

A sense of belonging at Thriving Places: Participant experiences of belonging at the Barrowfield Ball in Glasgow

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in collaboration with Parkhead, Dalmarnock and Camlachie
Thriving Place.



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Introduction

This report provides a summary of a 2017 study conducted as part of a Masters degree in Equality and Human Rights at the University of Glasgow. The study was conducted in collaboration with Thriving Places, a ten-year community programme aiming to improve outcomes for those living in areas of persistent multiple deprivation. The programme, delivered by Glasgow Community Planning Partnership, operates in nine areas of the city. The focus for this study was The Barrowfield Ball initiated by the Parkhead, Dalmarnock and Camlachie branch of Thriving Places in 2014.

The Barrowfield Ball takes place weekly. It is free to attend and involves a few rounds of Bingo, followed by dancing and refreshments. Since it started, the ball has attracted more and more people and now over 70 people attend regularly coming from different parts of the city. I wanted to understand why this ball is so popular and whether or not attendees feel a sense of belonging at the event. In doing so, I hoped to discover how that sense of belonging happens as well as the impact it might have on the lives of those who attend. Belonging means different things to different people and I wanted to learn about this using the following five research objectives:

1. How is the concept of belonging understood by older attendees at the tea dance?
2. In what ways is belonging established and maintained at the ball?
3. What is the staff role in establishing and maintaining belonging?
4. What is the impact of this for participants and for Parkhead, Dalmarnock and Camlachie Thriving Places?
5. How does this inform the sociological understanding of belonging?

Methodology

I visited the ball before starting research and got to know attendees and staff. It was during these visits that I observed a close connection between staff and attendees that influenced my choice of methods. I interviewed seven older attendees at the dance and then conducted a focus group with three staff members who organise the dance.

The interviews were conducted with a topic guide but questions were not set. This was so that participants could talk about what was important to them and the interviews could be like a conversation. The focus group took place after the interviews so that I could use themes of interest as talking points during staff discussions.

The interviews and focus group were audio-recorded and notes were manually written up and analysed for expected and unexpected themes of interest. The study was approved by the University of Glasgow ethics committee before any data was collected or any participants were recruited.

Key findings

Analysis of the interviews and focus group uncovered a number of themes that might explain why the ball is so popular and why coming to it is important.

1. Participants felt a sense of belonging at the Barrowfield Ball

Belonging is different for each person but is associated with feeling at ease, being safe and being around familiar faces. Participants felt a strong sense of belonging at the ball, expressing that they felt so comfortable they would attend alone. It was an event that participants looked forward to every week.

2. Strong ties

Relationships were really important in creating a sense of belonging. Participants had formed close, personal bonds with others in the form of strong ties. These ties were supportive and purposeful since participants could share common difficulties associated with later life.

3. Weak ties

Wider social networks were formed through the ball as participants came across many people every week and these people became familiar faces. This helped to create a sense of belonging to the community as participants would meet one another outside the dance either at other events or whilst out and about in the local area.

4. Acceptance of difference

All participants felt accepted at the ball and enjoyed being around people different to themselves. For some participants, this was a unique since they did not feel accepted in many other places. The ball was described as a place for anyone at all, no matter the circumstances.

5. Staff roles

Staff were crucial in creating a sense of belonging. They facilitated belonging by encouraging relationships, welcoming anyone who walked through the door and paying attention to details such as birthdays. The relationships they established allowed them to do much more than organise the ball, they learned about wider community issues and responded to them. Staff had initiated a bereavement support group and persuaded The Mungo Foundation to relocate to the community centre in response to needs learned at the ball.

6. Impact beyond the Ball

Participants described having a sense of purpose from going to the ball. They felt more confident and more connected to the community.

7. Impact for Thriving Places

Establishing belonging at the ball allowed Thriving Places Parkhead, Camlachie, Dalmarnock to deliver on their outcomes of fostering connected, supportive and inclusive communities. Through connecting with participants at the ball, staff had managed to learn about community needs and respond to them.

Conclusion

The data found that participants had a strong sense of belonging to the Barrowfield Ball. The ball was a place that participants felt at ease and this was achieved largely through relationships. Participants had made strong, supportive relationships with others they had met. Participants also described how the ball had given them a wider social network as they now recognised many people in the community through having met them at the ball. Staff were found to be great facilitators of belonging. Through successfully nurturing a feeling of belonging, participants felt able to share their private concerns. In doing so, staff could successfully learn about and respond to needs in the community. Participants expressed that attending the ball improved their lives beyond the event itself, providing a sense of achievement and purpose that should not be overlooked.

“Belonging here [at the ball] is from the companionship. It really is the ultimate feel-good factor and I feel good for days after.”

“the atmosphere and the people and it just touches ma wee heart.”

“I wouldnae give up this wee club. In comparison with my Thursday club, I would drop ma wee Thursday club and come here”

“So, to me belonging has to be people. If you took that centre where the ball is, that’s just a big empty room unless it’s filled with tables and candles and music and people and those people want to be there. That to me is belonging. It’s being with people you want to be with and when that happens, all sorts of other things can happen”

And all sorts of other things have happened. And all sorts of things continue to happen.

Future research

- Analysis of **staff roles** in nurturing belonging and the impact of this for the community
- The **longer term impact** of attending the ball for participants and the wider community
- Further research about what it means to **‘belong’**. For example, how it might be different for different age groups, cities or neighbourhoods

“the fun, the laughter, the feel-good feeling”

“It’s open and there’s no barriers. Everyone gets treated the same and you treat everyone the same.”

“To do the job that they’re doing, they’ve got to be exceptional. Everything about them [the staff] draws you in, from the youngest to the oldest.”