

## **Painting place: re-imagining landscapes for older people's subjective wellbeing**

### **1. Introduction**

The underpinning concept of therapeutic landscapes (Gesler, 1993, 2003; Williams, 2007) supports an expanded field of research investigating how encounters with landscapes can benefit perceived health and wellbeing. Gesler's (1993) initial therapeutic landscape concept included physical places with healing associations to which people would travel for treatment or healing, whether physical, psychological or spiritual. Subsequently, the development of an expanded concept includes settings or situations that encompass physical, psychological and social environments associated with healing, providing scholars a breadth of interpretation and application. Currently, the concept encompasses natural and built physical landscapes, social and symbolic environments, and landscapes of the mind as largely or entirely imagined landscapes (Andrews, 2004; Callard, 2003; Philo and Parr, 2003; Rose, 2012, Williams, 2007). Such diverse physical and imaginary locations embody therapeutic qualities for different groups and individuals. The encounter is not always therapeutic, there are places with which people have negative, or distressing associations, or phobic or obsessive relationships (Curtis, 2010). Such experiences involve feelings of risk, fear, or exclusion (Andrews and Holmes, 2007; Sperling and Decker, 2007; Toila-Kelly, 2007). Notably, relationships to places, even those of the everyday, can shift over the life course from positive to negative, from safe to risky (Milligan, 2007). This may be as a result of changes to the place through processes of nature, natural disaster, or human intervention, such as urban development, war, unsociable behaviour, or arise from changes to the individual, as with ageing or migration.

This paper contributes to the literature in exploring ways that landscapes evoke emotions and memories to impact older people's subjective wellbeing through engagement in a participatory painting project. We aim better to understand the role of painting in enabling participants to express and to represent feelings associated with a landscape, and to evaluate whether subjective benefits to wellbeing proceed from the participatory engagement. In order to provide a contextual framework for the study we examine the

connection between feelings and emotions evoked by place and their relationship to perceptions of wellbeing. Thus, re-imagining place is explored as a potentially therapeutic activity connected to a reflective painting activity.

In the context of therapeutic landscapes the significance of emotions in response to place has been explored within the field of geographic research (Anderson and Smith, 2001; Bondi, 2005; Davidson, Bondi, Smith, 2005; Davidson and Milligan, 2004; Milligan, 2007; Urry, 2007). The concern to give positive recognition to the presence of emotions in geographical writing, and to reflect the discipline's emotional involvement in people and places, was relatively new when Davidson et al., (2005) mapped geography's 'emotional turn'. The work generated greater focus on the intersection between geography and gerontology (see for example Andrews, Milligan, Phillips, Skinner, 2009), and fields of empirical inquiry into spatial issues and the lives of older people. Drawing from this work we highlight two issues of significance in relation to emotions and place for older people.

First, Rowle (1978) proposes that as people age, and become increasingly frail, they experience progressive disengagement from spaces used by younger age groups. The everyday life spaces occupied by older people progressively reduce until they effectively become 'prisoners of space'. Expanding this theme Milligan, Bingley, and Gatrell (2005) explore 'feeling out of place in public spaces', a study that exposes the negative experiences of older people in public spaces. In particular they identify factors that contribute to reducing older people's life spaces, such as limitations to their mobility caused by feeling unsafe, and specific challenges, such as, overcrowded tubes and buses, heavy traffic, crime in deprived areas, dark nights and poor weather. They found these factors constrain older people's access to places with which they have emotional attachment, in particular the peace and tranquility of the rural landscape where they might participate in activities such as painting, photography, walking or enjoying the scenery. Andrews, Milligan, Phillips, Skinner (2009) find the role of emotional attachments to place for older people is important in the context of supporting and retaining a sense of self-determination and identity. Thus, older people's progressive detachment from places contributes to a decline in their sense of wellbeing. This study responds to this issue in seeking to investigate whether beneficial impacts are generated by re-imagining places with which older people have an emotional attachment.

We explore whether the process of re-imagining, or 'holding a place in mind,' might contribute to a perception of 'holding on' to a significant place, conceivably even when that place can no longer be visited. We consider whether the resulting painted landscape, when displayed in the home setting, provides longer lasting benefits to wellbeing.

Second, the literature identifies a tension between emotions and subjective experiences of ageing, and the social and cultural expectations of age and emotions that society considers appropriate in the older person (Bytheway 1995, 2005; Gilleard, 2005; Milligan et al. 2005). Andrews, Milligan, Phillips, Skinner, (2009) understand this in three ways: i) society stereotypes older age individuals as less emotional; ii) social respect for older people is bound up in the attribution of distinctive emotions as 'respectable' (e.g. stoicism), whilst others are 'disreputable' (e.g. sexuality) as identified by Milligan, Bingley, and Gatrell (2005); iii) prescribed emotions result in older people adopting a 'mask of ageing' that operates to separate an older person's inner emotions from their outer performance, noted by Hepworth (1998) and Biggs (2004). In this context, this study explores whether a painting workshop provides a space where participants can drop the 'mask of ageing' to explore identities and share emotions in the present. It investigates whether the workshop enables participants to shift from socially prescribed roles and emotions to express themselves to their peers, using their emotional experiences in the creation of paintings.

In the context of older people's emotional attachments to place, and the limitations they can experience in accessing those places, we consider whether acts of remembering and re-imagining place can be beneficial. For this reason we explore how meanings from the past can evoke emotions, and memories can impinge on one's present therapeutic experience. Re-imagining in visual and narrative forms is central to a study undertaken by Kearns, Joseph, & Moon, (2010) suggesting memory may be practiced through material memorialisation, or narrative remembrance of past experience in a place. Material memorialisation and narrative remembrance are discussed to examine the extent to which the past is strategically forgotten or selectively remembered. The point will inform our understanding of the subject matter selected by participants. Reinforcing the notion of selectivity in the construction of a therapeutic place, a recent study undertaken by Wood, Gesler, Curtis, Spencer, Close, Mason, Reilly (2015) explores how selected meanings

attributed to therapeutic landscapes from one's past can evoke emotions and memories to generate ideas about nostalgia, solastalgia, salvage and abandonment. The study demonstrates how selected meanings produced by remembering reinforce a sense of place involving an individual's 'attachment' and 'identity'. The interaction between selected meanings, emotional attachment to place, and self-identity are important for this study, particularly in considering how emotional attachment and self-identity impinge on perceptions of the self, and how the self is projected to significant others.

Attachment to place connects with a strand of ideas within therapeutic landscape theory concerned with the meanings of places, and how their symbolic character relates to mental health (Curtis, 2010). Curtis develops the discussion to consider imagined spaces and real spaces, and the perception of the significance of places associated with different mental states (Ibid., P. 155). She argues that certain spaces and places important for psychological and emotional health are impacted by factors of attachment, influencing one's sense of security, identity and self-worth. The subject matter selected by participants is considered in connection with these ideas and participant's associative emotions.

We turn now to imagining place as a therapeutic activity. Imagining place has been the subject of research by several authors in geographies of wellbeing (Williams, 1998; Bondi, 1999, 2003, 2005; Bondi with Fewell, 2003; Callard, 2003, Philo and Parr 2003; Andrews, 2004, Rose, 2012). Bondi's psychotherapeutical approach is relevant for Andrews (2004) in developing a theoretical context that extends the idea of landscape to include imaginative constructs. Bondi (1999, 2003) suggests that counselling often involves practices whereby a client imaginatively revisits the past, often going to a place, that may be real or may be metaphorical. Extending these perspectives, Bondi and Fewell (2003) describe the spatiality of counselling in terms of how counsellors actively mobilize spatial concepts in their practice, and how spaces can be created through both reality and fantasy. More recently Kearns and Andrews (2010) note the concept of imagining place is used as a central therapeutic tool of practice in counselling. Psychotherapy, and mind therapies encourage clients to imagine a past or present place, for a therapeutic experience, and to improve their wellbeing. Complementing Bondi's research Williams (1998) focuses therapeutic practices in mental health to develop the term 'landscapes of the mind'. She explores the use of imagery

and visualization within psychological interventions to argue that a better understanding of mental health practices and therapeutic landscapes might be gained by researching them together.

Drawing on the work in therapeutic geographies, Andrews (2004) explores strategies of visualization used by therapists in clinical practice where patients' create non-physical places to enhance mental health and wellbeing. He links such strategies to imaginative enactments by individuals seeking to cope successfully with change and stress. For Andrews, and of significance for this paper, therapeutic associations and effects are also experienced in places other than physical locations, or physical encounter, in landscapes of the mind, and imagined spaces and places. Developing this theme Andrews suggests that imagination is pivotal to the construction of experiences in the here and now as well as the past, that is, psychotherapeutic places may not necessarily exist in real, linear, time and in physical space. He proposes they can exist as spaces and places created by and located in the mind. From our perspective, and in engaging with participants in the study, we approach memory and imagined spaces as existing in a temporal as well as a spatial framework, whose boundaries are porous, one influencing the other. Memory pulls information from the past as well as the present and present experiences influence memories. This is explored in relation to self-identity, the subject-matter of the older people's paintings, and development of an older age identity.

As identified, the literature of psychoanalytic geographies suggests therapeutic associations and effects may be experienced somewhere other than in physical locations, in spaces and places created by the mind. Rose (2012) employs psychoanalytic theory to explore how feelings about physical landscapes can be therapeutic through the encounter between the mind of the individual and landscape in a visualized place. Memories of such encounters enable the individual 'to identify and interpret interior affective states and understand feeling-states..., forming the basis of the therapeutic experience' (Rose, 2012, p. 1382). Rose prompts consideration of whether the landscape of the participant's painting can function in ways similar to a physical landscape, how participants engage with their paintings, and whether comparable emotions and reflections are generated.

The term 're-imagining' is used to describe a process prior to visualization following an act of remembering. Landscape is remembered, and re-constructed in the mind, before visual realization in the participant's painting. Re-imagining and visualizing are imaginative processes in this context linked to creative thinking for artistic reasons. Emotional attachment to place facilitates the process by enabling the individual to connect feelings with visual forms that have expressive purpose. To enhance participants' imaginative and creative ability it was important they access their own memories, rather than utilize images from secondary sources (T.V, advertising, photographs). For this purpose participants were prevented from using photographic material, or preconceived imagery derived from other means.

## **2. Participatory arts and relational aesthetics**

Communities, cultures and services face increased pressure to develop innovative and effective strategies that promote and sustain a healthy ageing population. The benefits of leisure activities for the ageing population, particularly those that promote social contacts, informal learning, or cognitive effort, have been linked to improved cognitive functioning and wellbeing for older people. Reynold's (2010) identifies several studies that emphasize the benefits of participation in creative and cultural activities (Salthouse, 2006; Zoerick, 2001; Lampinen, Heikkinen, Kaupinen, and Heikeinen, 2006). However, the contribution of particular creative and participatory arts activities has only recently been the subject of more systematic reviews in order to determine the impact of participatory arts on older people. Two such studies are significant: An Evidence Review of the Impact of Participatory Arts on Older People (ERIPA, 2011) takes a psychological and behavioural perspective, supporting the positive impact of participatory arts on older people to enhance mental health and emotional wellbeing. Examining Social Inclusion in the arts in Northern Ireland (Hull, 2013) suggests that participation in the arts can improve health outcomes and increase wellbeing for older people by reducing loneliness, increasing older people's social capital, improving levels of community cohesion, and tackling dementia. The Creativity and Aging Study (Cohen, Perlstein, Chapline, Kelly, Firth, and Simmens, 2007) based in the USA, provides a long-term evaluation showing improvements in general health, mental health,

overall functioning, and sense of wellbeing in older people who participate in cultural programs provided by professional artists in a range of artistic disciplines.

ERIPA (2011) features three studies exploring the impact of visual arts engagement on older participants: Reynolds (2010); Murray and Crummett (2010); and Harper and Hamblin (2010). The latter, based in the UK, utilizes Dulwich Picture Gallery in a long-running programme of interaction with older people. The study found positive physical, mental and social outcomes that were not limited to the participant alone, with carers, family, and even gallery staff reporting enrichment of their lives as a result of the programme. Murray and Crummett (2010) describe a community arts initiative with 11 older people from a deprived urban community in the UK to demonstrate that arts participation can enhance community esteem. Reynolds (2010) examines 32 older women's motives for visual art making in the UK using semi-structured interviews. The women are involved in a range of visual art forms in groups and individual settings (for example, painting, pottery, craft, and textile art). The study demonstrates that participating in visual art contributes to subjective wellbeing in enriching inner lives and promoting connectivity with the wider world. The evidence reviewed suggests activities with a cultural and creative focus benefit health and subjective wellbeing for experts and non-experts alike.

However, there are limitations in previous approaches that this paper seeks to address. In particular, they do not differentiate between arts activities, but approach the 'arts' as a broad spectrum of creative activities associated with making, including for example, knitting, textiles, pottery, craft, painting and drawing, with some or all of these grouped in any combination. This study investigates the role of painting in order to determine the specific impacts connected to this activity. A feature of previous studies is a loose definition of 'participation', the term employed to mean active engagement in making with others, but commonly also referring to attendance at museums, galleries, and performances, or engagement in arts discussion groups. For the sake of greater clarity, 'participation' here describes active engagement in a creative group activity. In narrowing these two determining factors we aim for a targeted understanding of their impact, designed within a framework of relational aesthetics.

The context of relational aesthetics was selected because it develops a form of art that understands itself not as an artistic object or product, but as a form of social exchange and encounter (Rooke, 2006). Initially developed by Nicholas Bourriaud (2002), the concept has been effective in influencing contemporary art to emphasize process, performativity, openness, social contexts, and the production of dialogue over the traditional focus on object-based artworks. It sets itself apart from ideas of visuality and individualism associated with modernist discourses. Since publication the concept has been extensively critiqued (Bishop, 2004, 2006; Kester, 2004, Wilson 2007; Martin, 2007), and claims for historical importance and the significance of relational art as the new cutting edge of politicized cultural practice have been challenged. This paper is not concerned with the status or success of relational aesthetics as an avant-garde project; its interest is with its core ideas and their application to enhance participants' connectivity whilst engaged in acts of painting. The project seeks to explore whether creativity, conducted in an environment of relational connectivity, constructs a therapeutic landscape beneficial to the wellbeing of its participants.

The relational models constructed by Bourriaud respond to social injustices and alienation with art practices, advocating that sympathizers learn to inhabit the world in a better way through active social engagement. Its artistic forms aim to ameliorate social damage and through creative acts repair the social fabric: "through little services rendered, the artists fill in the cracks in the social bond" (Bourriaud, 2002, P. 36). Relational art is generated through an experimental approach that supports creativity between people to produce new social bonds. For Rooke (2006), relational aesthetics emerge from the dynamics of inter-subjectivity, reflections on the interrelations between people and their communicative acts, collective expressions and construction of meanings. For these reasons relational art is better suited to take place in social, community-based settings, rather than museums and art galleries. It is developed from a situation substantially different from everyday life, where communication and participation with others is facilitated (Rooke, 2006). Relationality is a key component of this study, its participants actively engaged in a process of relational creativity and the construction of art forms produced from this encounter.

#### **4. Method**

The study set out to assess the impact and effectiveness of a participatory painting programme involving old and older age people. It sought to consider the extent to which re-imagining a landscape might be effective in enhancing perceived wellbeing. The participatory element was explored, as a relational intervention, for its effectiveness in generating a positive therapeutic environment. Further, through participant's engagement with their painting in the home setting, the study sought to assess the extent to which the painted landscape might continue to impact participants' wellbeing over a longer period of time.

The study used qualitative methods to analyze the findings, and employed qualitative data collection methods. This included: questionnaires completed by participants, diaries, digital video and audio recording, accounts given in a group discussion, and individual in depth interviews. The above information was collected from participants (N=23) of old and older old people, ranged between 65-86 years, with the greater proportion between 71-75 years.

The analysis is based on the self-report of participants and information was gathered by adopting the following approach:

- Experiences and reflections connected to participants' painted landscape were taken in two ways: in depth interviews with selected individuals (N=5); group discussion (N=23) encouraged individuals to give an account of their painting, to share thoughts and feelings with each other about their paintings, and to reflect on the workshop. These sessions were audio recorded and photographed.
- Participants' (N=23) submitted diaries for analysis after one month. Diaries recorded emotions, feelings and meanings in relation to the painted landscape and conversations about it or the programme. Diaries varied in the number of entries and in the amount of text submitted, some making entries every day, and others only when they had something significant to report.
- Three questionnaires (1), (2), (3) used scale ranges and spaces for additional comments. These were set before and after the workshop session and following display in the home. Questionnaire (1) determined: expectation of the programme, level of social connectivity, daily and weekly number of meaningful interactions with

others, self-worth to themselves and to others, opportunities for self-expression, factors limiting connectivity, general mood, sense of wellbeing.

Questionnaire (2) determined: level of expectations met, feelings of social connectivity, satisfaction with their painting, self-expression achieved through painting, opportunities for self-expression, emotions and feelings about their painting, feedback on their painting, self-worth to themselves and to others, whether they would continue painting, general mood, general sense of wellbeing.

Questionnaire (3) asked questions similar to (1) & (2) for comparison after participant's experience of the paintings in their home for one month.

- Demographic information collected included: name, age, gender, engagement with the arts in the last 12 months, participatory activities, previous painting experience, geographic location, reason why they chose to participate.

A thematic and narrative analysis was applied to visual material, recorded discussions and interviews. Using qualitative methods we developed an interpretive narrative thematic. A simple thematic analysis was applied to participants' accounts, questionnaire responses, discussions, visual and audio material, using methods described by Silverman (2001), and Reissman (2008) based on Mishler (1995) and Williams (1984). These analytic methods enabled us to identify the key content, which we summarize as three themes, emerging from the analysis.

Participants were recruited from two community groups in the North West of England, from different geographic locations, selected to reflect diverse living spaces and experiences of landscape –we were interested to see how this might influence participant's landscape selection. Group A was positioned in a semi-rural setting, whilst group B was situated in an urban area. The group was self-selected from attendees of two social clubs providing one or two hours of formal social activity per week.

The painting workshop encouraged participants to remember a landscape with which they have strong emotional attachment. We were guided by Rowles's (1978) categories of emotional attachment to place as: a) immediate, b) temporary, c) permanent, in discussing participant's selection, explaining that their landscape should have a permanent place in

their memory. We emphasized the breadth of places that could be included, such as, cities, bed-rooms, parks, bridges, woods, sea-scapes, landmasses, etc. The approach placed emphasis on memory and attachment to place rather than general reminiscence, or a 'snapshot' of an individual's present situation. We intended participants to locate memories with social connections, historical events, and life experiences, and to stimulate comparisons with past and present experiences.

The participants benefitted from technical demonstrations provided by arts practitioners on the use of acrylic on canvas, mediums, and colour mixing. There was an effort made to provide participants with enough self-assurance to put emphasis on evoking a sense of place and associated feelings, rather than focusing on accuracy and detail. Once the paintings were completed they were exhibited to the participating group, where they provided a forum for discussion before opening to the wider public.

Relationality was considered in all aspects of the workshop. The selection and construction of the space for the workshop was organized to enable conversation and easy communication, and the itinerary of the workshop supported sociability. The process of engaging in a themed creative activity provided the conditions for interpersonal encounters, and enabled participants to exchange experiences individually, and in the group setting. Participants were provided with opportunities to give accounts of their landscape, to tell their story to others, as the painting evolved, and in the context of a final exhibition. The narrative element made available a process for individuals to give accounts of their older age identity and to establish continuity of self through the life course. In the acts of giving an account, the participants produced meaning and understanding of others' works, and their life experiences, as well as their own. The diary provided a medium for reflection, exploration of thoughts and feelings associated with the biographical narrative underpinning the work, and in the context of conversations with visitors prompted by its display.

All data was assessed by the researchers for reliability and to establish a thematic framework. In depth individual interviews discussed emerging themes in detail and we were able to deepen our understanding of salient issues in the context of their reflections. The

remainder of the paper is structured around three core themes emerging from the evaluation and considered to impact participant's subjective wellbeing:

1. The impact of re-imagining landscape on participants' perceived self-value, and self-identity;
2. The role of painting in finding connection and maintaining family connectedness;
3. The therapeutic benefits of creative relational connectivity.

## **5. Findings**

The study attracted mostly older women; of the cohort only three were male. The group could largely be characterized as at risk of social isolation, or categorized as 'socially-active lonely' in that they were quite lonely but sought actively to find companionship. The majority of participants had two reasons for participating in the study: the opportunity to connect with others, and to learn something new, being cited most frequently. Of the 23 participants most had very little experience of painting; none had used acrylic paint on canvas. Technical demonstrations given by the postgraduate students were appreciated and enabled participants to think differently about the painting process and what was expected. The approach improved participant's confidence and helped to overcome concerns they had with their level of expertise and any limitations in dexterity or mobility. Many reported enjoying the new challenge of representing a place from their imagination.

Of the 23 paintings the subject-matter was predominantly of natural landscapes (N=20). Of the non-natural (N=3), a black coal slag-heap in County Durham overlooked a row of humble white cottages, a bowl of flowers was placed on a table cloth, a teacher stood with small children in a primary school building. Natural landscapes included those featuring water: sea-scapes, lakes, rivers (N=12); and landmasses: mountains, hills, meadows (N=8), one included a fishing harbor, and another, a gate to a meadow. A high proportion of the paintings (N=16) featured blue skies and various shades of green, reminiscent of Spring or Summer. Thus, the natural landscapes (N=20) appeared largely idealized, or selectively remembered. The paintings represented typically pictorialized constructs; they appeared to

imitate practices of viewing and pictorializing, where certain landscapes become places with views. Paintings depicted rolling hills and meadows, sparkling seas and sandy beaches, snow-capped mountains and valleys and displayed a noticeable absence of people, cars, roads, sign posts, and buildings. We considered that pictorializing, or selective remembering, serves to filter out unwanted elements, reinforces positive elements, and potentially enhances emotional attachment. In the next section we explore how emotional attachment is connected to safety, self-identity and self-value.

### 5.1 Re-imagining landscapes: perceptions of self-value, and self-identity

The majority of participants reported improvements in self-value. Such feelings emanated from feelings of satisfaction in the following elements: successful production of a painting, responding to the challenge, interaction with others, feeling safe, sharing a purpose, talking about emotions, discussing the painting's subject-matter, validation by others.

The majority of participants who depicted a natural landscape said it made them feel safe, and/or gave them a sense of calm and tranquility: '*... thoughts on the seaside made me feel happy and relaxed*' and '*nothing bad gets to me there*' (Jenny, 78, sea-scape). Whether the place was somewhere they had visited throughout the life course, or a place they had visited with a significant person, the place was considered a safe-haven with positive associations: '*The painting makes me very happy about my life with my late husband*'. One participant re-imagined a building tied to an event she felt had been significant in determining her identity:

I hope the painting reflects my early years. If someone viewed it, they would understand me better (...) my painting is my first day at infant school and meeting the daffodil lady who was my teacher. I was terrified because I was taken to school by a stranger, so I focused on the daffodil lady. Years later I became the reception teacher and never forgot how terrified young children might be (Margaret, 79).

Frequently participant's felt their paintings enabled them to connect the past with the present. Participants' narratives provided insights into how the self changes and adapts to both the environment and individual circumstances over time. A landscape visited as a child with siblings and parents, possibly when exploring and playing are the main activities, is different to the same place experienced as an adult with a partner, with children of one's

own, or as an elderly person, perhaps when mobility is impaired. Equally, relationships to places, even those of the everyday, shift over time. What was positive may become negative, and vice versa. The participant who depicted her school building when taken to her first day at primary school by a stranger emphasizes this point. In her narrative she spoke of how as an adult she used this memory in her working life as a teacher to greet new children to the school with greater empathic awareness. The participatory activity prompted a reflexive process in which she turned her memory from one of fear into one of improved self-value, validated by other participants.

The process afforded a significant number of participant's subjective enrichment of their inner mental life and connectedness with the wider world of place and landscape: *'Looking out to sea I can see a speed boat in the distance, and feel the sand beneath my feet'*. Another participant commented on her painting: *'When I look at the coppice I can hear the skylarks'*. Participants' reported strong attachments to the places remembered, and on several occasions this prompted projection of meanings corresponding to transitory emotional interior states: *'Sky looks cloudy today; waves are lapping over the sandy beach'*. Such comments suggest that whether depicted or re-imagined, both processes have a role in retaining participant's living spaces. A re-imagined place can act as a window in the mind, a painting as a window on the world. For participants both appeared to operate to keep living spaces open, alive, and potentially populated with significant others.

### **5.1. Painting place: connectivity, identity and attachment**

Participants described sources of wellbeing generated by the programme as: thinking about a favourite landscape, painting it, discussing it with others, and thinking about it at home afterwards. Displaying the paintings in the home setting did not just increase social interactions, but prompted connectedness with family members through the exchange of memories. A substantial number of reports focused on interactions with family members and it was clear that these were highly valued social relationships. The paintings provided a means to maintain connectedness, as well as to share significant life experiences and information. Discussions centred on shared memories of places visited a long time ago by family groups, and formative places from childhood were described to children or

grandchildren, giving largely socio-historical accounts, serving to strengthen family bonds and belonging. Grandchildren's responses to the paintings were uniformly positive and celebrated the achievements of grandparents, enhancing their self-value and feelings of connectedness, such as: 'She said *"Really good for first time painting"* (...) *"Can I have it for my room?" Made me feel good'* (Mary's granddaughter, 11). A diary entry from the wife of a participant illustrates how wider family members were able to share significant memories: *'Fred's was from memories of his childhood showing a mining village and a pit heap. Granddad explained to Sophie why he painted the picture and how they would slide down the slag heaps on trays after school'*. The display of the painting in the participant's home contributed to positive emotional reactions through shared acts of remembering. For Fred the painting evoked nostalgic memories of a tight-knit community *'Where every-one left their door unlocked'*. The slag heap represented a place he associated with feelings of safety.

Many participants recognized changes in their physical or environmental circumstances limited or prevented ways in which they previously interacted with others and visited significant places. They felt that doing something new might help them adapt: *'I came today to learn how to paint. I regret becoming physically weaker, as I can't go fell walking any more'* (Jenny, 78, snow-capped mountains). For Jenny, the painting workshop afforded her the opportunity to be in the mountains with others, albeit in representational form, even if she could no longer go fell walking.

### **5.3. The therapeutics of relational aesthetics**

The project set out to explore whether creativity conducted in an environment of relational connectivity is beneficial to the wellbeing of its participants. We wanted to investigate whether the relational environment could itself be a therapeutic landscape. As highlighted earlier, the majority of participants reported improvements to feelings of self-worth resulting from endorsements of their painting, but other comments led us to consider the role of the relational environment for participants' sense of wellbeing. Respondents were clear that the workshop served as an emotionally engaged place, providing a safe environment where they could explore, express, share and have validated their emotions

within their peer group. The painting activity supported this emotional process, in particular, engagement with a common theme, in the context of a new and quite challenging endeavor. The painting workshop increased opportunities to talk to others and prompted conversations that they would not otherwise have had: *'It was interesting meeting people at the workshop who I had only previously met briefly and it was interesting to talk to them and also be working alongside them'*. Another participant reported: *'I said things in the group I've never told my family'*. And *'I was amazed I just sort of opened up and it all came out'*. Participants' reported enjoying the challenge to depict a landscape from their imagination, rather than copying from a photograph, or representing from life. The process enabled an experimental approach that encouraged engagement with their emotions and discussion of feelings with other participants: *'it's the first time without something to look at whilst painting'*, and *'I had to explain why I chose those colours, it's not obvious'*.

For many the experience of painting was a new activity, certainly painting in a group in an experimental manner that encouraged conversation rather than expertise was a new experience. We suggest the design of a safe, convivial environment, where judgements of skill were limited, had a role in fostering openness, authenticity, and self-expression. Art forms produced from relational connectivity evolved through participants' development of emotional openness, to themselves and to others, throughout the day.

## **6. Concluding comments**

The initial impact of re-imagining and painting a landscape is strong enough to indicate enhanced subjective wellbeing for the participants. The evaluation finds the programme went some way to enable participants to develop their personal and social identities within a new social network, reflecting improved self-worth. We had not anticipated the significance of the programme in maintaining continuity of valued social bonds and the impact of this. The display of the painting in the home enabled participants to deepen connectedness with family members through the exchange of memories and personal histories. We suggest an improved self-identity impinges on perceptions of the self, and how the self is projected to significant others, our participants experiencing therapeutic benefits from this process. Creativity conducted in an environment of relational connectivity

was beneficial to wellbeing in providing an environment where socially prescribed roles and emotions were unnecessary, and participants could express themselves authentically to their peers, whilst engaged in a shared activity. Expression and validation of their emotions had a therapeutic impact in improving emotional wellbeing.

Re-imagined landscapes acted powerfully upon the participant's sense of self, and were experienced as dynamic environments contingent on self-identity, attachment, and personal attitudes. We identify a connection between participant's responses to landscape and a conception of place developed by Conradson (2005), who proposes the self is developed in relation to 'significant others': people, objects, events and settings. For Conradson, relationships are actualized through material encounter, as well as memory, longing and desire, as psychically internalized experiences, shaping the self and resonating meaningfully, consciously and unconsciously, throughout a life span in what he terms the 'relational self'. Within this study physical representation of landscape in paintings on canvas provides material encounter, also providing a place for material interpersonal connection with friends and family. For the participant's, both material interactions were imbued with less corporeal, but never the less compelling, re-imagined places and people, evocative of emotions, conceivably, of longing and desire in Conrad's terms. In considering the relational encounter described, we propose that it has potential to contribute to an individual's shaping of their older age self, a process of adaptation and transition, itself a therapeutic experience conducive to subjective wellbeing.

Perceptions of social inclusion, enhanced by engagement with others, helped to improve self-confidence and belief in participant's ability to meet new challenges. Memories of place and their material realization enabled participants to connect their past with their present, and to express their past, present, and future projections to themselves and to others, the paintings serving as a physical symbol through which they could connect their older and younger-age self. This combination helped to counteract a sense of individual isolation, and enhance feelings of personal growth. The process of re-imagining landscape, of 'holding place in mind' contributed to the participants' experience of retaining significant life spaces. The painted landscape in the home reinforced this perception and provided opportunity for ongoing encounter with therapeutic benefits.

The idea of engagement in the arts having a lasting change on an older person's wellbeing is not necessarily the purpose of this study, nor of participatory art in general (ERIPA, 2011). The perception of pleasure and fulfillment in the moment, the experience of social inclusion, are equally important in terms of quality of life as measuring impact after the moment. As a relatively short intervention we cannot evaluate the longer-term advantages, but immediate benefits were tangible, the evaluation indicating participants experienced positive benefits.

It is important to highlight the limitations of the study. First, the participants were a self-selected sample, which indicates they were open to the key concept of the study, possibly actively supportive prior to its commencement. Second, the sample is too small a group for the findings to be generalizable to the population as a whole. Third, of the 23 participants only three were male. This confirms recent research suggesting older men are more likely to avoid participatory activities, and consequently a larger proportion experience loneliness, social isolation and poorer health and wellbeing than older women (Milligan, Payne, Bingley, and Cockshott, 2015). Fourth, although the study was successful in attracting individuals representative of some diversity in geographic location, it did not reflect older people from a broader mix of ethnic backgrounds, and there is scope for further studies engaging these groups. Fifth, we were unable to identify any connection between geographic location of participants and the landscape selected for their painting. A larger study would be better positioned to investigate their connection.

In terms of recommendations for good practice in participatory arts activities that share similar objectives, a key message from this research is the theme of memory and imagination as it applies to place. It is important to recognise the strong emotional reactions people have to spaces linked with past experiences, significant people, and events. This focus facilitates participants to connect their past with their present, and to express these projections in material form, a process we consider able to provide therapeutic benefits. Future project designs for participatory arts activities might consider employing a common theme as this research found it not only gave participants a commonality of purpose, but was instrumental in promoting conversation and forging bonds distinctive from other studies. Lastly, participatory is operationalised as a creative activity of making, undertaken

in the presence of others, a significant feature of the study that is integral to the outcomes of the programme. Similar studies with alternative models of participation, for example, arts activities conducted by individuals in their homes (Reynolds, 2010), or performances evaluated for impact on 'participating' audiences offer different perspectives. In connecting a communal activity to ideas on relational aesthetics the study highlighted participation as a vibrant inter-subjective encounter, and directly influenced authentic personal expression, and perceptions of social inclusion and wellbeing.

Clearly further research is possible, and desirable. A larger and more diverse sample of the population could be researched using a similar intervention over a longer period. However, we consider the participants' experience of re-imagining place and its material representation in the form of painting provides a relational encounter with landscape, whose benefits are potentially therapeutic, and conceivably, more durable than this study was able to determine. The study suggests acts of re-imagining, when connected to processes of self-expression through visual means, has the potential to reveal pathways of memory not always easily accessible or readily articulated into words. This insight stimulates our interest to explore the application with different groups, particularly those for whom engagement with memories may assist with processes of adaptation or transition, such as those experiencing dementia, and potentially migrants whose dislocation from place can be problematic for wellbeing.

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