

Research Article

## What are the needs of older people undertaking activities in art museums and do activities fulfil them?

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper reports the findings of an empirical study to explore art activities for older people in art museums. The aim was to ascertain the needs of older people undertaking activities at art museums and to ascertain whether the activities fulfil them. The survey process included both quantitative and qualitative methodological approaches. One hundred and eleven older people took part in the survey. The results were analyzed in relation to the research aims following both thematic and statistical approaches which suggest that social interaction is the most significant factor in older people's motivations in attending art activities. The findings summarise the results and discuss implications and the research concludes by offering implications for practice. Finally, I suggest further research for art museums on how to best access programs for older people.

**Keywords:** Art museum education; older people, art activities.

### I . INTRODUCTION

“Between 2015 and 2030, the number of people in the world aged 60 years or over is projected to grow by 56 per cent, from 901 million to 1.4 billion, and by 2050, the global population of older persons is projected to more than double its size in 2015, reaching nearly 2.1 billion” (UN, 2015). The issue has grown in importance in light of recent research into the social impact of aging populations. The Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations (2012:6) indicated aging populations will increase the impact of both “economic and social welfare systems” and they suggested that governments should promote and protect all human rights, inclusive for all ages and they emphasises “a society for all ages”. However, a number of studies indicate that the ageing population brings negative issues to not only communities but also for ageing itself. Vanderhorst and McLaren (2005:517) state that many older adults experience a high level of “depression and suicidal ideation”. In particular, suicide is particularly high for men over 85 years, reaching 47.3 per 100,000 in 2010 (Arias 2012:7). This must be tackled through social policy in order to reduce the suicide rate. Therefore, governments and local authorities need strong policy to enhance the quality of older people's lives.

Maslow (1968) identifies human needs and divides into five categories. Belongingness is ranked third on Maslow's hierarchy of needs and is regarded as a basic human need. Vanderhorst and McLaren (2005:517) support this view, suggesting that "enhancing social support" and "sense of belonging to community" may help older adults' mental health. Therefore, social engagement is a big issue regarding the quality of older people's lives. Sandell points out, “museums should consciously use their ability to influence visitors to address social problems such as prejudice within society” (Sandell 2007 cited in Newman 2013:122).

There is some confusion about how to fulfil older person's needs with several considerations raised. As noted above, Maslow (1968) stresses basic needs and he highlights belongingness among people, which can alleviate social isolation. Therefore, this research will focus on the needs of older people as interpreted through activities. This can lead to social benefits through older people's art activities. Thus, this study will be looking for effective ways to help older people's environment in order to improve the quality of their lives. In particular, this study will focus on improvement in older people's feelings of confidence and self-esteem to tackle the difficulties in adjusting mentally and physically to changing conditions.

The results of this research will assist older people who are interested in art activities in art museums. First, to investigate older people's motivations and characteristics, the literature review explored some theories related to aging, continuity and human needs. Furthermore, to fulfill the aims, this study will examine the needs of older people undertaking activities in art museums and do activities fulfil them. Second, this research conducted interviews with older people to collect accurate data using quantitative and qualitative methods. Furthermore, the survey categorised older people depending on whether they were active or inactive in their engagement with art museums, or participants at workshops or whether they meet up at a Cathedral or public library. The data gathered enabled a deep understanding of the design needed for appropriate programs for older people. From the survey, the empirical evidence was compared with existing theories and research and analysed through thematic and statistical analysis. This should add to existing knowledge around museum evaluations

in several ways and encourage the use of practical frameworks to benefit both art museums and older people. Finally, this

study will conduct a review of selected literature covering an ageing society, arts for older people and art museums education. The literature provided much knowledge relating to this study, shedding light on the study's importance, and value, the necessity for empirical research the kind of research needed to contribute to older people's needs.

This study tackles the aims of the research questions, such as identifying the factors determining fulfilment of needs for older people. To achieve this, this study was divided into three objectives as follows: 1) What are the motivations for older people's engagement and how can they be understood? 2) To what extent can activities satisfy the psychosocial needs of older people? 3) To what extent do curators understand the impact of activities for older people?

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **1. Ageing society**

A large and growing body of literature has investigated the impact of population ageing. According to the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the UN (2012:21), there are four benefits of population ageing, as older people are: living longer; making important financial contributions to their families; contributing significantly to the global economy; increasingly able to live independently. These benefits may boost aging societies and increase life expectancy. In contrast, among the perceived threats of an ageing society, Harper and Bernard and Phillips claim societal problems will result (Harper 2000; Bernard and Phillips 2000) while Cutler et al.(1990:48) claim that it strains government spending on healthcare and social security. Luy et al.(2013:2) state that ageing strains social and medical services and raises demand for health care and social security systems, showing it can affect all age groups in society. Nevertheless, Cutler et al. (1990:70) predicts greater political power for older people due to their population size increasing their influence on government policy and leading to political change. Therefore, this study explores theories on ageing in order to suggest optimal strategies for an ageing society.

According to the activity theory of aging, while social activity has a positive relationship with life satisfaction, "salient role loss is inversely related to life satisfaction" (Lemon et al. 1972:521). More recent studies confirm there is a link between social activity and life satisfaction in later life (Loue and Sajatovic 2008:79). Maslow (1943) divides human needs into five: 'Physiological, security, belonging, esteem, and self-actualisation'. He states, "human needs are hierarchical - that unfulfilled lower needs dominate one's thinking, actions, and being until they are satisfied" (Maslow 1954 cited in Sirgy et al. 2011:173). Among the categories of hierarchical needs, Hagerty and Williams (1999) argue that belongingness is ranked third as one of the basic human needs and it connects individuals with others and their environment, promoting social and psychological well-being.

### **2. Arts for older people**

A considerable amount of literature has been published on social impacts of art activities for older people. Harper and Hamblin (2010:5) indicate that "social isolation is a central concern for many older people, and they state this not only results in psychological distress, but also impacts quality of life and physical health". For example, House et al. (1988) reviewed six large studies and found that mortality is high among socially isolated persons. Keaney and Oskala (2007:345) suggest that barriers to engage in cultural activities for older people include "fewer social networks, poor health or limited funds". Therefore, they suggest some solutions including "providing access to transport, reducing the impact of poor health and lack of mobility and incorporating greater social elements into arts activities"(Ibid:353). Despite these suggestions, difficulties remain in tackling the barriers.

More recent studies defined social relations as potential values in older people's lives. For example, "creativity strengthens morale in later life" and may enhance physical health and improve relationships. It also creates "the greatest legacy people" can leave for posterity and society, as "historically, elders have functioned as keepers of the culture who pass on the history and values of a community to the next generation" (Hanna and Perlstein 2008:2-3). On the other hand, Lemon et al.(1972:522) conclude that only "social activity with friends was related to life satisfaction, but there was no significant relationship" between life satisfaction and social activity with "neighbours, relatives, formal organization, or solitary activity". Nevertheless, Dannefer and Shura (2009) point out that changing conditions will affect older people activities, "their social relations and their social definition and status". Boyer notes that arts engagement may help to establish a sense of identity and community, increase socializing with others, and enhance the life quality (Boyer 2007 cited in Rollins 2013). Therefore, older people may promote community engagement through creativity.

In recent years, there have been an increasing number of studies which demonstrate that quality of life for older people is positively correlated with psychological issues. Andrews (2010:7) revealed that learning enhances confidence and self-efficacy. Hacking et al.(2006:121) identified benefits for those who have "mental health or self-esteem issues" through mental health and arts participation research. More recently, Camic(2008) found that using the arts in health care contributes to human development and health and concluded that the aims of health psychology may be promoted through the arts. The fact that the conclusions of Camic(2008) and Hacking et al.(2006:121) concur confirms the strong connection between arts activities and wellbeing in older people.

The International Social Security Association (2010) stresses the biomedical perspective that cultural activities reduce chronic illness and healthcare costs and enhance preventative culture assisting healthy and active living. Uchino (1996) reviews 81 studies and indicates that social support for older people reliably relates to positive effects "on aspects of the

cardiovascular, endocrine, and immune systems". These biomedical factors may be affected by cultural support for older people. Cohen studied the effects of participation in the arts and showed, "improvement to physical, social, and emotional well-being, including fewer falls, decreases in medication and doctor visits". They found out, while nonparticipation exposed a decline of involvement in community activities, participation increased involvement and reduced loneliness and depression (Cohen 2006 cited in Rollins 2013:iv). Other attempts have been made to provide biomedical access for older people. Andrews (2010:7) evaluates the National Museums Liverpool 'Active Aging' programme and finds most participants express their experience as 'therapeutic' and beneficial for their wellbeing. Therefore, arts activities can provide good alternative healing programmes to improve older people's biomedical conditions, performing a therapeutic function.

### 3. Art museum education

Hooper-Greenhill (1991:9) stated that museums were known as educational institutions open to the public which extend informal learning opportunities so people can teach themselves. Therefore, museums and galleries are required to "provide more than displays on interesting themes" and connect to "the life experiences of different groups of audiences" (Illeris, 2006:17). He recognises museums as "centres of learning" and emphasises the importance of promoting learning to actual and potential visitors. Furthermore, recent studies indicate that "museums and galleries can actually reproduce inequalities inherent in the fields that dominated their production" (Newman 2013:132).

MLA (2004) introduces Generic Social Outcomes as a framework and evaluates social outcomes in museums, libraries and archives in terms of "working towards healthcare and well-being aims". However, such engagement needs forceful "theoretical and empirical evidence" and "a conceptual language" to be able to accurately define and measure wellbeing in cultural context. Furthermore, educators need to consider the personal achievements of older people who are involved in educational provision. Nevertheless, museum educators are required to "adopt many of the learner-centred, facilitative methods that underpin lifelong learning" (Hooper-Greenhill 1988:41).

## III. METHODOLOG

### 1. Research strategy

This study adopted both a quantitative and qualitative methodology in order to achieve the aims and objectives of the research, known as multi-strategy research (Bryman 2006:97). This method was selected for my research questions because the typologies of mixed strategy research can be helpful to researchers when clarifying the intended goals (Ibid:98). This research design considered the importance of older people's perspectives from their experiences and therefore the method of this research required different approaches depending on the participants' characteristics.

These combined methods were utilised through close ended interview questionnaires and participant observations to investigate older peoples' experiences. Roberts (2004:110) states that the benefit of combined methods is that "Blending these two approaches generally allows greater depth of understanding and insight than what is possible using just one approach". This mixed methods approach enhances understanding and reduces the gap between integration data and results.

The collected data for older people have been analysed thematically and using statistical approaches. Matthews and Ross (2010:144) claim that quantitative analysis is well suited to numeric data, but qualitative analysis is used "in terms of players' moods, stresses, procedures". This view is somewhat challenged by others, including Hammersley who states that "qualitative research uses words while quantitative research uses numbers is overly simplistic". He states that "qualitative studies focus on meaning while quantitative research is concerned with behaviour is also not fully supported since both may be concerned with people's views and actions" (Hammersley 1992 cited in Brannen, 2005:175). Therefore, this research uses both quantitative and qualitative data to gather a broad overview of the research topic.

### 2. Selection of Participants

This study was undertaken from 14 October to 7 November 2013. A total of 111 interview questionnaires were completed by individuals over 50 years of age. In order to collect accurate data, this study visited four venues: St. Andrew's Cathedral; St Mary's Cathedral; The Civil Library; and Shipley Art gallery, all in Newcastle Upon Tyne, United Kingdom. These samples do not represent the general public in late life. However, this study believes that the survey could allow for investigation into their real lives. Brehm found that "statistically correcting for demographic biases in sample composition has little impact on the substantive implications of co-relational analyses" (Brehm 1993 cited in Krosnick, 1999:540).

The target population was older people, both active and inactive, who have experiences with art activities in art museums. Therefore, this study was necessary to categorise depend on their involvement with arts. One target population was older people who joined art workshops at Shipley Art gallery. Another target was older visitors to Shipley Art gallery and the other venues were selected as places open to the general public, including cathedrals and libraries. Such purposive sampling was used to truthfully represent their characteristics depending on their personal background related to art activities. A total of 52 questionnaires were completed at cathedrals and civil libraries; 28 respondents were visitors to Shipley Art gallery and 31 respondents attended art workshops at Shipley Art gallery. The workshops were divided into both gallery talks and self-led craft groups, which included an embroidery craft workshop, a Northern Guild silk painting class, lace-making, patchwork and quilting and a spinning group.

Among the craft groups, this study chose the patchwork and quilting group in order to observe the participants for the intended qualitative research. A total of 14 individual participants were observed at art activities with ages ranging between 58 and 92 years old, with the mean age of 71 years. The researcher observed these activities for observation so that qualitative data could be collected. Denzin and Lincoln (1994:2) emphasises that observation enables understanding of “things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them”. Furthermore, the researcher made notes when the participants were present during art and craft activities at the museums and asked for their motivations and why they wanted to join the programmes.

**3. Data Collection Methods**

**3.1 Closed-ended Interview Questionnaire**

This study selected the use of quantitative data using closed-end questionnaires since the participants are old people and they would prefer questionnaires easily and quickly answered. The closed-ended questionnaire was composed with multi-choice options and tick boxes. Gubrium and Sankar (1994:125) note, “Closed questionnaires force study participants to structure their responses according to the researcher's priorities and notions or the answer's parameters”. This study aims to identify the participants’ characteristics to collect accurate data and therefore the research surveyed various venues such as public places and arts spaces. In addition, this study considered classifying according to visitors’ age, gender, marital status, education level and their motivations to join the activities. Such primary data was gathered based on face-to-face research. However, some participants did not complete the questionnaire since they did not have experience relating to art activities in art museums.

**3.2 Non-Participant Observation**

According to Kumar (2005:119), “Observation is a purposeful, systematic and selective way of watching and listening to an interaction or phenomenon as it takes place”. He also divides observation into “participant and non-participant observation”. This study used nonparticipant observation in order to concentrate on observing, watching and listening to participants’ activities. Furthermore, Matthews and Ross (2010:257) state that nonparticipant observation is simple observation and it enables the observer to become an objective outsider. They add that, “It is important to make certain that the operational definition that are used to identify the events to be observed are clear and to ensure that proper strategies are in place to record the data”. This study observed craft workshops for older people at Shipley Art gallery to gain deepened understanding from generalised data. The observations were conducted at the “Patchwork and Quilting Workshop” on 24 October and 7 November 2013. During the observations, the researcher did not interview many participants rather having the opportunity to chat and construct a close relationship with them to fully

receive their feedback. Matthews and Ross (2010:142) state that this approach can be best for “describing and explaining events and gathering participants’ understandings, beliefs and experiences”.

**3.3 Approach to data analysis**

Mixed methods research requires quantitative and qualitative analysis. Closed-ended questions allowed for statistical analysis of participants’ demographical data. This research utilised Microsoft Excel to analyse the results, as recommended by Pohlmann (2004:18), who states that Microsoft Excel may be suitable to produce appropriate reporting and interpretation of collected data. From the data, this study could analysis not only their demographical sources but also their preferences, motivations, and their willingness in terms of art activities.

The observation data supported the statistical analysis so that this study could gain deep information about older people’s needs. A mixed methods approach is defined as “a plurality of philosophical paradigms, theoretical assumptions, and methodological tradition, data gathering and analysis techniques, and personalised understandings and value commitments”(Greene, 2007:13). Tashakkori and Creswell (2007:4 cited in NHS 2014) describe mixed-methods as, “research in which the investigator collects and analyses data, integrates the findings and draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches”. Therefore, this study could integrate both quantitative and qualitative data in order to gain generalised results for older people’s needs.

**IV. EMPIRICAL RESEARCH FINDINGS**

**1. Interview questionnaire respondents by age group and gender**

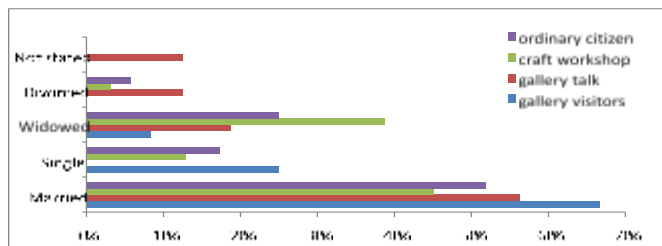
A total of 111 respondents completed the interview questionnaires. More females took part in the survey than males: 76.6% (85) females compared to 23.4% (26) males. While the largest proportion of male respondents were aged 71-75 years (10), female respondents were 61-65 years (21).

Table I . Interview questionnaire respondents

Age group	No. of males	% males	No. of females	% females	Total	% total
50 - 55	3	12%	0	0%	3	3%
56 - 60	1	4%	10	12%	11	10%
61 - 65	5	19%	21	25%	26	23%
66 - 70	5	19%	16	19%	21	19%
71 - 75	10	38%	18	21%	28	25%
76 - 80	1	4%	12	14%	13	12%
81 - 85	1	4%	1	1%	2	2%
86 - 90	0	0%	3	4%	3	3%
91 - 95	0	0%	1	1%	1	1%
Not stated	0	0%	3	4%	3	3%
Total	26	100%	85	100%	111	100%

**2. Marital status and arts activities**

The chart illustrates that marital status has an impact upon art activities of older people. Among the categories, married people tend to participate as visitors and at gallery talks. A comparison based on the marital status indicates those who are widowed tend to attend more crafts workshops.

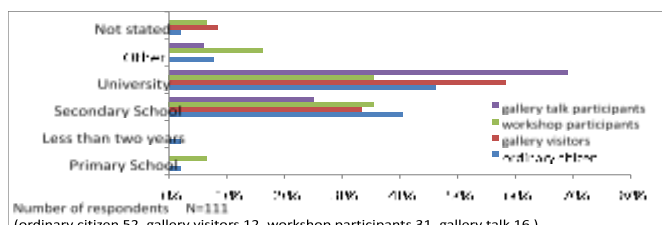


Number of respondents N=111 (ordinary citizen 52, crafts workshop 31, gallery talk 16, gallery visitors 12)

Figure I: Marital status and arts activities

### 3. Education status and arts activities

The graph shows that those who are educated to university level tend to attend activities more than other education levels. In particular, museums talks were more popular with the high levels.

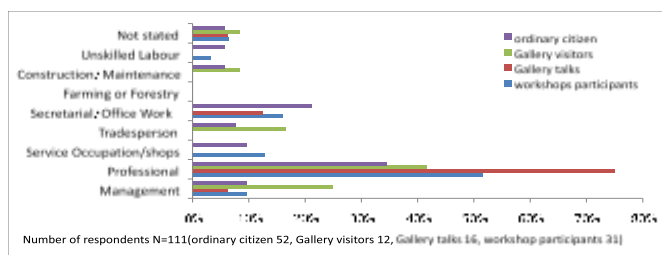


Number of respondents N=111 (ordinary citizen 52, gallery visitors 12, workshop participants 31, gallery talk 16)

Figure II: Education status and arts activities

### 4. Employment status before retiring and arts activities

It is notable from the figure that those who had professional employment status before retiring attended more art activities compared with ordinary citizens. In particular, they tend to attend to museums talks around 75% while those who were farming or forestry did not appear any categories.

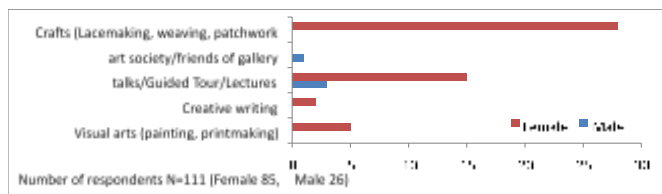


Number of respondents N=111 (ordinary citizen 52, Gallery visitors 12, Gallery talks 16, workshop participants 31)

Figure III: Employment status before retiring and activities

### 5. Type of activities as experienced by gender

Females dominated the art activities and they tend to join crafts while males participated in museums talks, lectures and art society.



Number of respondents N=111 (Female 85, Male 26)

Figure IV: Type of activities as experienced by gender

### 6. Main motivations for older people's engagement with art museums

The highest rate of participants replied they wanted to gain knowledge as their main motivation in joining activities in art museums. Following this, they chose personal satisfaction and to mix with stimulating people. However, 20% of respondents did not complete their motivations because they did not have experiences.

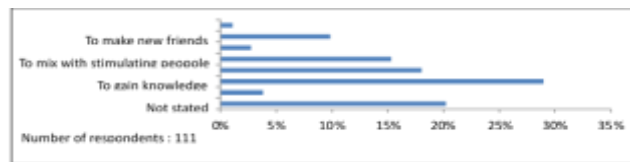


Figure V: Main motivations for older people's engagement

### 7. Type of activities for the psychosocial needs of older people

Respondents prefer to choose creative workshops to fill their psychosocial needs and they are also interested in training for skills and museums tours. Some who chose 'others' recommended organising activities.

*"To alleviate loneliness in older people"* (Female, ordinary citizen, 70 years old).

*"Stimulating talks and discussions"* (Female, museums talks participant, 87 years old).

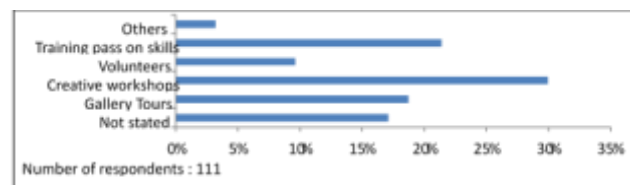


Figure VI: Type of activities for the psychosocial needs

### 8. The main impact of activities for older people

Around 47% of respondents indicated that the social impact is the most important factor, and some who chose 'others' explained.

*"It's the duty of curators to inspire and educate all members of society. Diverse exhibitions and social events to bring people in are vital"* (Male, visitor, 61 years old)

*"My experience is...exhibitions workshops are older people so one would hope curators would be aware of this"* (Male, ordinary citizen, 64 years old).

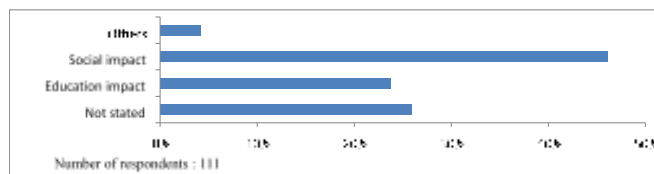


Figure VII: The main impact of activities

### 9. Participant Observations

The observation of the patchwork and quilting workshop was undertaken on both 24 October and 7 November at Shipley Art gallery, Newcastle Upon Tyne. To gain detailed data from

the workshop, the researcher tried to do fieldwork during the observation. DeWALT and DeWALT (2002:vii) state that the advantage of fieldwork is in enabling, "active looking, improving memory, informal interviewing, writing detailed field notes, and perhaps most importantly, patience".

The self-led workshop comprised typically 12-15 participants every Thursday afternoon for approximately two hours. The mean age of participants was 71.14 years (range 58-92 years), and all participants were female. There was no teacher and each member shared their skills. The group activity members tended to exchange skills and knowledge and to share some foods such as cakes, cookies and tea. They also organised travel with team members.

This study identified significant factors that they were not focused on creating works rather than talking with each other related to their real lives. Therefore, the researcher noted that the participants wanted to socialise with each other. One female was asked why she wanted to attend this workshop, and she replied:

*"I have been attending this workshop over thirty years. I need company.....because I live alone.....so I want to make friendship"(female, 87 years old).*

## **V. CONCLUSIONS**

As noted in the literature review, art activities and older people's quality of life are correlated. The Oxford Institute of Ageing Report indicates the significant role that "museums have in enhancing the lives of older people from diverse social, cultural and economic backgrounds"(Harper and Hamblin 2010:5). A strong relationship between older people's mental health and art activities has been reported in the literature as have art activities to reduce social isolation and enhance mental wellbeing and social contact(Walters et al. 1999 cited in Cattani et al. 2005:42). The purpose of this research was to explore art activities for older people to promote the quality of their lives and therefore it will investigate the correlation between educational programmes in art museums and visitor satisfaction among older people.

Key findings from this study that older people's main motivation included wanting to gain knowledge, personal satisfaction and mixed with stimulating others. They were interested in attending creative workshops and interested in training and passing on skills and museums tours. In addition, the social impact is a most significant factor and this was followed by educational factors. Furthermore, older people wish to have companionship rather than learning new skills. This research show that art activities make older people the subject of interactive activities and around 47% of older respondents reported significant social benefits. A divorced female of 61 years stated "meeting new friends" as the main factor for participating. Axelsen (2006:218) supports this, confirming that discussion is facilitated through group activities that enhance socialization in particular. Maslow also supports this, emphasising "a sense of belonging" which means connecting with people such as friends and neighbours

(Maslow 1968 cited in Vanderhorst and McLaren 2005:518). However, it should be noted that some previous studies (Lemon et al. 1972) suggest there is no significant relationship between life satisfaction and social activity with neighbours and relatives except friends.

The results of the survey did not set out to ascertain effective art education for older people; however, evidence of such was identified in the literature review. Durr et al.(1992) indicated that, "principles of effective practice for facilitating learning, [include] mutual respect and support, collaborative learning, praxis, critical thinking, and self-direction". Furthermore, the results reveal that around 27% of older people replied "to make new friends" and to "mix with stimulating people" and therefore programmes could perhaps be modified to target such. However, Illeris (2006:15) examined self-help and professional-led groups and did not find significant differences in terms of effective learning styles. Nevertheless, the researcher observed one self-led workshop in Shipley Art Gallery that had run for over thirty years and the participants were satisfied, suggesting collaborative learning is attractive to older people, which would be a promising area of adoption by other programmes.

Due to the demands of older people, additional studies are needed on activities for older people in art museums. As discussed in this study, art activities are required for specialised programmes because older people have diverse personal backgrounds requiring adjustment of the environment and activities. In particular, the suicide rate of older men is relatively high suggesting men's programmes are needed to explore their effectiveness. Therefore, identifying how to best access art activities for older people is necessary for further research, which is where studies in this area should develop next.

\* This research was revised based on part of author's unpublished master's thesis.

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## Kyungsook Min / What are the needs of older people undertaking activities in art museums and do activities fulfil them?

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