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Fostering Belonging and Social Connection: The Impact of Art Hives on Older Adults in Supportive Transitional Housing

Dr. Fatima H. El-Sayed 

Department of Community Health, Cairo University, Egypt

Agildo Andrade Ribeiro 

Department of Social Work, University of São Paulo, Brazil

ABSTRACT

Social isolation and loneliness are pressing concerns among older adults living in supportive transitional housing. This study examines the role of Art Hives—community-based creative spaces—in fostering belonging, social connection, and emotional well-being within this population. Using a mixed-methods approach combining participant observation, interviews, and standardized measures of social engagement, the research explores how collective art-making activities provide opportunities for self-expression, skill development, and relationship building. The findings indicate that participation in Art Hives contributes to increased feelings of inclusion, reduced loneliness, and enhanced self-esteem among older adults. Moreover, the informal and non-hierarchical nature of Art Hives helps to create safe environments where participants feel valued and respected. This paper highlights the potential of arts-based interventions as low-barrier strategies to strengthen community ties and improve quality of life in supportive housing settings.

KEYWORDS: Art Hives, social connection, belonging, older adults, supportive transitional housing, community art, arts-based interventions, social inclusion, emotional well-being, creative engagement.

INTRODUCTION

Older adults experiencing homelessness represent a particularly vulnerable and growing demographic, facing complex challenges that extend beyond the immediate need for shelter [5, 6, 24]. These individuals often contend with multiple chronic health conditions, mental health issues, and substance use disorders, compounded by the profound social isolation and lack of community inherent in their circumstances [11, 13, 24]. While transitional housing with supports aims to provide a stable environment and facilitate pathways to permanent housing, residents, especially older adults, frequently continue to experience feelings of loneliness, marginalization, and a diminished sense of belonging [8, 18, 24]. These social determinants of health significantly impact their overall well-being and successful reintegration into society [21].

Traditional support services in transitional housing often focus on basic needs, case management, and clinical interventions. However, there is a growing recognition of the importance of holistic, person-centered approaches that address psychosocial needs, foster community, and promote active engagement [29, 30]. Arts-based interventions have emerged as powerful tools for enhancing well-being,

facilitating self-expression, and building social connections across diverse populations, including those experiencing homelessness [9, 12, 16]. Among these, the "Art Hive" model has gained international recognition. An Art Hive is an open, inclusive community art studio that welcomes everyone, regardless of artistic skill or background, to create art in a non-judgmental, shared space [2]. Its philosophy emphasizes hospitality, reciprocity, and the inherent value of creative expression as a means to foster social inclusion and a sense of belonging [2, 10, 17, 25, 26, 27, 28].

While the general benefits of Art Hives for various populations, including older adults, have been explored [10, 22], there remains a significant gap in research specifically examining their role in creating belongingness and social inclusion for older residents living within the unique context of transitional housing with supports. The specific vulnerabilities and needs of this population, combined with the structured yet temporary nature of transitional housing environments, warrant a focused investigation into how such a community art space can effectively address their profound social and emotional needs.

This article aims to investigate the impact of an Art Hive on fostering belongingness and social inclusion among older adults residing in a transitional housing facility with supports. Specifically, this study seeks to answer: How do older residents in transitional housing with supports describe their experiences within an Art Hive, and what role does this space play in cultivating their sense of belonging and social inclusion? By exploring these lived experiences, this research seeks to illuminate the potential of Art Hives as a valuable intervention for enhancing the well-being of this vulnerable population.

Methods

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative, single-case study design. A case study approach was chosen to allow for an in-depth, holistic exploration of the Art Hive's impact within a specific transitional housing context. This design is particularly suitable for understanding complex social phenomena within their real-life settings, providing rich, contextualized insights into the experiences of older residents.

Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at James House, a transitional housing facility with supports for older adults experiencing homelessness in a major urban center [20]. James House provides private rooms, shared common spaces, and on-site support services. The Art Hive at James House operates as an open studio, accessible to all residents several times a week, facilitated by a trained art therapist and community artists. Participants were purposively sampled from the older adult residents (aged 65 and above) of James House who regularly attended the Art Hive sessions. Inclusion criteria included: age 65 or older, residing at James House for at least three months, and having attended at least five Art Hive sessions. A total of 10 residents (6 female, 4 male) participated in the study. Recruitment was facilitated through the Art Hive facilitator and James House staff, who introduced the study to eligible residents. All participants provided informed consent prior to their involvement.

Data Collection

Data were collected through multiple methods to ensure triangulation and provide a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences:

1. **Semi-structured Interviews:** In-depth interviews were conducted with each participant, lasting approximately 60-90 minutes. The interview guide explored their experiences of loneliness and social isolation prior to and within transitional housing, their motivations for attending the Art Hive, their experiences during Art Hive sessions, and how the Art Hive impacted their sense of

belonging and social connection. Probing questions encouraged rich descriptions and reflections.

2. **Participant Observation:** The primary researcher conducted non-participant observation of Art Hive sessions over a period of three months (approximately 15 sessions). Field notes were taken to document interactions among residents, their engagement with art materials, the atmosphere of the space, and the role of the facilitators.
3. **Arts-Based Elicitation:** During interviews, participants were invited to create a simple drawing or collage that represented their feelings about the Art Hive or their sense of belonging. These art pieces then served as a visual prompt for further discussion and deeper elicitation of their experiences [3, 16].
4. **Facilitator Interviews:** A single semi-structured interview was conducted with the Art Hive facilitator to gain insights into the operational aspects of the Art Hive, observed changes in residents, and challenges/successes from their perspective.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Arts-based elicitation pieces were photographed with participant permission.

Data Analysis

The transcribed interview data and detailed field notes from observations were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022) [4]. The analysis was iterative and involved:

1. **Familiarization with the Data:** Repeated reading of transcripts and field notes to gain a deep understanding of the participants' narratives.
2. **Generating Initial Codes:** Identifying interesting features, recurring phrases, and significant statements across the entire dataset related to belonging, social inclusion, and Art Hive experiences. This was done manually and with the aid of NVivo 12 software [23].
3. **Searching for Themes:** Grouping initial codes into potential themes and sub-themes, looking for patterns and connections across different data sources.
4. **Reviewing Themes:** Checking if the themes accurately reflected the coded extracts and the entire dataset. This involved refining theme definitions, collapsing similar themes, and separating distinct ones.
5. **Defining and Naming Themes:** Developing clear, concise names and detailed narratives for each theme, ensuring they captured the essence of the participants' experiences.
6. **Producing the Report:** Selecting compelling illustrative quotes from interviews and descriptive excerpts from field notes to support each theme.

Triangulation of data from interviews, observations, and facilitator perspectives enhanced the credibility of the

findings. Researcher reflexivity was maintained throughout the analysis process.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant university Institutional Review Board and the management of James House. All participants received a detailed information letter explaining the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. They were assured of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty, and confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms in all data reporting and publications. All data were stored securely on password-protected devices.

RESULTS

The thematic analysis revealed several key themes illustrating the role of the Art Hive in fostering belongingness and social inclusion for older residents in transitional housing. These themes highlight the unique contributions of the Art Hive model to their well-being.

1. The Art Hive as a Sanctuary and "Frame of Belonging"

Participants consistently described the Art Hive as a unique and invaluable space within James House, distinct from other common areas or support services. It was perceived as a "sanctuary" – a safe, non-judgmental environment where they felt accepted and free from the pressures and anxieties often associated with their housing situation or past experiences of homelessness [10, 17]. One participant stated, "Here [in the Art Hive], I'm not just a resident, I'm an artist. No one judges what I make, or who I am." This sentiment aligns with the concept of the Art Hive as a "frame of belonging," where individuals can connect through shared creative activity without the typical social barriers [10]. The consistent presence of the facilitator and the open-door policy contributed to this sense of safety and welcoming [17].

2. Fostering Genuine Social Connections and Reciprocity

The Art Hive significantly facilitated social connection, directly addressing the pervasive loneliness and social isolation experienced by many older residents [8, 18]. Participants reported forming new friendships and deepening existing relationships with fellow residents through shared creative activity and conversation. The art-making process often served as a natural icebreaker, allowing for interaction without the pressure of direct conversation. One resident noted, "We talk while we paint. Sometimes about the art, sometimes about life. It's easy, not forced." The space promoted reciprocity, with residents sharing materials, offering advice, and celebrating each

other's creations, fostering a sense of mutual support and community [10]. This contrasts with other communal areas where interactions might be more superficial or task-oriented.

3. Empowering Self-Expression and Reclaiming Identity

For many participants, the Art Hive provided a vital outlet for self-expression, particularly for those who had experienced trauma or felt their voices were unheard in other settings [1, 9, 12]. The act of creating art allowed them to communicate emotions, memories, and experiences that might be difficult to articulate verbally. This process was often described as empowering, leading to a renewed sense of agency and self-worth [1, 12]. One participant, who had been homeless for many years, shared, "When I paint, I feel like myself again. Not just a number, not just 'homeless.' I'm me." The Art Hive thus served as a space where residents could reclaim aspects of their identity beyond their current housing status, fostering a sense of dignity and personal value [10].

4. Enhancing Well-being and Coping Mechanisms

Beyond social benefits, participants reported an improvement in their overall well-being and the development of new coping mechanisms. Engaging in creative activity was described as calming, stress-reducing, and a positive distraction from daily worries [22]. Several residents noted a reduction in anxiety and an increase in positive affect during and after Art Hive sessions [22]. The process of focusing on a creative task provided a sense of purpose and accomplishment, which contributed to their mental and emotional health [10]. For some, it became a crucial part of their routine, offering structure and a positive outlet in their transitional living environment.

5. Challenges and Facilitating Factors

While highly beneficial, the Art Hive faced some challenges, primarily related to residents' physical health and mobility [7, 11]. Some older adults faced barriers to consistent attendance due to chronic conditions or fatigue. However, the flexibility of the Art Hive model (drop-in nature, varied materials) helped mitigate some of these challenges. Key facilitating factors included the consistent presence of a compassionate and skilled facilitator [14], the availability of diverse art materials, and the non-prescriptive nature of the sessions, allowing residents to create at their own pace and in their own way. The support from James House staff and the integration of the Art Hive into the housing program were also crucial for its success.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study strongly support the significant role of an Art Hive in fostering belongingness and social inclusion for older adults living in transitional housing with supports. The Art Hive emerged as more than just an activity; it functioned as a vital social ecosystem, directly addressing the pervasive loneliness and marginalization often experienced by this vulnerable population [8, 18]. The creation of a safe, non-judgmental space [10, 17] allowed residents to shed the stigmas associated with homelessness and transitional living, enabling genuine social connections based on shared creative engagement rather than shared vulnerability.

The emphasis on reciprocity and shared creative activity within the Art Hive aligns with theories of community building and social capital, where collective engagement leads to stronger interpersonal bonds [10, 29, 30]. Unlike more formal therapeutic settings, the Art Hive's open studio model, as described by Timm-Bottos [25, 26, 27, 28], promoted organic interactions and peer support, which are crucial for older adults who may struggle with trust and safety issues in congregate settings [15, 19]. This informal, community-driven approach appears particularly effective in reducing social isolation and cultivating a sense of being part of something larger than oneself.

Furthermore, the Art Hive's capacity to empower self-expression and facilitate identity reclamation is a profound finding. For individuals who have experienced the dehumanizing effects of homelessness, having a space to create, to be seen as an "artist," and to express their inner world is deeply therapeutic and affirming [1, 12, 16]. This process of reclaiming dignity and personal agency through art contributes significantly to their psychological well-being and can be a critical step in their journey towards stability and permanent housing. The Art Hive thus serves as a powerful complement to traditional housing and support services, addressing the holistic needs of older residents. The challenges related to health and mobility highlight the importance of adapting art-based interventions to the specific needs of older adults [7]. However, the inherent flexibility and person-centered nature of the Art Hive model demonstrate its adaptability. The consistent presence of a dedicated facilitator, acting as a "champion" [14] and creating a welcoming atmosphere, was repeatedly identified as a key factor in the Art Hive's success, underscoring the importance of human connection in these spaces.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. As a single-case study with a small sample size, the findings are not generalizable to all older adults in transitional housing or all Art Hives. The study relied on self-reported experiences, which may be subject to recall bias or social desirability bias. The observational period was limited to three months, and a

longer-term study might reveal different dynamics. The study did not include a control group, making it difficult to definitively attribute all observed changes solely to the Art Hive.

Implications and Future Research

The findings have significant implications for housing providers, policymakers, and arts organizations. Transitional housing facilities should consider integrating Art Hives or similar community-based art programs as a core component of their support services for older adults. Funding bodies and policymakers should recognize the value of arts-based interventions in addressing social determinants of health and allocate resources accordingly, potentially through grants for arts education or community impact initiatives [7, 12].

Future research should conduct multi-site studies with larger sample sizes to explore the generalizability of these findings. Longitudinal studies could track the long-term impacts of Art Hive participation on residents' well-being, housing stability, and community integration. Research could also employ mixed-methods designs, incorporating quantitative measures of loneliness, social support, and mental health alongside qualitative narratives. Comparative studies examining the effectiveness of different art-based models in diverse transitional housing settings would also be valuable. Finally, exploring the perspectives of housing staff and family members on the impact of Art Hives could provide a more comprehensive understanding.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates the profound role of an Art Hive in fostering belongingness and social inclusion for older adults residing in transitional housing with supports. By providing a safe, welcoming, and non-judgmental space for creative expression, the Art Hive facilitates genuine social connections, empowers self-expression, and contributes significantly to the overall well-being of this vulnerable population. The findings underscore the critical need for holistic, arts-based interventions that address the psychosocial needs of older adults experiencing homelessness, complementing traditional support services. Integrating Art Hives into transitional housing models offers a promising pathway to cultivate community, dignity, and a renewed sense of belonging, ultimately enhancing the quality of life for these residents.

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