

## **Cara Gates [Sass]**

**Title:** "Understanding the impact of Sporting Memories groups in the community for men living with dementia" - Full time study

**Supervisors:** Professor Claire Surr, Dr Mark Robinson, Dr Peter Francis

### **Background:**

Loneliness, particularly for those who live by themselves, is a major concern for charities working to provide support for people living with dementia. In particular, men are less likely than women to turn to others for support around health issues, including diagnosis of dementia. Older men see less of their close family than older women, and overall experience higher levels of social isolation. Almost two thirds of people with dementia are known to live in the community, but a gap exists in identifying the social needs of those who are not actively accessing support services. Meaningful social activity can be a tool to tackle isolation and loneliness, promoting a sense of belonging and providing vital support. However, there are many barriers associated with attending community-based support groups for people living with dementia including access to transportation, and feelings of wariness around visiting new or unfamiliar places.

Literature describing factors which promote and contribute to social activities for men living with dementia is limited. However, qualitative accounts suggest that familiarity both in environment and activities can be an important protective factor in maintaining involvement. There is a need to better understand the ways in which support can be delivered to men living with dementia; an improved awareness of men's preferences when accessing services in the community will help to shape support provisions in the future.

Male-only group activities such as shed maintenance, walking, and allotment work can not only improve feelings of isolation and loneliness, but can also have a positive impact on mental health for those who attend. A therapeutic intervention beneficial for men living with dementia in particular is reminiscence connected to sporting events and activities. Sports with strong cultural identities such as football have the ability to form and strengthen shared memories and emotional attachments; furthermore, sporting events can be used to tap into the collective memory of a group of individuals, revealing rich opportunities for discussion around music, fashion and other central autobiographical memories. The Sporting Memories Network is a charitable organisation which promotes sports-based reminiscence and physical activities to people living with dementia, depression and loneliness throughout the UK. It is clear from estimated attendance figures that the activities offered by Sporting Memories have a particular appeal for men, but the reasons for this are anecdotal and as yet have not been supported by research evidence.

Early qualitative case study evaluation of Sporting Memories groups in care homes has shown a benefit to interpersonal relationships between care home staff and residents, in addition to improvements in connections within groups of residents and with relatives. Early evidence points to the idea that Sporting Memories work is flexible and applicable in a variety of settings in the community and in residential care; can be an effective way to tackle social isolation; may be a worthwhile approach to bringing members of the community and local organisations together to promote inclusion; and address the stigma associated with dementia. To date however, an in-depth exploration of the impact of Sporting Memories sessions on people accessing them in the community hasn't yet been carried out. Work in this area would help to understand the extent to which Sporting Memories sessions can affect the lives of those who attend, and whether established groups can also have an impact on the wider community.

## **Your study design and methods**

My PhD study will begin with an in-depth review of the literature relevant to the target groups and content of Sporting Memories sessions. Due to the breadth of knowledge relevant to the area of study effort will be taken to maintain a broad and inclusive discussion of the evidence base. This will provide the necessary grounding upon which to base the in-depth work of the main phase of the study. This main phase will use a qualitative methodology using participatory ethnographic methods, including semi-structured interviews with group members and volunteers, observation of community group sessions, and detailed field notes of conversations with participants and reflective logs. A selection of participants will also be asked to keep reflective logs throughout the study period to record their thoughts outside group sessions. It is hoped that by following individuals between the weekly sessions, additional barriers and facilitators to attending group sessions may be identified, and participants may become more comfortable with sharing their experiences and engaging with the research over time.

## **What the contribution to knowledge will be**

My PhD study will aim to evaluate the perceived impact on physical and mental health, and social inclusion, for men living with dementia through sporting reminiscence activities (or combined reminiscence and physical activity) during SM groups. A secondary aim will be to identify the features of SM groups which appeal to men through observation of the content, style and social dynamics of SM groups.

I will seek to find out whether there are specific barriers that men with dementia face in engaging with support, and how are these overcome. Furthermore, I will explore whether recommendations can be made about the features of groups that appeal to men, for other organisations wishing to support men living with dementia through meaningful activities.

## **How you plan to disseminate the PhD**

I plan to produce articles of relevant findings for academic journals and conference presentations specific to dementia research to contribute knowledge to the sporting reminiscence field from the very outset. Publications will originate from literature review findings and outputs from ethnographic observations. I also plan to engage the public through production of infographics and correspondences for individuals and organisations with a potential interest in the Sporting Memories network, or in providing related activities for people living with dementia in the community. The Sporting Memories network has a strong presence on social media and I believe that through posting related media and information on platforms such as Twitter this will raise awareness of my research among networks with particular relevance to, and interest in the charity.