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Heritage, health and place: The legacies of local community-based heritage conservation on social wellbeing

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ABSTRACT

Geographies of health challenge researchers to attend to the positive effects of occupying, creating and using all kinds of spaces, including 'green space' and more recently 'blue space'. Attention to the spaces of community-based heritage conservation has largely gone unexplored within the health geography literature. This paper examines the personal motivations and impacts associated with people's growing interest in local heritage groups. It draws on questionnaires and interviews from a recent study with such groups and a conceptual mapping of their routes and flows. The findings reveal a rich array of positive benefits on the participants' social wellbeing with/in the community. These include personal enrichment, social learning, satisfaction from sharing the heritage products with others, and less anxiety about the present. These positive effects were tempered by needing to face and overcome challenging effects associated with running the projects thus opening up an extension to health-enabling spaces debates.

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1. Introduction

The geographies of health have explored the varying therapeutic effects of occupying, using and creating a myriad of spaces including parks and woodlands ('green spaces') (Milligan and Bingley, 2007), yoga centres and other 'new energy' spaces (Conradson, 2010), men's sheds (Milligan et al., 2015) as well as spas and other 'blue spaces' (Foley and Kisterman, 2015; Kearns et al., 2014). Meanwhile, little is known about the potential health benefits people can accrue from participating in community-based heritage conservation.

Community-based heritage conservation refers to the increasingly popular activity of coming together with members of the community to research local historical 'assets'. These could be associated with events, stories or moments linked with local places, including political movements, past professions, or local historical figures, as well as physical places themselves, such as walking trails, and cemeteries. It implicitly involves developing a closer relationship with one's local area and is potentially open to everyone, regardless of locality. Sometimes it involves 'preserving' an asset from harm – that is harm to its significance, not simply its fabric. It also typically involves the creation of cultural 'products' to conserve such heritage such as voice recordings of oral histories,

poster exhibitions, heritage trails maps, books and murals. In the UK, much of this work is undertaken with the help of the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), although some groups are also self-sufficient from monies made from their heritage products sold. The HLF grants help cover the costs of bringing people together to undertake a heritage project and produce the heritage products to share amongst the wider community.

Community-based heritage conservation is often but not exclusively driven by the involvement of older people, although many groups try to involve younger adults and schools as well. Inter-generational contact between younger and older generations has been found to create positive impacts on both cohorts (Brady and Dolan, 2009). For older people, the extent to which this is rooted in nostalgia is relevant. Lundgren (2010) found that older people often refer to their accumulation of life experiences in accounts of 'how it was' to explain their view on today's society. Another potential reason could be that older people have stronger connections with their local place, as found by Beaumont (2013). Yet, despite these strong connections with place, older people, particularly men, are more vulnerable to loneliness and social isolation in older age (Milligan et al., 2015). Whether becoming involved in heritage is good for one's health is thus significant in this respect. For the purposes of our study, we examined health primarily as a state of social wellbeing, derived from a sense of involvement with other people and with our communities (a core component of the WHO definition of health), although we understand that this is complexly interrelated with physical and mental wellbeing (for example, from walking with other people).

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Understanding the spaces being created and occupied by community-based heritage groups and whether they are likely to promote social wellbeing is important. Gleeson (2004) argues that in the age of globalisation, terror, ecological risk and endless (neoliberal) structural reform, it's surely understandable that there is a new yearning for social values based on community, belonging, order, balance, stability and place. These betoken what Gleeson calls the *new social yearning*: the desire for a secure place in social networks based on reciprocity, trust and mutual respect. The decline of people's social ties and civic capacities since Gleeson's paper has arguably continued apace with an increasingly mobile and fragmented world and more widespread concern for the growing disintegrative forces he identifies.

In this paper we report on one such avenue for promoting social wellbeing. Drawing on a 2012–2014 Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) study, one of our primary aims was to examine the personal motivations and journeys behind people's involvement in community heritage groups and what outcomes emerged. In particular, were there any positive effects on people's social wellbeing and was this shared amongst the wider community? In doing so, we consider the extent to which heritage conservation may become a health-promoting activity to address the challenges of engaging often disconnected and isolated members of the community and, in doing so, provide a 'map' for other communities to become engaged in such groups.

A second complementary aim was to examine 'how' and 'where' community-based heritage conservation operates. Such an approach can reveal much concerning the context in which particular community actions and motivations belong. It can also help disentangle how groups evolve from seemingly widely scattered and diversely constituted communities. Central to this focus was an investigation of the specific role of space and place in the heritage project. Our understanding of these terms derive from Massey's distinction; 'whereas space is abstract, place is *concrete*' (2005: 184). Taking the example of 'public space', it only *becomes* a place when it is locally differentiated and endowed with a particular value and meaning (e.g. a named village green). To avoid confusion, we avoid using the term site (as in 'heritage *site*') as it has its own specific meaning in geography.

2. Researching heritage, place and wellbeing

As indicated, the health geography literature has explored the beneficial physical and mental health effects of participating in a range of community-based activities. Many of these have been chronicled in Williams (2007) edited collection of therapeutic geographies as well as in a special issue in Health and Place (2005). Some have also attracted interest from public health funding bodies, such as Men's Sheds, in response to growing evidence of the positive health effects of participating in these spaces (see Milligan et al. (2015)).

To date, there has been little interest by health geographers in the spaces of community-based heritage conservation, although some exceptions to heritage in health geography are explored below. This gap is unusual given the long history of heritage conservation and the potential for it to have some positive effects in people's lives. Admittedly for much of this history, heritage conservation was largely seen as a state or large institutional responsibility until the last few decades (see Waterton and Watson (2015) for a detailed study). As far back as the fifteenth century right across Europe, there was an interest in creating collections of heritage. In Britain, with the rise of nationalism in the nineteenth century, this materialising impulse was matched with a generation of heritage management policies and legislation including the *Ancient Monuments Protection Act of 1882* (Cleere, 1989; Blake,

2000). It was not, however, until the 1960s onwards when heritage research emerged. However, this served as a backdrop to related activities of museums, archaeologists and the tourist industry. The community were seen as consumers rather than as producers of heritage (Lowenthal, 1985; Wright, 1985; Hewison, 1987). It is only in the last 30 years that there has been a shift towards a public, community generated focus.

The most recent drive, within the past 15 years, has been an increasing acceptance amongst policymakers and professionals that participating in archival work has real potential to improve community cohesion and individual wellbeing, but the evidence is mostly anecdotal. The HLF, created in 1994, has introduced community heritage as a priority and has just introduced a new fund 'Sharing Heritage', in its 2013–18 strategic framework. The Community Archives and Heritage Group (CAHG) was founded in 2005 and now has about 400 members.

It was the HLF's 2012–14 'All our Stories' programme that introduced the latest chapter in the UK's trajectory of heritage conservation. Until then, most programmes were produced and managed by large community collectives (such as the Migration Museum Working Group for example), or by local, small-scale and unconnected community-run historical groups. The 'All our Stories' programme marked a shift in HLF policies. In addition to making a strategic themed call for local communities to become involved (such as their extensively engaged World War One programme), groups were invited to propose what their local community wanted to explore. In total, 542 projects were awarded £4.5 million, ranging in individual grants from £3000 to £10,000. The HLF have plans to further develop this kind of programme and are specifically interested in 'support[ing] projects that help local people delve into the heritage of their community, bring people together, and increase their pride in the local area' (HLF, 2015a).

As noted, heritage is largely absent in the health geography literature. Moon et al. (2015) do consider the heritage of former mental-health asylums, but this work largely points to the strategic forgetting and ambivalence towards creating heritage associated with these spaces. Some rare exceptions exist, where former *workers* have developed fond place-histories with asylums. Meanwhile, Foley (2010) examines the history of spas and other therapeutic 'blue spaces' on people's wellbeing. However, the heritage of these spaces is rarely the motivating factor behind the health-promoting effects. Heritage largely remains the preserve of cultural geography. Crouch (2010) examines affect and emotion in heritage tourism and consumption and offers a critique of how 'heritage' is often institutionalised and reified in contemporary culture. For Crouch (2010), cultural heritage should be understood as perpetually *emergent* and performed, and this malleability can give rise to a 'gentle politics that emerges from the quieter affects of people coming to their own heritage' (p. 6).

Here, we seek to go some way toward broadening this debate around people's engagement with heritage by considering community-based projects through the lens of health-enabling places and spaces (Foley and Kisteman, 2015). This draws on the geographical metaphor of the therapeutic landscape – a theoretical concept that characterises how the healing process works itself out in places (Gesler, 1993). Health-enabling places and spaces can work like affective 'atmospheres' (Duff, 2015), described by Duff as interstitial spaces which inhere in encounters between bodies, objects and subjects, whereby a particular set of properties or qualities emerges. Atmospheres thus capture a moment of subjectivation in space, the 'right here, right now' feeling of the body and its environs in 'real experience'. Health-enabling spaces understood in this way are not necessarily 'natural' but can be created (Milligan et al., 2015). Indeed, their very creation can sometimes be the health-enabling instrument itself, for example the collective work involved in cultivating community gardens. Here,

such spaces should be seen through a health-promoting as well as a curative lens. For example, they can create mutually supportive atmospheres that can tackle social isolation and enhance people's quality of life and social wellbeing. Health-enabling spaces are thus concerned with complex interactions that can include the physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, societal and environmental (Williams, 2007).

Heritage conservation as noted above is by its very nature about generating a closer relationship with one's local area. Geographers have long explored the beneficial effects of having a strong sense of place and belonging (Relph, 1979; Tuan, 1977). Perceptions of places can be influenced by personal experiences and memories, the length of time spent living in a particular area, as well as awareness of historical significance (Relph, 1979). Bagnall (2003) for example, drawing on research on Wigan Pier, Northern England, demonstrates the active nature of heritage consumption, as visitors draw upon their memories and biographies to validate the interpretation of exhibits.

Community-based heritage conservation is also by its very nature driven by the coming together of members of the community who participate in forms of voluntarism. Health geographers have carefully chronicled the various shapes, sizes and therapeutic effects of different forms of voluntarism (see Rochester (2013)). Using NIMBY-ism as an example, Devine-Wright (2009) identifies the importance of place attachment and place identity as important symbolic and affective aspects of place-related action. Similarly Collins and Kearns (2013) focus on the local politics of resistance over a local sandspit, emphasising the special values of place, particularly when threatened by development. This body of work has contributed to understandings about the localness of narratives that people use to make sense of their lives.

Meanwhile, places are also active in shaping people's everyday activities. Processes of 'conserving' are ultimately underscored by conviviality of cause, local politics and serendipity concerning why people are in a particular place at a particular time. For instance, work by Milligan et al. (2011) explored the trajectories underpinning people's local involvement in activism and identified how local events and moments in time provided critical junctures in these trajectories. Tracing these paths can inform how and where people become connected with, and forge connections amongst local heritage groups and how they use narratives to make sense of their involvement.

Tracing these two inter-related roles of place and the inherent shape of voluntary activity underpinning heritage projects can help to disentangle the potential health-enabling effects of being involved in such groups.

3. Methodology

The research is based on an AHRC funded project, *Preserving Place* [AHRC: AH/L013118/1]. Given our aim in this study was twofold – to examine what health-enabling effects community heritage conservation can create and how and where groups operate – we adopted a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) to openly examine the motivating factors for the participants and their experiences of working in the groups. With this goal in mind, our research design incorporated three methods: questionnaires, interviews and a user-designed conceptual mapping technique, discussed below. All the research received University of East Anglia ethics approval.

A purposive sampling strategy was adopted, with the aim of recruiting the 32 HLF 'All Our Stories' funded community groups (all based in the East Anglia region in the South East of England primarily from rural towns and villages) who had taken part in the first ever collaboration between the HLF and the AHRC 'Connected

Communities' programme (at University of East Anglia and University of Cambridge). These groups accessed a variety of skills-based training workshops from the universities including archival searching and storing data. The findings must therefore be interpreted in light of the fact that other HLF groups nationally did not have similar training workshops. Our rationale for working with the same groups was to draw on what they learned from the workshops and other experiences, to enable the creation of our mapping tool to help other communities become involved in heritage conservation.

The questionnaire was sent to groups by email or post and was self-administered. The questions centred on investigating the main organisation details and activities of the heritage groups, consisting of tick box, scalar and free text response modes. Questions included: when was your group founded? How many people were involved in your community project? What were you trying to conserve? What activities were involved? What places did you meet and undertake activities in? What skills were needed to deliver the project? What made your project easy or difficult?

Each group was also given the opportunity to self-select members that wished to take part in an interview. These were face-to-face interviews and typically they involved one or two members of each heritage project (in one interview, four took part as a focus group). The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Questions focused firstly on exploring the motivating factors and origins of the community-based projects and the lasting social effects for participants. Secondly, they sought to examine the participant's everyday experiences of working in the groups. Questions included why did you get involved in the heritage project? What was important to you in the process? What were the biggest barriers you came across?

Finally, our user-designed conceptual mapping involved a process of exploring what was the best way to represent the journeys and flows of the materials, people and ideas involved (Wheeldon and Faubert, 2009). Our focus was to represent 'how' community-based heritage groups operate and to share the lessons learned. The questionnaire and interview data fed into the early design of the map. Interviewees participated in a focus group to help design the final map.

Data analysis was carried out concurrently with data gathering, as per a grounded theory approach. Firstly this involved open and selective coding of all questionnaires and interviews using NVivo. References to terms associated with social wellbeing were coded (e.g. enthusiasm, learning, social aspects, sharing) alongside less positive experiences. Secondly, this involved the design of the map, as indicated above. This process served as an additional mode of concurrent analysis in deciphering the key processes involved. For the purposes of this paper, we exclusively draw on the interviews, using pseudonyms, although the wider methods were relevant in discerning the main themes.

4. Findings

Of the 32 groups in our purposive sample, 21 self-identified group leaders responded to the questionnaire, representing a good range of local heritage groups in the East Anglia region. For the face-to-face interviews, 18 individuals in total volunteered to take part, with an equal mix of individual and focus group interviews, representing 10 groups from the original 32. A description of the 18 interviewees detailing gender, age, marital status and role in group/occupation is provided below in Table 1. The range and type of participants revealed that the groups were not always cohesive. Some were well established, running multiple projects while others had come together for the first time in response to the funding call. Some had narrowly defined projects (for example, the

Table 1
Heritage Group Participant Details.

No.	Group No.	Psuedonym	Approx Age	Marital Status	Role in Group/occupation
1	1	Jenny	60s	Married	Chair of Community Hall committee. Genealogist. Trustee of Wayland Partnership Trust.
2	2	Sarah	60s	Married	No specific group role.
3		Donna	60s	Single	Local history book author. Historical society secretary.
4		Adrian	70s	Married (to Sally)	Chairman of Parish Council. Local history author. Website manager for historical society.
5		Sally	70s	Married (to Adrian)	History recorder for parish.
6	3	Melanie	50s	Married	Restaurant owner. No specific group role.
7	4	Cathy	50s	Married	Campaign to Protect Rural England Norfolk branch.
8	5	Matt	60s	Married	Company director. No specific group role.
9		Mary	60s	Single	PhD, FARc. Retired Consultant Clinical Scientist. Chair of heritage group.
10	6	Paul	70s	Married	Local history publisher.
11		Jayne	50s	Married	University Community Engagement Officer, Health Sciences PhD student.
12	7	Susan	50s	Married	Local and family historian. Early music performer/re-enactor.
13		Joy	70s	Single	Company secretary for building firm. No specific group role.
14		Debbie	60s	Single	Local history book author.
15	8	Ray	50s	Married	PhD. Retired School teacher. Re-enactor and creative writer. Chair of heritage society.
16	9	Rachel	30s	Single	UEA postdoc in Medieval and Early Modern Literature.
17	10	Abi	70s	Married	Archivist.
18		Sandra	60s	Married	Retired physiotherapist. No specific group role.

history of the village's telephone box) while others were wide-ranging (for example, examining medieval and early modern letters of a whole county region).

4.1. The seeds of heritage conservation

Firstly, we examined why people became involved in heritage conservation. Importantly, we tried to decipher whether the seeds of heritage conservation stemmed from trying to find social connections in the community or for exploring the heritage itself.

Overwhelmingly, we found that most people discussed the curiosity and interest in the heritage as the primary motivating factor rather than the social dimensions which *may* have potentially accrued. Many of the accounts from participants referred to the curiosity and passion for history and the learning and understanding achieved as the key seeds for stimulating their initial action.

It's understanding how people lived here before us. It's learning and understanding and having a curiosity… and well, we've both always loved history so, you know, but I firmly am of the belief, you do not understand today unless you understand yesterday. Well you don't, do you? How can you understand why people are doing things now if you haven't understood what created that in the first place? Even if it's only your own life you know. (Jenny, 60s, married)

This passion in history indicated above also extended to capturing more recent history, such as the life histories of older residents for sharing amongst current and recently settled residents. Other accounts referred to moments of excitement and real senses of achievement associated with making a new discovery and finding out a new aspect of the history of one's area:

There were moments of great excitement when people found out things that they… particularly I think with Harry's bit in the war chapter, 'cause he took the names off the war memorial and was going to find out about each of them, and there was one that he couldn't find for a very, very long time. And then the information came from America, the Bomb Group Association in America. We found out enough to be able to put something in the book about it, so that was a real sense of achievement. (Sally, 70s, married)

Interestingly, we found that this degree of excitement and achievement was discovered in quite ordinary spaces typically occupied in the early stages of community-based heritage

research. These spaces included the parish hall for recruitment meetings, in homes of other group members for meetings as well as the local record office. However, for some, this latter space was where there was some apprehension about approaching at the outset but where participants gained confidence in using after some time. The heritage work also generated new mobile geographies stemming from new car journeys between these various spaces as well as more regular walking around historical places and trails.Throughout the research, we discovered from many of the participants how centrally involved older people were in the various heritage projects. The reason for older people having a passion for the past was explained by a participant below:

It seems to me it's very much older people because they might have retired and they've got time on their hands and… they're able to indulge their curiosity. That is what I think it is now. You know… the fascination with the past is probably in all of us, but it's only, it's… only able to sort of manifest itself when you've got time to explore, go on training courses and go spend five hours in the records office trailing round papers (Cathy, 50s, single)

Interest in one's heritage, according to the same participant, can also stem from anxiety about the present. The quote below articulates the growing sense of uncertainty felt by society about government, technology and global threats. As an antidote to these anxieties, the following participant advocates how a look into the past can contribute to feelings of greater security and stability.

I mean there's a real fascination with [heritage] and looking back… you know, it's funny I was thinking about this actually, about nostalgia… and I don't know whether it's an anxiety about the future or the present that makes people want to look back into the past… to a time when they felt things were more secure. But it's only because it's known you see. I think that's what people like about the past. It is a known thing and they can understand it. They can put it into context whereas anxieties about the present or the future, whether it's technology or government or war or famine… or global stuff. You know that's quite big and frightening, whereas you can look back on the past and make sense of it. So I think there's a sense of reassurance about history, that you can get answers, possibly. (Cathy, 50s, single)

While the above point about anxiety of the present was only made explicitly by one participant, many others referred to a sense of comfort derived from looking into the past, as articulated by

Sarah (60s, married) 'it was an emotional experience… because after [the project] had been done, I found myself walking around the village, I really looked at places and buildings and almost felt… 'we've recorded your history now'… You feel you're making connections about people that lived here in the past'. From the above two comments, it is clear that heritage conservation can go some way towards helping people make strong connections with their local sense of place and to some extent help alleviate some present day anxieties.

4.2. Bringing people together

Secondly, we were interested in the extent to which the social aspects of community-based heritage research were important in *sustaining* people's interest in the projects. What emerged from the interviews was a commonly shared experience of valued social connections and the extent the projects brought people together. All participants spoke of the social networks generated and friendships made in their groups and wider community. The original curiosity which drove the initial interest was inherently linked with their enjoyment of meeting other people informally who shared their interest, as illustrated below.

> When the group meets, it meets in the pub. So basically there's a room that's kind of given over to us and so in a way there's a social aspect to the steering of the group. It's not a formal thing and I think [with] that informalness, there's a laugh. I think the social aspect of it is really important… (Matt, 60s, married)

As well as creating opportunities to meet and build friendships with other people, participating in heritage projects also appeared to have positive impacts on people's inter-personal skills. Heritage projects typically involved people working together with others in the community (often for the first time) over a long period of a year or longer. They often required the learning of new skills. A treasured outcome reported by one participant was learning 'tolerance' for people with different capabilities:

> It teaches you tolerance I think. You know, not everybody can do the same sort of things can they? Not everybody's capable of doing um… perhaps all four of us were capable of what we were doing but perhaps some people weren't or aren't… and you have to be tolerant. (Sally, 70s, married)

These positive social effects clearly stemmed from the widening of new spaces, friendships and opportunities as the projects unfolded. The inter-generational dimensions of engaging with children and schools also very clearly emerged from the interviews. There was a clear awareness of the beneficial effects of giving young people an opportunity to become involved in the heritage research projects.

> we had you know… all ages, they got together it was quite moving actually to see that from the old people, young people, schools, colleges, passers-by… I had no experience [painting murals] but it was just so lovely to see people getting together and painting. (Melanie, 50s, married)

Another group involved children in the local school early in the project to participate with an archaeologist in a mini-dig on the village green. The group reported that if you make children aware of things and give them a sense of ownership and involvement in the project, they will more likely become passionate about it and custodians of the future. They also noted that children often see things in a different perspective and did some brilliant work.

The inter-generational involvement of children also had more long-term beneficial effects on some, as reported by the following participant regarding a disadvantaged young person's boost in confidence and choice of career path:

> There were young people who went to the Nexus Engineering Centre and learned how to build bridges. The children were post-sixteen, these youngsters they had various problems. So they would come once a week for three hours to learn how to build bridges, the bridges of Great Yarmouth. One of the youngsters, the language! F-ing and blinding, 'I don't want to be here and why am I here?' And in few weeks' time with encouragement of Sarah and me and telling her how intelligent she was – and she was really very intelligent – to see what she was achieving that girl and then to say, 'I love coming here' and that she wanted to do an engineering course. (Melanie, 50s, married)

4.3. Telling their story

Thirdly, we explored what therapeutic effects emerged from celebrating the end products associated with heritage conservation and people's reactions to them. The participants were able to celebrate their achievements and this often encouraged other people to get involved.

> I can't complain 'cause I'm really, really happy with the end product. And I love the [oral history] transcripts… And people's reaction to it. I must admit, the week before it was launched… [you couldn't sleep, could you? And I couldn't sleep. (Donna)] No, I couldn't sleep. I thought, 'oh what if they hate it… what if everybody thinks it's rubbish?' but fortunately… there hasn't generally been a negative comment. It's been wonderful. (Sally, 70s, married)

The above quote illustrates a broader finding shared amongst all groups. The production of heritage 'outputs', as indicated at the start of the paper can be quite diverse and can embody a wide range of material, aural and visual objects. These products generated other important material or virtual 'spaces' associated with heritage conservation, in terms of where they decided to store, exhibit or sell the outputs. Seen as a space, the objects embodied the spirit of a particular aspect of the local history and told people more about themselves and their place. Often they became permanently exhibited in public thus leading to the creation of new material spaces, for example in the village green, Church, or parish hall. Their use also generated new hybrid dynamic spaces, involving the sharing and interacting of the products with different people in diverse ways.

The widening spaces and networks, as reported above, thus continued to grow after the lifespan of projects, as participants made new contacts amongst people not involved directly in working on the project. There was some evidence of a growing sense of collective social wellbeing which stemmed from the projects amongst the wider community.

> I think also part of the project is that there are a lot of new people who've moved into the village over the last 10 years or so, who are unaware of a lot the rich history of the area (Matt, 60s, married)

> yes the community part was as important as the heritage part really. Great Waldingfield… there's lots of incomers… lots of people that don't know one another. I think during this project and the history society has engendered a lot of good spirit in the village… people that haven't spoken to one another for years are suddenly all friends with each other again (Donna, 60s, single)

The opportunity for the wider community to become involved in viewing, sharing and learning about the heritage of their area,

as the quotes above show, demonstrates the positive multiplier effects from the projects.

4.4. Frustrations and challenges

Fourthly, we examined whether negative experiences from the heritage conservation work were also reported. The interviews revealed many accounts of frustration and a loss of patience which arguably hampered or perhaps were even injurious to people's wellbeing.

First, there were negative experiences which stemmed from anxieties over funding, the workload and paperwork involved in the heritage projects:

> when we had to go for an extension, I was really worried, and I had to very, very carefully word it… thinking, 'is that right?' I took a day or two to send it off and it came back 'no problem'. And that was a relief, you know. (Adrian, 70s, married).

There was also a sense that the heritage projects at times became labour intensive and demanding on one's time and one's family life. Given the participants were centrally involved in setting up their projects, this finding is perhaps likely, as they took the lead with the work involved:

> I doubt, if I'd known how much work, I would have said I wouldn't have been able to do it. Because it takes… it does take over your life… your home life as well, I mean there were a couple of times… There's got to be people at home… got to be um… understanding (Sally, 70s, married)

Many of the anxieties involved working with other volunteers, particularly when they failed to deliver on a promise. This led to feelings of disappointment and further reinforced how demanding the projects could be on the participant's time:

> It's just disappointing though… when people volunteer to do something and you give them, you know… [particularly when you've had them on the training sessions as well (Adrian)] Oh yes, they've been into the training sessions you give them the information that you've got… you tell them where to go… and give them whatever guidance you think you can… and a month later they say, 'sorry, I haven't got time' and give it back to you having done nothing. (Sally, 70s, married)

Second, there were interpersonal emotional challenges which emerged from working closely with people in the heritage projects. For instance, sometimes there was a 'culture clash', when group members had different visions for their group as expressed by Matt; 'coming from an arts bias, you could present an idea like 'let's get the school involved in this aspect'. Well that'd be met with deaf ears'(Matt, 60s, married). Another participant spoke about how he felt when forced to show an unpopular controlling side of his personality which he did not want to:

> you also need someone to crack the whip and…
> and he did… very well (Donna, 60s, single)…
> I felt quite unpopular at times. (Adrian, 70s, married)

There were also instances of squabbles between group members, perhaps given the work involved and stresses sometimes felt. Some spoke of feeling naïve and having to learn new skills in dealing with people with different agendas and those deemed to have 'small mindedness':

> perhaps at the beginning I was a bit um… too naïve for, for various things and I had a lot of trust in people… I learnt how to deal with different people and different people's personalities… let's say that you have to be more firm as a chairperson. I

had the ethical responsibility to keep things right and keep any other uninteresting things out of the project if you know what I mean, any, any small minded attitudes out of the project. I learnt very fast in a painful way sometimes but I had to learn to do that you know. (Melanie, 50s, married)

Ultimately though, throughout the course of the interviews, the participants articulated a dichotomy associated with having to go through the hard work and personal journeys in order to experience the more therapeutic experiences of achievement, pride and accomplishment in seeing the project come to fruition and the new skills learned:

> If you knew in advance how much work it was, you probably wouldn't go outside to do it, to be perfectly honest. If we were to do it again, it would be a lot easier… interesting dichotomy… (Adrian, 70s, married)

Overall, despite people's frustrations and anxieties, a sense of personal achievement and a view that the heritage conservation was something worth doing was shared amongst all the participants. This no doubt cut across the experiences articulated above about showing the final heritage products and seeing the wider connections with the community grow.

5. Conclusions

Before elaborating on the research findings, the limitations of this study are discussed. First, most of the participants were married and therefore did not fit within a specific group category typically associated with social isolation. With this in mind, we cannot speculate about the health effects for other groups who may be more vulnerable to being disconnected and isolated in the community. Second, all evidence of positive effects on social wellbeing was self-reported and we did not interview the participants before they became involved in community-based heritage projects. Therefore it made it difficult to know if the participants always experienced positive mental health. To alleviate this, we ensured that we captured the participant's accounts of their journeys of how and why they became first involved and the changes in themselves, their group and wider community as their projects evolved.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the paper showed a wide range of positive experiences associated with community-based heritage conservation. The study design provided open opportunities to participants for thoughtful and felt responses. These included a range of affective experiences such as passion, curiosity, delight, accomplishment, pride, reciprocity, and growth. Moreover, these positive affects appeared to have contributed to wider experiences of belonging, engagement, and social wellbeing, with each tied to place overtly. While these 'therapeutic' experiences are being found in the reviews of the heritage funding bodies, these have largely been absent in health geography literature or more widely within public health promotion literature.

The positive experiences were tied up with firstly, whetting one's appetite and original passion for history and place; secondly, meeting other like-minded people and seeing wider community connections grow; and thirdly, seeing the final 'product' come to fruition and sharing it. The findings thus offer an early contribution to the way in which heritage is worked by individuals in their own practice and understanding that of others. Each of these points are deeply relevant and contrast in different ways to other types of activities deemed to be health-enabling.

For the first point, there were obvious benefits from being able to draw on one's love of history and place, in terms of building and sustaining one's sense of belonging, cultural identity and security

in one's area. These benefits illustrate the quieter affects of people coming to their own heritage, as identified by Crouch (2010). This is an important finding as everyone should be free to discover their own heritage; however we also acknowledge that glorifying the past is not without its own problems, as argued by Hewison (1987). For the second point, being able to extend social networks had obvious benefits for the participants' social inclusion, reciprocity and inter-personal skills. The findings revealed a rich array of examples of gaining social wellbeing through interacting with others with shared interests. It also appears to have wider community benefits, which resonates with Bagnall's (2003) point about the active community interpretation of heritage exhibits. This final point demonstrates a particular relevance of having satisfaction associated with 'production', as well as the active engagement in visiting, seeing, hearing about or feeling a space/object representing one's local area. Therefore the therapeutic effect can be extended to others through the sharing and interpreting of the heritage re-presentation.

These wider beneficial effects link back to Gleeson's (2004) prognosis of what can often be wrong with new neighbourhood planning that fails to support local community connection initiatives, like the ones being reported here. Gleeson argues that urban planners and private sector property developers are increasingly prioritising top-down 'masterplanning' of the community 'commodity' (for example, designing shared public spaces and recreational spaces) as a way to address concerns by communities for more social ties. He argues that this typically fails to give incumbent residents opportunities to develop a healthy collective purpose and lasting social ties. Our findings show that people can develop much stronger, long-lasting connections with their communities through the heritage conservation work. Moreover, despite the heritage projects being predominantly led by older people, many in the wider community were able to participate and benefit too, through the active interpretation of exhibits and other 'products' attached to the history of their local area and through attending talks and school workshops.

Interconnected with these experiences were a range of spaces which opened up to the participants and wider community beyond the records office and library. These heritage spaces were distinct from those conventionally understood as heritage places such as museums that are somehow interpreted as pre-figured, ready-made and often elitist (Crouch, 2010). The geographies of community-based heritage work included the places which were the original motivating factors for the work, where subconscious place attachments became consciously realised (Devine-Wright, 2009). They also included an expansion of people's private living rooms and kitchens to other like-minded people, as well as an unfolding of 'new' public spaces including mini-digs on village greens, and material or virtual exhibitions of films, posters, maps and so on in village halls, history websites, and schools. Each of these new spaces created hybrid inter-relational and interstitial connectivities, understood here as affective atmospheres (Duff, 2015) in which people's sense of place, belonging, and security can grow.

Despite the findings being primarily from older married people, such examples may resonate for other older people, particularly single men who as noted can be susceptible to social isolation. Given many of the participants were older, the study raises questions about why there is not more joined-up thinking in relation to active ageing programmes and broader public health promotion initiatives. This is unfortunate as each programme of work could potentially learn a lot from another. In addition, there were rich positive inter-generational effects from the involvement of older and younger people on many of the projects.

An important point must be made about the 'untherapeutic' frustrations and challenges experienced by the participants. Community-based heritage work appears to be at odds with other health-enabling spaces that can have a more immediate outcome; for example the therapeutic effects of immersion in water (Foley, 2010) or viewing nature (Abraham et al., 2010). Heritage conservation appears to mirror other therapeutic activities that involve 'deep immersion', for example the long periods that yoga practitioners spend learning techniques (Philo et al., 2015). In the case of heritage conservation, given the accounts of the sometimes difficult political (small 'p'), economic, and social challenges, there were some distinct untherapeutic stressors involved. This was particularly evident in the account of one participant reluctantly having to 'crack the whip' out of annoyance with fellow heritage project members; a trait he felt uncomfortable expressing in a personal social context. Acknowledging these affects we feel adds credibility and balance to more positive wellbeing accounts. This sense of a contested therapeutic geography is acknowledged elsewhere (Collins and Kearns, 2007; Milligan and Bingley, 2007; Williams, 2007) and such reflexivity should be continued in future critical writing. As the participants showed, overcoming these stressors led to significant feelings of accomplishment and pride. Moreover, we would argue that facing these challenges can have longer lasting health-enabling effects, given the wider collective sense of community, belonging, order, balance, stability and place which can be cultivated and sustained by researching and conserving the heritage of one's local area. In a sense, people can embody and live 'in' the very outputs that they have created, for example, guided walks and parks. There can also be health benefits associated with walking around between places associated with the heritage project. Also, participants were able to reap a strong sense of ownership over the process and outputs, which is not found in some other forms of voluntarism. Whilst it was not the aim of this paper to show the conceptual mapping tool, we ultimately hope that in time it will help other groups to overcome the challenges and pitfalls and maximise these positive experiences.

Given the participants in this study would not be typically deemed vulnerable in official policy terms, we would therefore encourage further health geography work which critically considers the radical plurality of many localities, in the UK and abroad, and which explores the complex interplay of heritage, place and different individual journeys. It would also be important to examine whether it is suitable to promote community-based heritage conservation as a therapeutic activity for other groups who may be deemed more vulnerable such as people with learning disabilities (Ray and Thomas, 2015) and people with mental ill-health (HLF, 2015b). Duff (2015) for example emphasises the importance of cultivating affective atmospheres of recovery for those with mental ill-health. Such work would help to uncover the true value of heritage conservation on health and wellbeing across the many different stages of 'becoming or staying well' that are enabled or inhibited within a broader web of social, political and economic contexts.

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