



SYNERGI PHOTOVOICE EXHIBITION BROCHURE

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LONDON | MANCHESTER | 2018



synergi

**COLLABORATIVE
CENTRE**

- ETHNIC INEQUALITIES
- SEVERE MENTAL ILLNESS
- MULTIPLE DISADVANTAGE

SYNERGI PHOTOVOICE PROJECT AND EXHIBITION

The **Synergi Collaborative Centre** is delighted to be hosting a photography exhibition featuring a selection of images and narratives of ethnic minority people with lived experience of severe mental illness.

Funded by Queen Mary's Centre for Public Engagement and the Synergi Collaborative Centre, this exhibition provides a creative space for guests to view the photographs developed throughout the public engagement project - 'Visual Reflections of Mental Health: Realities of Severe Mental Illness for Ethnic Minority People and Those Involved in Their Care', which reflect the often unheard stories of service users and carers from London and Manchester.

Informed by a powerful and well-established method ('photovoice') of authentic and meaningful co-creation in health care, the project has asked participants to capture photos on disposable cameras to provide an insight

into the everyday reality of their experience of living with severe mental illness or its treatment, or that of the people they care for or represent.

This exhibition is of interest to service user organisations, carer organisations and groups, policymakers, charities, voluntary organisations, academics, students, creatives, artists, journalists, photographers as well as anyone interested in improving health systems and eradicating ethnic inequalities within mental health services. There will be an opportunity to meet and discuss the photographs and the captured narratives with some of the participants who took part in the project.

PARTICIPATING ORGANISATIONS



ABOUT THE SYNERGI COLLABORATIVE CENTRE

The Synergi Collaborative Centre is a five-year national programme funded by Lankelly Chase to establish an independent centre of excellence on ethnic inequalities, severe mental illness and multiple disadvantage. A partnership between Queen Mary University of London, the University of Manchester and Words of Colour Productions, the initiative is focused on working towards the transformation of health services for ethnic minority people with severe mental illness.



“ There are a lot of grey areas in my life, a lot of ambiguity, maybe I don't see the black and white, I'm stuck in the grey. It makes me think that I cannot be right; am I the only one who feels this way? I feel that I've got no understanding of, possibly why we are here, or what's happening. ”



“ It is difficult to go out and do things on your own, you feel lonely, isolated and you don't socialise with people. I suffer from psychosis depression but now I am much better. At home I do crochet and knitting everyday, it helps me to recover, most of the time when you do drawing, you do crocheting, you do sewing, you forget the other worries and focus on the physical moment. When you go out the hospital you don't know who to connect with, you have no voice. When you come out of hospital you don't know which service you want but [local mental health centre] will give you confidence to express yourself, to recover, to avoid arguments or things that have affected your life. It has helped me a lot. They create something good in you, tell you that it is not the end, that there is going to be recovery in the future. You can carry on moving and you can be a human being. You forgot your confidence, you forgot everything that you are about but when someone is telling you you are beautiful, you have something in you and they believe in you, it is little by little. I know what triggers to avoid. I know what affects me more. ”



“ Psychosis dramatically altered my experience of time. Old or young? Not quite sure and there are times when the cross over between linear and non-linear time makes for incredible storytelling possibilities. I don’t take time for granted anymore and whatever it is, it’s weird and wonderful. Lingering on this possibility positively fortifies my mental health in a way that most other things don’t because it brings up extreme trust in the naturalness of life. And opens the door to so much gratitude for this short gasp of breath that is a lifetime. ”



“ Art is key to me. It’s enhancing, it’s spiritual. It helps me mentally and prevents triggering unwelcome voices in my head. When doing art activities I hear them [the voices] but not in depth or detail. ”



“ Those are my goldfish. When I am depressed I go to them and I will talk to them; they listen to me but if I talk too much one by one the fish will move and when they are bored I will stop talking. But after looking at them they will listen again and I will give them a big kiss and they will kiss me again and that makes me happy and helps with my depression. I love my fish to bits; they help me cope with my depression. ”



“ It was so hard raining. When the rain – it remind me suddenly I was at home first, later off in hospital, voices and rain was going together. When the rain started it was very strong and my brain, my voices were strong. And then when the rain stop, voices were stopping... they know when the rain stop and that's how they talk with me and I'll be hearing them like I was talking with the weather... rain stops and voices stop. ”



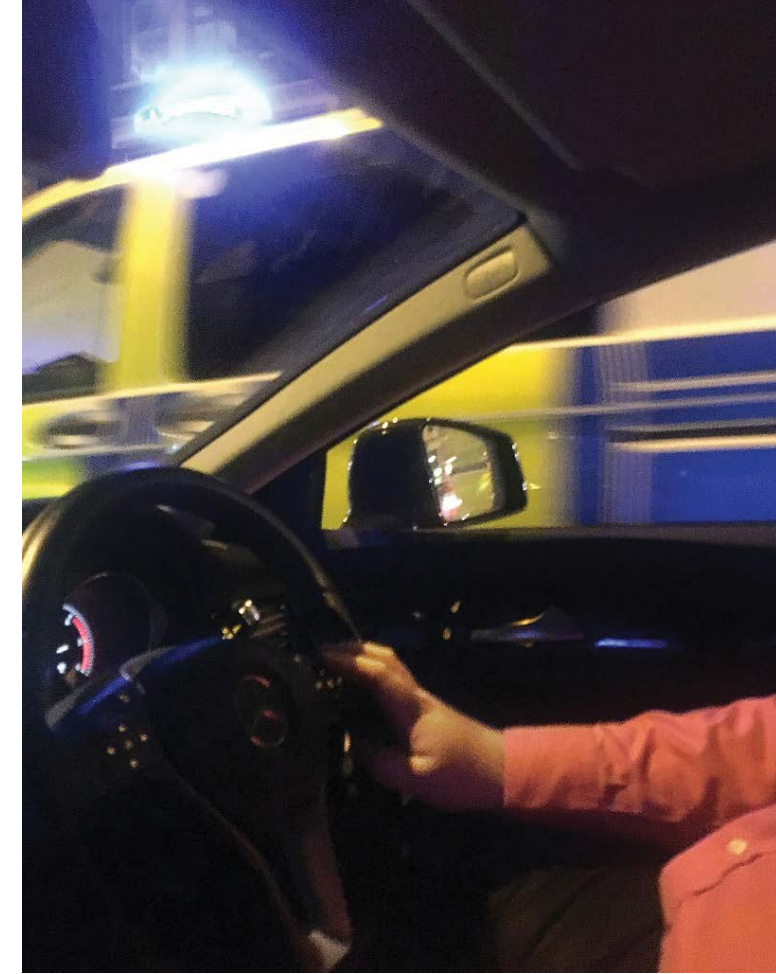
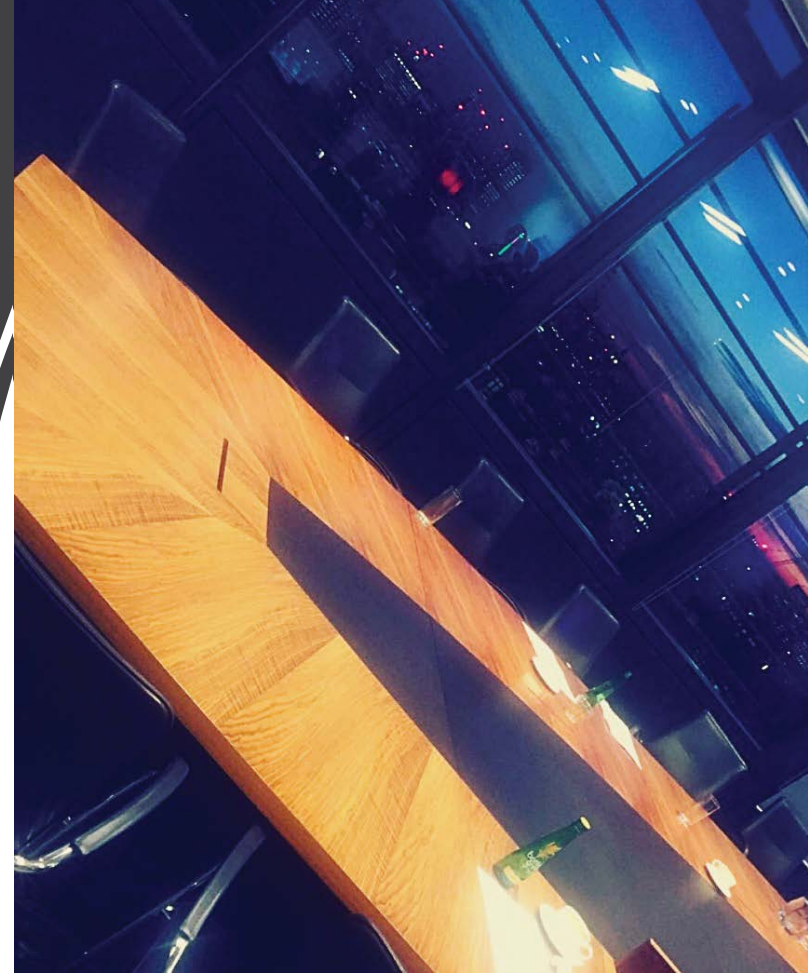
“ I have taken this picture when I walk on the pavement. Sometimes when you walk on the pavement you see a crack. So when I see the crack in the pavement, I don't step on the crack because if I step on it I think that the crack is like an earthquake on a movie. I feel like the pavement is shaking so I have to avoid it and go to another part of the pavement which is not cracking. If I walk on that I can feel my body being dragged down into the crack and the rubble is on top of me. When you look at this picture, you may say this is just a crack on the pavement, but when I look at that I didn't look at the crack, I look at something else now. ”



“ A beautiful red geranium in my sunny window.
It's good to care for a plant and see it growing through the year. In my garden I have a huge lavender which grows throughout the summer and is covered in bees and butterflies.
Not bad for central London. ”



“ When I walk
through the gates my anxiety disappears
and I feel free. ”



“ To anybody else these pictures may seem like just a day
in the life but to me they represent something a lot deeper.
For example, the picture with the wonderful sunset in the
boardroom is in the building where I speak about my experiences
as being a service user and how things can change, then when I
come down I am stopped by the police as my car has a log on the
system stating I am a forensic mental health patient. ”



“ These pictures show the effects of gentrification.

Where there used to be clubs and shops when I was young, these have all been knocked down and it now feels like a wasteland. Black and White people used to talk with each other more often on the streets than you find nowadays. ”



“ These are contrasting images. The picture of the doll represents times when I feel low. The mood is dark and the doll is lying down to recuperate from a stressful day. The other picture is of the sun appearing through the cracks of the trees. It's when I feel better – a bright sunny day and uplifting atmosphere compared to the dark mood in the previous picture. The sunlight puts me in a good mood as it emerges through the trees, giving a sense of hope to get through more difficult times. ”





“ I have started my own personal project in my flat and that is how to declutter my surrounding. When my surrounding is like this as you have seen in the photos, I find it difficult to function properly. Hence, on a good day I try very much to declutter my surrounding which means decluttering my mind. The titles of some of the books in the bookcase are hidden because when things were extremely bad for me, I found myself reacting to images or written works. I believe and hope that all that is in the past now. My reaction could mean me feeling physically uncomfortable, very restless and anxious. ”



“ This is a park that we always go to. I've taken my children there since they were little. It's a lovely park and it gives peace and time to reflect on the day that I've had. It keeps me away from stress. It's a big park with lots of things going on in it. ”



“ Medication plays a substantial part in her [mother’s] life. It is something she depends on to help manage her mental health. It has taken 3 years for the right medication to work but still there are many days she feels unwell. The tablet is so important, but once they are discharged they see you as fine and there is a lack of support post-release. After one month she relapsed and family concerns were not listened to. ”



“ The card has an affirmation ‘I am perfect exactly as I am’. This is an important reminder for me and everyone who suffers from a mental illness. Sometimes people or society in general may make you feel less than you actually are, when in reality there is nothing wrong with you. Having a mental illness does not make you any less of a person, and you are perfect even with an illness. It doesn’t define you and the illness isn’t a reflection of your true self. The illness is not you, it is only something you are experiencing. ”

FEEDBACK FROM PARTICIPANTS

The feedback from project participants in London and Manchester has reflected how the project and the use of photography as a relatively accessible and creative method have enabled people marginalised from the mainstream debate to share their knowledge and expertise. This has included having an outlet through photography to communicate concerns and everyday priorities for the participants.

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Comments such as those on page 21 were a frequent theme in participants' feedback.

“ The thing about taking pictures I think is very helpful ...
Because when you look at the picture, the picture is always there for you ... and then you can share to people about it. I can ask you 'can you look at this picture?' ... I can show and ask 'do you see what I see now?' ... and then they say 'yes' and you know that at least you're not alone.
In this society, still a lot people have similar problems to you, so maybe you feel that you feel a bit better in that way. ”

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“ I feel uncomfortable approaching people.
Expressing my thoughts is something I would not normally be doing.
I hope that people one day change their attitudes. ”

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“ Mental illness is not the end of the world. You can recover from it.
The photographs show my past life and present life. This is my real story. I have a life and I have to live for myself before I live for others.
I hope that people will come and see my pictures and that they will gain confidence and that they will encourage them. ”

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“ We talk about these things all the time and are told to write these things down but to take photographs like these is better – it helps us to concentrate and focus on what matters. ”

Q&A

WITH THE ACMHS



Why did you decide to participate in the Synergi Photovoice Project?

We decided to participate in the project as we saw it as a good way for service users to express their mental health journey.

What opportunities did it present the participants?

Participants had the opportunity to explore their mental health journey through photography and those items/events which may have been significant to them through their journey.

What would you say the benefits were/are for the participants?

Some benefits for participants could possibly be cleansing of negative experiences, learning how to express themselves through photography, reflecting on where they have come from and being in a better place now, more confidence in themselves and being proud of what they have achieved.

Can you give your thoughts and feelings on hosting the well-attended private exhibition?

It was a pleasure hosting the exhibition as it afforded me an insight into the participants' mental health journey and I as well as staff, felt very proud of their achievements.

You have decided to host a semi permanent exhibition of the photographs and captions in the foyer of your building. Why have you made that decision, what impact would you like it to have and who do you think 'needs' to see it?

The decision to host a semi permanent exhibition was in collaboration with the chair of the centre and ourselves with the agreement of service users. We feel it should be seen by the wider community and staff/users of the building. The NHS (senior managers and commissioners) are very regular users of the building and the exhibition would hopefully Impact on them and educate them in a different way about service users from the BME community and hopefully change the way services are commissioned, particularly for small BME groups.

As a longstanding and respected organisation working with African and Caribbean communities, how do you, as an organisation, feel about being part of this creative project?

We feel honoured to be a part of this project; anything to showcase our very talented service users. As a different and fresh approach we hope it will have a huge impact on the general public about mental health which will lead to positive outcomes.



COLLABORATIVE CENTRE

- ETHNIC INEQUALITIES
- SEVERE MENTAL ILLNESS
- MULTIPLE DISADVANTAGE

The **Synergi Collaborative Centre** is a national initiative focused on the realities of ethnic inequalities in severe mental illness and which explores how multiple disadvantage generates and sustains such inequalities. Taking a collaborative leadership approach, the centre aims to use the principles of co-production of knowledge and a creative mix of robust research methods. The centre will work closely with commissioners, policymakers and politicians, as well as public service providers, citizens and those experiencing mental distress, to create and deliver a vision to help eradicate ethnic inequalities in severe mental illness and their fundamental causes.

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SYNERGI PHOTOVOICE PROJECT
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Centre for Public
Engagement

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PROJECT PARTNERS



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