

“Love is the magic ingredient” in our co-production relationship: an art therapist and people with learning disabilities share their experiences of co-producing research

Nicki Power

People with learning disabilities are often excluded from research, both as participants and as active researchers. Nicki and The Lawnmowers Independent Theatre Company have been working together to develop an authentic co-production relationship using their combined skills in art therapy and theatre. They are collaborating to co-develop an art therapy group intervention to support this population’s mental health, (this is Nicki’s PhD).

We started with a pilot project to see if we could work together. After co-authoring a paper exploring power, language and labels in healthcare research (see our publication list), we knew our partnership was built on trust. Next, the Lawnmowers wanted to understand more about art therapy, through experiencing it, to better inform their expert input during Nicki’s PhD. We used a range of arts-based techniques to explore art therapy practice and outcomes. This work deepened our relationship and we learned more about each other.

We have also analysed interviews with people with learning disabilities about their experiences of art therapy. This is the first time in art therapy that people with learning disabilities have been researchers. Beyond research, we have co-developed a theatre-based intervention to explore health inequalities and identify change priorities in North-East London. Drawing on practice and evidence, we are currently co-developing a training package for the British Association of Art Therapists. These are the ripples of change from authentic co-production!

We want to share our ingredients for effective co-production and the challenges we have encountered. We want to talk about how working in this way can lead to transformational change in healthcare and research and also for us as individuals. The National Health Service in the UK (where Nicki works) can be a challenging environment and people with learning disabilities face many inequalities in our society. Working together has given us hope in the darkness.

Biography

Nicki Power is a clinical academic art therapist working in the NHS and doctoral fellow at Queen Mary University of London, supported by Barts Charity. She is also Senior Project Lead in Learning Disability Therapies & Engagement, East London NHS Foundation Trust, London, UK. Nicki is using collaborative and inclusive research with people with learning disabilities to develop a group art therapy intervention with the aim of reducing mental distress.

Activists and Artists at The Lawnmowers Independent Theatre Company are a producing-arts organisation focused on social change through the use of forum theatre. They believe the arts can unlock the talents and capacities of people with learning disabilities to take charge of their lives as active citizens, visible artists and agents of change. They operate in Gateshead, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne and surrounding areas. The Lawnmowers are a registered charity. They are run by and for people with learning disabilities.

Recent publications and conference presentations

Nicki Power & The Lawnmowers Independent Theatre Company - [Un-labelling the language: exploring labels, jargon and power through participatory arts research with arts therapists and people with learning disabilities](#) | [Voices: A World Forum for Music Therapy](#).
Voices: A world Forum for Music Therapy



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Nicki Power - [_Art therapy as a treatment for adults with learning disabilities who are experiencing mental distress: A configurative systematic review with narrative synthesis - ScienceDirect. *The Arts in Psychotherapy*](#)