

David Truswell, Executive Director of the Dementia Alliance for Culture and Ethnicity.

DAVID TRUSWELL has worked in community based mental health services in the UK for over thirty years developing services for people with complex care needs and enduring mental health problems in a career spanning the voluntary sector, local authority services, and the NHS at a senior level. He is currently Executive Director of the Dementia Alliance for Culture and Ethnicity, a UK social enterprise developed by local and national voluntary organisations working with dementia and also works as an independent writer and researcher on dementia support and services for Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities with a number of journal publications on the issues. His recent published work includes the book *Supporting People Living with Dementia in Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Communities* and contributing a chapter on Dementia and its Impact on Minority Ethnic and Migrant Communities in [The International Handbook of Black Community Mental Health](#) (2020). He is also the Director of *somefreshthinking.ltd*, a healthcare consultancy for service redesign and change management in health and social care services.

‘Undiagnosed Artists from Unknown Cultures.’

Let us start with a blank piece of paper. I think a lot of people when they think of arts in relation to dementia, and creativity in relation to dementia and later life, maybe do not consider that a lot of people have gone through a lot of their lives without thinking they are creative, or that the endeavours they are involved in are creative. They cannot see themselves as being artistic or creative in those endeavours. A big challenge across the board, but especially for minority communities is to say, how do you understand yourself as being creative?

What is being creative? If you are somebody who writes, draws or paints, you might start with a blank piece of paper, or if you're going to be digital, a blank computer screen. It is important to understand that whatever language you speak, it is the same blank piece of paper. Often when you are working with people, particularly when you are working with people with limited verbal methods of expression, they're often more comfortable in expressing themselves in their mother tongue. Giving someone the opportunity to write things in English, for example, if that is not their original mother tongue, may not seem as important to them in terms of developing their creativity in a way that is helpful and beneficial for their wellbeing, as an opportunity would be to write and be read in something like Arabic.

In many cultures a blank piece of paper is an opportunity to create something folded like origami, or if I had different coloured sheets, maybe I could start to cut it into strips, or maybe I could mash my paper down into papier-mâché and create puppets. Which again, for some cultures, communicating about stories and lives through puppetry is very significant.

The important thing about approaching creativity in relation to people worrying about living with dementia is to think about how they might understand themselves as being creative, and how important that might be in thinking about how they can improve their wellbeing and engagement in creativity. They might manage to get on to some photo books. I have some here created by people affected by dementia in a project which I have been recently involved in with my colleagues Ellie Robinson-Carter and Ronald Amanze. We sent disposable cameras in the post to people to take photographs in their own environment of the things that were important to them and asked them to write a little bit where they describe what the pictures mean to them. They take the pictures. We developed their pictures to create photobooks, so they discovered themselves as creative artists, in a way that they may have never thought of before. One woman contributing to the photobook project, her illness was so advanced that she cannot communicate verbally, so it was a real revelation for her to participate in this project.

The unknown country is everybody who steps through the door who is from a place that you are not familiar with. My question is can you take a blank piece of paper at the end of this, and write down what is important in your life, how you express your creativity and what that means to you? Having done that, think how you ask a person from an unknown country that same question, to indicate or show what is important to them in their life in relation to their creativity, and how do you think how you are going to help them embrace and develop that creativity?

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