

Scientists: They are surprisingly normal

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The team that created Inside an Unquiet Mind. Credit: Squeaky Gate

(Medical Xpress) -- A multi-media production with a musical narrative set in the day room of a psychiatric hospital, Inside a Quiet Mind brought together Cambridge Neuroscientists and mental health service users to perform side by side, in this way breaking conventional barriers that exist between the two groups.

The show took performers and the audience outside their comfort zones to confront their prejudices and learn more about what it is like to have mental illness, how it feels to be on medication or to be hospitalized, and what is involved in the study of the brain. A paper describing the project, published today in the journal *EMBO* as part of a Science and Society report, will raise awareness of the potential for using the arts as a platform for bringing together groups who often feel an acute sense of separation.

The production was devised by Squeaky Gate, a music education charity specialising in [mental health](#), working in collaboration with its students, many of whom have experienced mental health issues, and with researchers and clinicians at Cambridge Neuroscience. It took place at Pembroke College and played to a packed audience totalling 400 people as part of the 2011 Cambridge Science Festival. The ethos of the show was inclusive and experimental with the audience encouraged to ask questions and engage with the issues raised. The performance was intercut with short presentations by scientists working on different areas of neuroscience that will contribute to a better grasp of mental illness and eventually lead to the development of improved treatments.

The *EMBO* paper has been written by Dr. Hannah Critchlow who made the link between Cambridge Neuroscience and Squeaky Gate. Dr. Critchlow has worked with Squeaky Gate for three years and was instrumental in developing the performance project as one of the charity's activities. Not only did she play a key role in organizing the project but she also took part as a performer, in the show filling the role of news reader for the fictional television program Neuroscience Today to draw attention to the vital importance of funding for the neurosciences.

For many people in the audience, the power of the production stemmed from the fact that performers comprised both scientists and service users. The lack of distinction made between the two carried a simple but powerful message: one in four people experience mental illness during their lifetime and it can happen to any of us. The combination of emotionally-charged performances that conveyed the often dehumanising experience of mental illness and the more coolly academic presentations of scientists working in the field of neuroscience was also elucidating as it confronted the persistent misconception that mental illness is something “in the head” rather than a range of conditions with a complex set of biological causes and triggers.

“I first became interested in neuroscience, and in mental health in particular, when I worked as a ward assistant in a big [psychiatric hospital](#) while at university. I saw how devastating mental illness can be and how it can take over your life and that of your family. My experiences prompted me to take a PhD at Cambridge University focusing on how connections between nerve cells are altered in schizophrenia. I wanted to contribute to the understanding of an illness for which improved treatments are desperately required” said Dr. Critchlow.

“The idea of creating a piece of drama involving both scientists and people who use, or have used, the mental health service, developed gradually in an organic way. Performing together was a challenge for those who took part but it was great to see how the arts could be used as a platform to bring people together on an equal footing in quite a novel way. You could see the barriers coming down and a sense of trust developing. I think everybody benefited from this partnership, the cast members and the audience.”

Responding to a follow-up survey set up to gather feedback from those who took part, one of the mental health users wrote that the production had resulted in a change in attitude of a relative who had been in the audience. “She had seen me perform musically before, but not alongside scientists. This production had a different impact on her. She had never done any research on bipolar [illness] and didn’t really understand it. It’s really shifted our relationship and we get on a lot better now. She now seems to understand that my illness is biological, that there is a reason and it’s not my fault – I can’t just cure myself.”

We are all guilty of stereotyping: indeed, our ability to judge other people is how we navigate the world. After taking part in Inside an Unquiet Mind as one of the performers, one scientist reported: “The experience taught me a lot about my own [prejudices](#) – which I am ashamed to admit – and sensitivities to public opinion, and helped me to

understand some of the difficulties involved in living with these debilitating conditions.” The initial unease felt by the neuroscientists did not go unobserved. A member of the cast who had experienced mental health problems said that it had been revealing to see neuroscientists “coming in with a fear of being around people with mental health issues – and watching them get rid of their fear while they were working with us and getting to know us as individuals”. Another member of the cast was struck by the fact that the scientists seemed “quite normal which was a bit of an eye-opener”.

The production did not pull any punches in addressing the pain of mental illness, and the accompanying hurt of social exclusion, which was conveyed through lyrics that were both raw and heart-felt. The lyrics were written by Squeaky Gate’s students, set to music by both students and neuroscientists, and also performed by a combination of the two. As part of the performance the audience watched two short films by Toby Peters (winner of 2011 Digital Heroes) made in response to individual’s experiences of bipolar disorder and psychosis. These films provided a personal and highly affecting counterpoint to the scientific presentations. As an audience member wrote: “The heart-breaking story of stigma and social exclusion made me realize what a desperate need there is for new knowledge about mental illness and that advancing scientific knowledge is fundamental to improving clinical care.”

All the neuroscientist who took part in the project found the experience challenging but also rewarding. The value of taking part lay in the opportunity to communicate their research to the general public – something that they all regarded as extremely important. For those involved and their families, [mental illness](#) quickly dominates lives with a schedule of treatments and appointments that eat into time and energy.

Squeaky Gate’s Artistic Director Simon Gunton commented: “It has been fantastic to work alongside the neuroscientists, and we are very

excited to continue this partnership. Working with Hannah and other Cambridge [Neuroscientists](#), we are now looking to conduct a research project to measure the impact of this type of work on the well-being of participants.”

Dr. Critchlow has recently been given a Wellcome Trust Society Award to work with the Naked Scientists – the award-winning podcast and BBC radio program based at the University of Cambridge. She is developing a neuroscience live show and podcast which will strip down the nervous system to its bare essentials, and discuss neuroscience research with the general public. She continues to work with Squeaky Gate and can be found flocking like a bird (a form of dance) with the students at the Squeaky Gate Monday evening workshops.

Provided by University of Cambridge

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