect on the health of individuals as well as the communities in which they reside. Art has also been used as a means of promoting awareness, combating stigma, and creating social capital.

Objectives:

At the conclusion of this presentation, participants should be able to:

1.) identify effects of stigma and discrimination on social participation and occupational engagement

2.) discuss the power of engagement in shared occupation as a means to reduce stigmatizing beliefs

3.) incorporate the implications of this study into daily practice and system strategies for combating stigma

Methods:

This year long study employed an ethnographic approach using participant observation, semi-structured interviews, journals, and document review with twenty individuals in a community arts studio. Data was analyzed by a team of researchers using qualitative content analysis.

Results:

Initial assumptions of all twenty study participant-artists included stereotypical beliefs about who was mentally ill. As individuals engaged in art-making over time with others, their focus on who was and wasn't mentally ill shifted to an interest in the process of art making and the products created. At the conclusion of the study, participants reported a change in their belief system, the development of a community within the studio, and greater access to the community at large through art.

Conclusion:

Engaging in the shared personal interest of art making with others created a scaffolding upon which participant artists changed their beliefs about mental illness and built a community of artists. Although personal contact was a necessary ingredient in this shift in beliefs, it was the pursuit of a common, meaningful occupation with others that led to these changes.

Contribution to practice/evidence base of occupational therapy:

This study demonstrates the power of engaging in shared occupations of meaning with others. Occupational therapists interested in social justice will find evidence that art-making can affect stigmatizing beliefs. Practical, local strategies can be employed to support inclusion and recovery.