

Recovery in persons with complex mental health needs

A qualitative study of place-making dynamics

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RESEARCH

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Opening up the black box of recovery processes in persons with complex mental health needs: a qualitative study of place-making dynamics in a low-threshold meeting place

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The authors of this study have no competing interests to declare.



Background

Persons with complex mental health needs

A 'hard to reach' population of persons with substance use problems

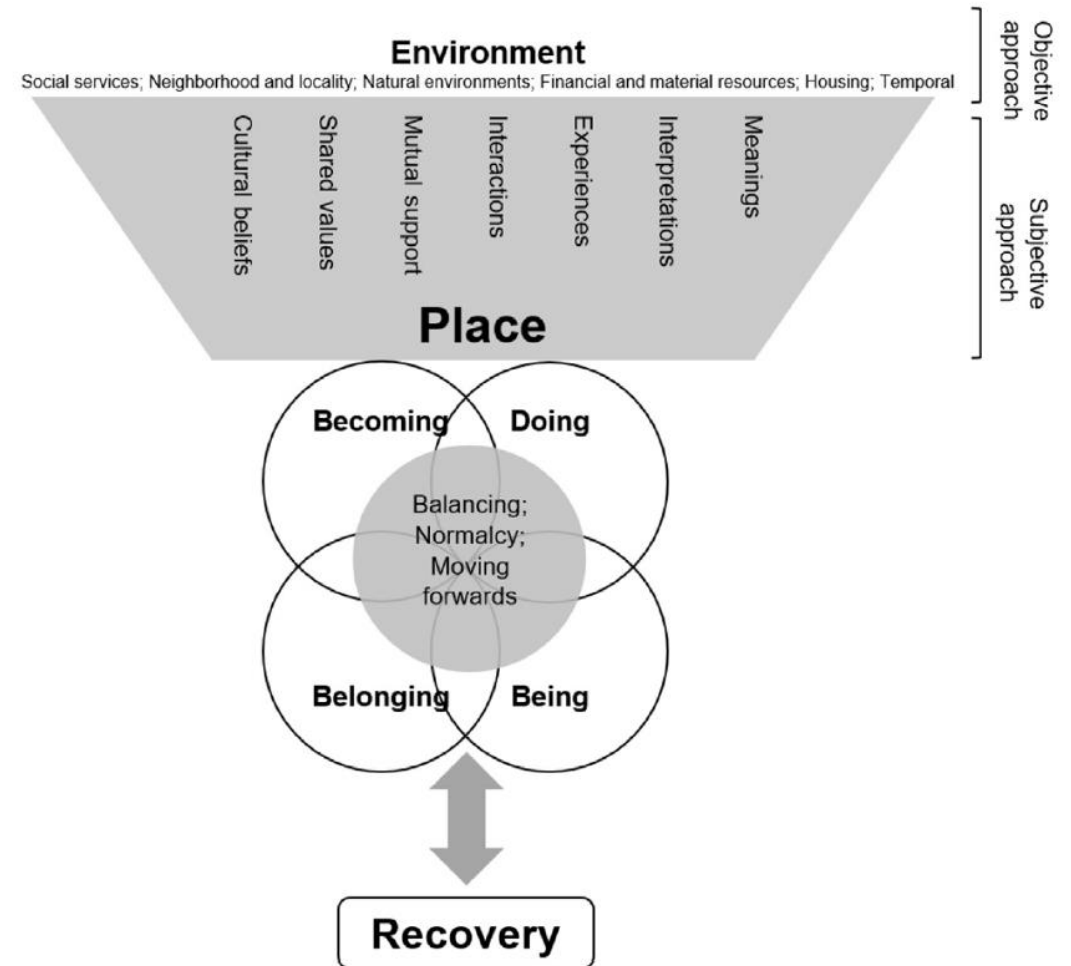
- Co-occurrence of substance use problems and severe mental health problems
- Homelessness, judicial problems, poverty, poor physical health, social isolation
- Slow and unpredictable recovery processes, with intense ups-and-downs (Priester et al., 2016)

Recovery in persons with complex mental health needs

- = black box!!
- Insight into building blocks of recovery (cf. CHIME-D) but processes remain hard to grasp (De Ruyscher et al., 2017)
- Personal recovery approach → relational and contextualized recovery approach (Price-Robertson et al., 2017)

Relational geographies & recovery

- Enabling, restorative, therapeutic dimensions of places (Duff, 2010, 2011, 2012; Tucker, 2010)
- Place-making dynamics as link between recovery and context
- Importance of everyday rituals (Jacobsen & Kristiansen, 2016)



(Doroud, Fossey & Fortune, 2018)



**How do the recovery processes of persons
with complex mental health needs take place?**



Methods

Research location

Villa Voortman

- Low-threshold meeting place in Ghent (Belgium)
- 15-25 daily visitors
- Horizontal organizational structure
- Creative and artistic processes (ateliers)
- Focus on the human encounter rather than treatment

“A place to be (me)”

De Ruyscher, C., Vanheule, S., & Vandeveldde, S. (2017). 'A place to be (me)': A qualitative study on an alternative approach to treatment for persons with dual diagnosis. *Drugs: Education, Prevention & Policy*, 26(1), 50-59.



Research process

Data collection & analysis

- Focus on the lived experiences of the meeting place's daily users
- In-depth interviews with visitors (n=8) and staff members (n=6)

The COVID-19 pandemic: a unique research opportunity

- Disturbance of everyday rituals and practices
- Magnifying glass on place-making dynamics
- NOT: impact of pandemic on daily practice of Villa Voortman





Results

The beating heart of the matter

Rituals of hospitality

- Physical closeness
- Cooking and eating together
- The importance of 'hotspots' (cf. fragmentation and intensification)
- Small-scale and larger rituals (e.g. Christmas party)



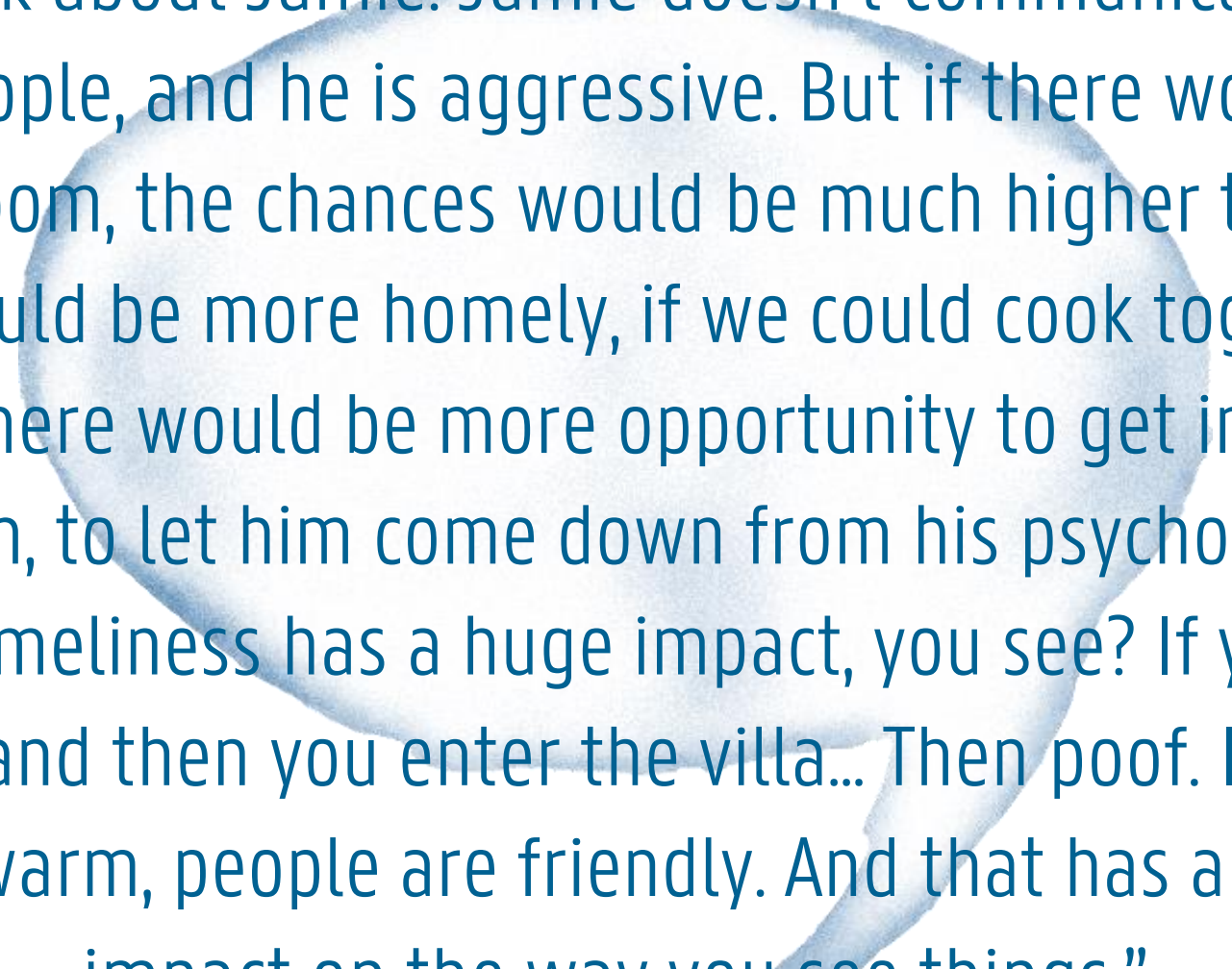
“Whenever we organize something big, there is always some kind of echo, a kind of afterglow, a kind of reverberation. (...) After something really good, there is a more positive atmosphere in the villa for a while. And people are more cheerful and positive. Just like after the Christmas party.”

(visitor)

Rituals as a counterweight

The entanglement of care and the encounter

- Softening effect of homely rituals
- Counterweight to 'survival rituals' (street life)
- Human encounter as essential mediator in responding to visitors' needs
- Balancing act between individual needs and collective rituals



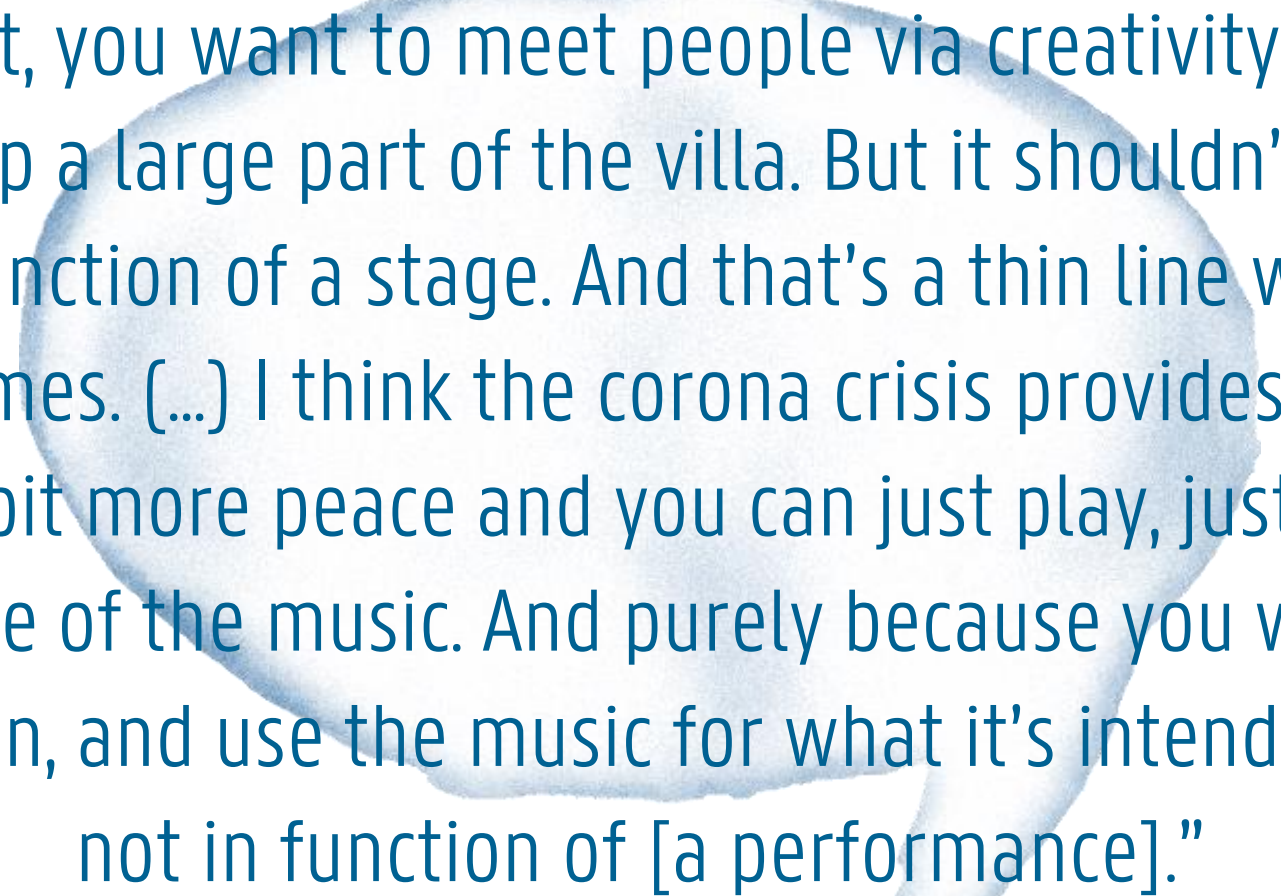
“So think about Jamie. Jamie doesn’t communicate with most people, and he is aggressive. But if there would be a living room, the chances would be much higher that he... If it would be more homely, if we could cook together... Then there would be more opportunity to get in touch with him, to let him come down from his psychosis a bit. The homeliness has a huge impact, you see? If you are raging, and then you enter the villa... Then poof. It is soft, it is warm, people are friendly. And that has a huge impact on the way you see things.”

(visitor)

The art of place-making

Creativity fueling place-making dynamics

- Both small (e.g. drawing, cooking, making music) and big (e.g. theatre productions)
- Opening up pores to the outside world
- Finding a language to engage in dialogue (cf. fluidity in guest-host roles)
- Creative and artistic products as tangible fingerprints in space and time



“Alright, you want to meet people via creativity, which makes up a large part of the villa. But it shouldn’t always be in function of a stage. And that’s a thin line we walk sometimes. (...) I think the corona crisis provides people with a bit more peace and you can just play, just purely because of the music. And purely because you want to have fun, and use the music for what it’s intended. And not in function of [a performance].”

(staff member)



Reflections

Recovery-enabling environments are characterized by...

... a radical hospitality

... horizontal relational dynamics

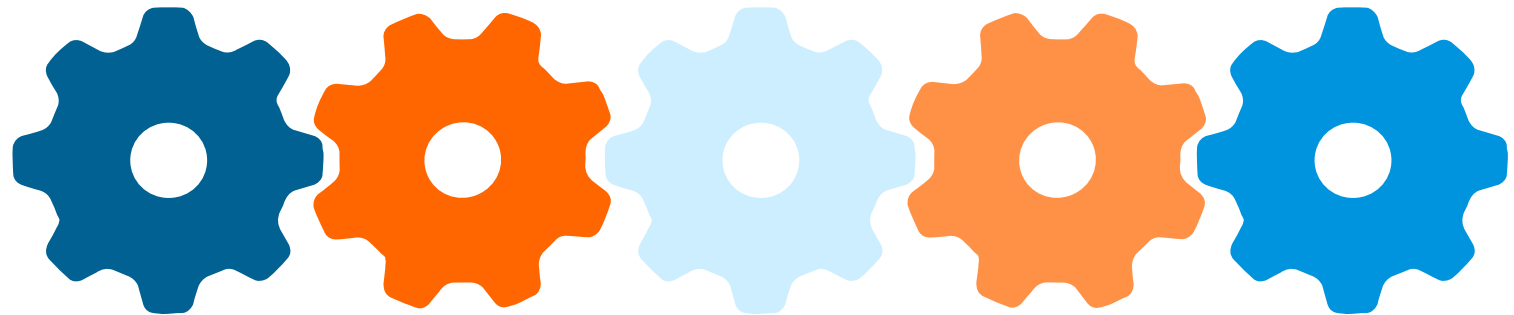
... reciprocity of ritualistic interactions

... porosity of boundaries



Place-making dynamics & recovery processes

- Material, social and affective dimensions of place (Duff, 2010, 2011, 2012)
- Being, doing, becoming and belonging (Doroud, Fossey & Fortune, 2018)
- Place-making dynamics are not intentionally linked to recovery (cf. CHIME)
- An ode to the ordinary... and the peculiar



Connectedness

Hope

Identity

Meaning

Empowerment

Literature

De Ruyscher, C., Vandevelde, S., Vanheule, S., Bryssinck, D., Haeck, W., & Vanderplasschen, W. (2022). Opening up the black box of recovery processes in persons with complex mental health needs: A qualitative study of place-making dynamics in a low-threshold meeting place. *International Journal of Mental Health Systems*, 16(1), 1-13.

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Thank you!

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