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CURIOSITY, PLACE AND WELLBEING: ENCOURAGING PLACE-SPECIFIC CURIOSITY AS A ‘WAY TO WELLBEING’

Abstract

This paper advances understandings of relationships between wellbeing and place by exploring one mechanism by which place is mobilised in the pursuit of wellbeing: the cultivation and practice of curiosity. It does so through discussion of projects funded through the Decade of Health and Wellbeing in Liverpool, England. This scheme advances ‘five ways to wellbeing,’ one of which – ‘take notice’ – encourages curiosity in and about places. Three projects – memory boxes for people living with dementia; a community garden in an area experiencing socio-economic deprivation; and an urban photography project involving veterans – form the case studies on which this paper is based. We focus on two related sets of practices and approaches to curiosity: (1) learning to see places differently; (2) focussing on the micro-geographies of place – literally, curiosities – such as found objects. These practices suggest ways in which ordinary places may be a catalyst for curiosity in ways that may benefit both individual and collective forms of wellbeing. This allows us to see and understand place and wellbeing in relational terms. In so doing, this paper contributes to conceptual debate about wellbeing, place and curiosity, and the relationships between these.

Keywords: Wellbeing, Curiosity, Place, Materiality, Visual, Therapeutic Landscapes, Dementia

Introduction: Taking Notice in the City

Be curious. Catch sight of the beautiful. Remark on the unusual. Notice the changing seasons. Savour the moment, whether you are walking to work, eating lunch or talking to friends. Be aware of the world around you and what you are feeling. Reflecting on your experiences will help you appreciate what matters. (<http://liverpool.gov.uk/leisure-parks-and-events/Events/healthandwellbeing/>)

The above advice, issued as part of a 'Decade of Health and Wellbeing' in Liverpool, England, encourages people to be curious about places as a route to wellbeing. Part of a call to 'Take Notice', it forms one of 'five ways to wellbeing' also including 'Connect', 'Be Active', 'Keep Learning', and 'Give'. The 'five ways' are drawn from a report published in 2008 by the New Economics Foundation (NEF) 'think-and-do tank' which was commissioned by the UK Government as part of the Foresight Commission's project on Mental Capital and Wellbeing (Foresight, 2008). This call to take notice resonates with a variety of initiatives, from the political to the pedagogical, to encourage attentiveness to place (e.g. the work of the Geography Collective, 2010).

The Liverpool Decade of Health and Wellbeing (hereafter, LDHW) is part of a wider health and wellbeing agenda, which shifts attention from the simple absence of ill-health towards broader understandings of wellbeing (Atkinson, et al., 2012). One result of this shift has been a focus on place in relation to wellbeing, including the places in which people live, work and play. While health geographers have identified important relationships between place and wellbeing, further research is needed to develop a nuanced understanding of the practices and processes through which wellbeing might be related to, and affected by, place (Conradson, 2005). To enable this, Sarah Atkinson (2013) suggests a movement away from a focus on wellbeing as an outcome to think

instead of wellbeing as process; and a concurrent shift in understanding of place as more than simply physical location or material setting but as “profoundly relational” (Atkinson et al. 2012, p.7). This entails exploring the ways in which wellbeing is embedded in relationships between people and places, which are in turn composed of human and non-human actors. One way of thinking about this is through the lens of curiosity, as an attitude and a set of practices through which wellbeing and place may be connected. This means understanding curiosity both conceptually and practically.

General definitions of curiosity provide points of departure. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines it as “a strong desire to know or learn something” (Pearsall, 2002, page 351), a definition indebted to the philosopher Thomas Hobbes, who presented a positive picture of curiosity as the “desire, to know why, and how” (*Leviathan*, 1668, quoted by Inan, 2012, page 6). Yet curiosity takes different forms in different times and places (Benedict, 2001). Brian Dillon, who curated an exhibition on curiosity, argues ‘if there is something called curiosity, it is an oddly dissolved, indistinct and various notion, overlapping with desire, avarice and envy as well as more abstract or virtuous qualities’ (Dillon, 2013, page 15). Curiosity is relational in that it is a set of ideas and ideals with ongoing threads but changing forms, and with the scope and need to be invented and reinvented, contested and claimed, according to changing contexts and interests. As such, in exploring the relations between place, curiosity and wellbeing, we avoid any general definitions of these terms, instead seeking contextual understandings of these terms and the relationships between them. We focus upon three particular contexts, which reveal different forms and dimensions of place-specific curiosity through: ways of seeing places; curiosity-driven activities within places; and attention to objects that trigger place-specific memories.

In this paper, we address the following questions: in what way can curiosity be seen as a ‘catalyst’ in relationships between place and wellbeing? What forms does curiosity take when mobilised as

wellbeing practice and how might it be understood and supported? How can conceptual work on curiosity help us understand the potential risks and challenges of its mobilisation as wellbeing practice? And how can a focus on curiosity offer a way to understand the material and emotional relations through which wellbeing is connected to place?

This discussion is grounded in empirical work funded by the Wellcome Trust which explored the 'take notice' strand of LDHW. This research included interviews with 27 people who were involved in the design and/or delivery of LDHW (including representatives from the Primary Care Trust (PCT), Mersey Forest Partnerships and Liverpool City Council), or were coordinators or participants in projects funded by the programme. These included detailed interviews with individuals associated with three projects, funded through the 'take notice' strand of the LDHW, which we also investigated through participant observation.¹ Interviews afforded understandings of how convenors/participants reflected on and understood their involvement in the projects whilst participant observation allowed us to document the practices as they happened. Different methods, such as more interventionist action research, or quantitative analysis of participation in and outcomes of LDHW schemes, might have generated different perspectives, particularly with respect to the outcomes of involvement in wellbeing projects. But, since many of the project convenors we interviewed expressed reservations about before/after wellbeing measures and surveys, we chose to focus upon qualitative methods, which we felt would provide a broader understanding of wellbeing. Informed consent was sought from all participants and all names used here are pseudonyms except for high profile individuals where anonymity would not be possible, and who agreed to be named.

¹ The interviews and observations were carried out by one, or a combination of, Richard Phillips, Bethan Evans, and Joanna Long, who joined the project as a Research Assistant.

The three case studies are as follows: first, 'Memory Boxes'², a project for people living with dementia, their carers and friends. We interviewed three members of staff from a charitable organisation involved in this project (Mary, Jenny and Paula), a representative from the city council involved in commissioning dementia services (Leanne) and two people who volunteer to befriend people living with dementia (Sean and John), who were accompanied by one of their clients (Dave, who has dementia).³ We also conducted participant observation with this project, taking part in a training programme and sessions involving befrienders and people living with dementia. The second case study – 'Creative Gardening' – is a community garden in suburban north Liverpool facilitated by artists. It attracted funding through the LDHW because it advanced some of the five ways, notably 'take notice' and 'connect' and because it did so in an area of socio-economic deprivation. We conducted several interviews with Sarah (who identifies as an artist and 'grower') and Paul (a community artist); visited the site and participated in a number of activities over the course of a year; and convened a curiosity workshop and picnic in the garden in May 2013. The workshop was facilitated by Paul and attended by 12 children, aged 2-11, along with 4 of their mothers and grandmothers. The third case study – 'Veterans' Photography' – is a photography project for ex-servicemen and women, and is part of a broader programme of work aimed at helping veterans

² Names of projects and organisations are also pseudonyms

³ Dave was keen to join and participate in the interview with Sean and John. For us to quote him, it would have been necessary to make a retrospective application for ethical clearance including revised consent procedures to ensure informed and ongoing consent was gained by someone living with dementia. Our ethical clearance and procedures did not cover us for this work and so we focus on interviews with befrienders. We felt conflicted in this decision, since we would have liked to comply with Dave's request if possible, but on balance we felt the ethical procedures had led to the right outcome.

during the transition to civilian life. Our involvement with this project included interviews with the lead photographer and facilitator (Simon), the coordinator from the arts organisation involved (Cerys) and a representative from the PCT (James). We also attended a discussion session involving participants in the project and the launch of the photography exhibition that resulted from the project. The three schemes, which form the case studies for this project, were designed not simply to observe, but stimulate and cultivate curiosity for wellbeing. Our methods mainly observed these interventions, but in the case of the creative garden our research also played a part in actively fostering curiosity, through the curiosity workshop. As such, the workshop reflects the normative dimension of our own contribution in this paper, which is not simply about, but more actively for particular forms of curiosity.

In the remainder of this paper, we first provide some background to recent debates about wellbeing, place and curiosity. We then develop these themes through an empirical discussion, based on case studies from the LDHW. Through these three case studies, we identify a series of curious practices, all of which involve ordinary places, and which collectively reveal different forms and dimensions of curiosity. These practices, briefly mentioned above, are concerned with ways of seeing, activities within places, and attention to objects that trigger place-specific memories. Curious ways of seeing are explored in a project in which participants create photographic representations of places and then reflect upon and discuss them. Curiosity-driven, place-specific activities and experiences are examined through a garden project, which engages children in art and garden workshops. The third project – concerned with curiosities in the literal sense of curious objects, involves engagement with a series of objects, which trigger place specific memories and reflections. These contexts highlight different forms and dimensions of curiosity through the curious practices and dispositions, all of which understand place, curiosity and wellbeing in relational terms.

Wellbeing and Place

There has recently been a resurgence of interest in the social sciences, Geography in particular, in the relationships between wellbeing and place. Atkinson et al (2012, page 3) explain:

“Wellbeing, however defined, can have no form, expression or enhancement without consideration of place. The processes of well-being or becoming, whether of enjoying a balance of positive over negative affects, of fulfilling potential and expressing autonomy or of mobilizing a range of material, social and psychological resources, are essentially and necessarily emergent in place.”

The term wellbeing has been used increasingly within policy and health fields in the last twenty years building on earlier understandings of “positive health” involving “a state of physical mental and social wellbeing” (WHO, 1948, page 100). Wellbeing is a complex and contested term, mobilised in different ways in different policy agendas (Atkinson and Joyce, 2011). Broadly speaking, wellbeing is a dimension of a social model of health which locates individual experience within social contexts (Cattell et al, 2008) and emphasizes the promotion and protection of health rather than the causes of illness (Atkinson et al, 2012). Wellbeing policies have been influenced by the positive psychology movement, which emphasises individual happiness (Seligman, 2002). This has been criticised for placing too much emphasis on the individual, leading for calls to develop a more relational and situational approach to wellbeing, which is grounded in material spaces and social relations (Atkinson, 2013).

Recent work on the relationship between wellbeing and place in Geography is situated within a longer history of research into the spatial determinants of health, and individual and social interactions that influence wellbeing (Kearns and Gesler, 1998; Kearns and Moon, 2002). In medical geography, wellbeing has typically been approached as the absence of ill-health, and research in this

area has been dominated by large scale, quantitative spatial analysis of ill-health. Four overlapping concepts emerge in recent research on the relations between space, place and wellbeing, each organised around a spatial construct (Fleuret and Atkinson, 2007): *spaces of capability*, in which “social and physical space may enable or hinder wellbeing through self-fulfilment” (Fleuret and Atkinson, 2007, page 113); *integrative spaces*, which recognise the positive effects on wellbeing of social networks; *spaces of security*, concerned with how perceptions of security, conflict and risk affect wellbeing; and *therapeutic spaces*, in which landscapes may be culturally, emotionally, and spiritually therapeutic. The latter – therapeutic landscapes – is the most relevant for our discussion here since, as Milligan et al (2004, page 1783) explain, research on therapeutic landscapes “is concerned with a holistic, socio-ecological model of health that focuses on those complex interactions that include the physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, societal and environmental.”

It has been claimed that therapeutic landscapes can promote the physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing of those who visit them (Thurber and Malinowski, 1999). These may be particular areas or settings that encourage rest and recuperation, such as tourist retreats, spas, forests, beaches, sacred places and drop-in centres (Conradson, 2005; Lea, 2008; Little, 2012). There is a tendency for therapeutic spaces to be set within, or designed to mimic, ‘natural’ settings (Gesler, 1992; Kearns and Moon, 2002). Conradson (2005) also observes an emphasis upon physical and/or psychological distance and removal from routine, everyday and ordinary spaces, and argues that spaces designed for therapeutic purposes typically seek to offer opportunities for solitude and/or friendship.

This practical and conceptual work on therapeutic landscape has been the subject of critical debate, with three particular lines of critique, which will be significant for the present discussion. The first is concerned with a tendency to focus on ‘exceptional spaces’ (Wakefield and McMullan, 2005). More recent work on therapeutic landscapes has moved away from a focus on the “iconic and formal sites

of healing to include more localized and ordinary spaces of care and wellbeing as well as the more everyday practices and routines associated with health and therapy” (Little, 2012, page 218). For example, Milligan et al (2004) stress the significance of ‘ordinary’ spaces of community gardening for older peoples’ wellbeing, even though they trace the benefits of these places to their distinctness from everyday life, which they identify with tranquillity and stress relief. In the light of the neglect of ordinary places, within understandings of therapeutic landscapes, there is a need for more attention to the wellbeing-related “transformations, negative and positive, that occur in and of those places” (Willis, 2009, page 88).

Second, therapeutic landscapes tend to be idealised, whereas a more critical perspective, sensitive to the limits and risks of these spaces, would be more productive. This means interrogating claims about links between health, wellbeing and place, and developing critical perspectives on perceptions of places as ‘healthy’ or ‘unhealthy’, beneficial or harmful, as Rachel Colls and Bethan Evans have done in their critique of research on obesogenic environments (Colls and Evans, 2014; see also Wakefield and McMullan, 2005). Similarly, Conradson (2003, page 521) argues that it is important to avoid an “uncritical affirmation of care environments” by recognising that therapy is precarious and may involve both positive and negative outcomes. Thus it is not enough to simply identify the components of landscapes that might be considered ‘therapeutic’; attention must also be paid to ways in which people might interpret and experience these settings as simultaneously therapeutic and problematic.

Third, therapeutic spaces have often been conceived in terms of their intrinsic properties rather than in more relational terms, as the expressions and vehicle for interpersonal and social relationships. As Conradson (2005, page 338) puts it, research on therapeutic landscapes has been limited by “a tendency to... equate physical presence within a landscape with the unproblematic

receipt of its therapeutic influence". To address this blind spot, it is important to acknowledge the relationships that can benefit wellbeing, recognising that it is not always enough just to be in a place to guarantee a therapeutic outcome; rather, there is a need for skill or artistry in engagements with place (Thrift, 1996). The benefits of therapeutic landscapes "always derive from particular forms of socio-natural engagement. They are not in any sense pre-determined outcomes" (Conradson, 2005, page 338).

These three critiques of research on 'therapeutic landscapes', combined with recent discussions about the relationship between wellbeing and place more broadly (Atkinson et al., 2012), call for attention to the relationships through which place and wellbeing may be connected and the processes and practices that might act as catalysts, unlocking the potential of place to benefit wellbeing. In the remainder of this paper, we focus on one such catalyst: curiosity.

Wellbeing, Place ... and Curiosity

Curiosity has been brought into focus through schemes to improve wellbeing and through policy studies behind these schemes. The NEF (2008) report, introduced above, identified curiosity (as part of 'take notice') as a 'way to wellbeing'. It did so with reference to evidence that mindfulness practices can benefit wellbeing. Sam Thompson, a co-author of the NEF report, explained, in relation to mindfulness, that ideas and practices with deep traditions (such as meditation and yoga) have been adopted and adapted, "*stripped [of their] spiritual implications*", scaled up to the level of public health care. Curiosity (rather than mindfulness) is used to explain 'take notice' within the NEF report, because, as Sam Thompson put it, "*What we tried to do [in the five ways, was] to come up with a word or two-word thing and then give some examples that would feel quite normal in real life to people*". However, 'take notice' has proven the most difficult of the five ways to pin down and put

into practice. In response, a 'Take Notice in the City' working group or 'action set' has been established. This working group has focused upon 'taking notice' within a range of built and green settings within the locus of the health authority in question: Liverpool Primary Care Trust (as it was then).

The struggle to understand and implement 'take notice' reflects the more generally limited conceptual base upon which it can draw: in the form of limited and uneven theoretical literatures on curiosity and wellbeing, and curiosity and place. Preliminary investigations of curiosity in relation to wellbeing have emphasised the importance of exploration and absorption (Gallagher and Lopez, 2007). Exploration means seeking and engaging with positive stimuli and experiences, which may be novel, challenging or interesting to an individual. Absorption comes when the individual is fully engaged with an activity (Kashdan et al, 2004). In both senses – as the object of exploration or absorption – place can be a vehicle for the practice of curiosity, which may benefit wellbeing.

Relatively little attention has, however, been paid to relationships between curiosity and place. Phillips (2014) has explored places designed and maintained with a view to encouraging curiosity such as museums and libraries (Pearce, 1998), as well as everyday settings such as streets and homes, which are not specifically tailored to curiosity, but in which and through which it is possible to cultivate and practice forms of curiosity. This work extends an earlier, narrower set of interventions on curiosity and geography, which focus largely upon curiosity in academic scholarship and cognate practices such as exploration (Gade, 2011; Phillips, 2010). Phillips (2014) argues that curiosity can be practiced in a range of ordinary settings, but that being curious is not necessarily easy or comfortable; it can be risky and dangerous. He goes on to identify a series of potential outcomes, which can follow from or motivate curious practices, these including (curiosity-driven)

learning, creativity and social connection, each of which can be both a form of and pathway to wellbeing.

This discussion of the critical literatures on wellbeing, place and curiosity, informs the following empirical discussion in three main ways. First, the literature on both wellbeing and curiosity identify these as slippery and eclectic terms, best explored contextually rather than generally. This means that, rather than posing general questions about curiosity and wellbeing, our discussion here is informed by the contextually specific understandings of both curiosity and wellbeing as they emerge through the empirical work. Secondly, the critical literatures on therapeutic landscapes and curiosity both raise questions about the role of ordinary (not exceptional) places in practices relating to wellbeing and curiosity. They also present place, in the context of both curiosity and wellbeing, as relational rather than as contextual backdrop. Thirdly, running through the critique of research on therapeutic landscapes and conceptual work on curiosity, is an imperative towards critical, rather than celebratory accounts, which recognise the precarity of both wellbeing and curiosity and therefore the riskiness of associated practices. These ideas and debates inform our subsequent discussion, which is concerned with seeing ordinary places and the things within them differently, being attentive to curious things, and creating and finding spaces conducive to curiosity. Through these discussions, an understanding of the relationality of place, wellbeing and curiosity emerges.

Seeing differently

Philosopher Mark Zuss (2012) traces curiosity to questions, and questions to sensory experiences – the “immersion of bodies in the world” (page 128) – through the “activity of the sensible” (page 146). He argues “that, like small flames, questions arise from the filaments of our senses” (Zuss, 2012, page 122). Many of the projects funded through the LDHW specifically aimed to spark

curiosity by creating spaces that engage the senses. Though curiosity engages all the senses, the visual is particularly important, and the practice of curiosity is often discussed as a matter of learning to “see differently”, to look more deeply. Keri Smith’s manual for curious living – *How to be an Explorer of the World* (2008) – begins with a call to the visual in all its forms, literal and metaphorical, through a quotation from Jules Verne: “Look with all your eyes, look” (Smith K, 2008, frontispiece).

The most immediately visual of the three case studies, the Veterans’ Photography, involved ex-servicemen and women, taking photos of everyday life and landscape. The product of collaboration between a Liverpool arts organisation and the local PCT, this was part of a broader programme for veterans. Participants learned technical skills associated with making and manipulating photographic images, and also practical and social skills associated with presenting and discussing them. The premise was that curiosity about ordinary places and people within them – including streetscapes, monuments and domestic interiors – can be a way to reflect on and tackle difficult issues encountered during the transition to civilian life (including housing, addiction, skills, employability, friendships, and PTSD). Simon, the photographer who led the group, explained:

“You don’t have to go far to photograph something which is a reflection on yourself. So it was all about you know, views from windows, it was about your interiors and all that sort of stuff. It was about looking at the domestic side of one’s own environment which you know, that in itself can be applied to anything.... It’s like getting them to start thinking like a photographer, start thinking about needing to record what’s happening around them no matter how mundane, even by making notes or using the camera as an instrument to help enable the visual diary.”

Photographic assignments allowed participants to attend to and take notice of personal issues, building confidence and relationships, without speaking too personally. This was crucial in what

Simon described was a *“very macho environment,”* where the direct exploration of emotions went against the grain. For example, as Simon put it, one *“guy was photographing like a tree growing out of a wall which for him was obviously very poignant because ... he had cancer.”*

Discussion groups, centred on the photographs, allowed participants to recognise and talk about the significance of the places, people, and things they had photographed. This transformed the apparently solitary act of photography into an overtly social and sociable practice. It brought personal issues into the open. Simon explained how one veteran reflected, through his photographs, on the distinction between the order of his military life and the disorder in his civilian life:

“He started getting into the project there was stuff really starting to come out and the fact of like bullying and all that. And this was mentioned in his text ... witnessing bullying... and he photographed his bald [highly polished] boots and ... And he always had this attitude of like oh well you know, it’s no big drama and everything but they started to photograph ... he was photographing where he lived which was complete chaos, you know. And that in itself was strong. ... You obviously don’t see that at the time but then you start looking at it and saying look you know, this actually means something. And so it’s that kind of magic of photography taking over where you least kind of expect something to happen and it does”.

As Simon put it, photography provided participants with a *“sideways mirror”* for noticing and looking at things that affected their lives, providing a means to see differently, *“to step outside of themselves for a moment”*. In this way, the veterans’ photographs embraced challenging forms of curiosity, which went beyond superficial forms of noticing. Here, there was space to search for truth, *“no matter how shit the truth is”* (Simon, *Veterans’ Photography*). Thus, curiosity is beneficial for wellbeing because, as Simon explained, *“I think we’re all kind of capable of just ending up you know, bottling lots of things up and being too stubborn to see you know, another person’s point of view”*.

Seeing differently was also important in the 'Creative Gardening'. The visual elements of this project, which are diverse, involved workshops led by Sarah and Paul, which used a range of techniques including light-, heat- and water-reactive paints:

"I think with the painting colours, with the heat[-reactive paints], it was trying to hint at the season changes and that things change you know and to look at differently. Because things change all the time around you and you sort of get so used to walking past the same thing that sometimes you don't really notice" (Sarah, Creative Garden)

Sarah explained that learning to see things differently, and see them being transformed, can entail a sense of magic: *"you start to look at other things differently. And that is the thing that relates to curiosity"*. To illustrate how this works, one series of workshops involves looking at negatives and silhouettes, which de-familiarise the original:

"You look at it in a different way because it's a silhouette. So something that you'd always looked at and thought is a reed might look different and nicer maybe on the page. So I think that was to try and get people to look at what was already there before we started to think about what could be there in the future" (Sarah, Creative Garden).

The garden also reveals more commonplace forms of magic, for example in planting seeds, then watching them germinate and grow into plants. This helps participants to see familiar things and places in a new light, to become curious about them. This finds illuminating parallels in the history of scientific curiosity where, as Philip Ball (2012) has shown, newly invented telescopes and microscopes have made distant and immediate objects more visible, bringing some into view for the first time, through a kind of visual magic. In early modern England, light itself became an object of curiosity through investigations of phenomena such as luminescence and phosphorescence, while

newly illuminated objects were also recast as curiosities, in the way that remote, tiny and other rarely-seen things have tended to do (Dillon, 2013).

Curiosities: Curious Things

The Creative Gardening project encouraged close attention to objects through bug hunts, art workshops exploring the textures and shapes of leaves, and the curiosity workshop. Paul, who led the workshop for this research project, invited children to go around the garden and find three really small things to draw. Many became competitive about trying to find things that others had not noticed. The activity involved looking, but other senses too: in particular, children were touching and holding plants, insects and discarded objects. Two children became absorbed in stones and wood. One drew a picture of the house opposite. Others found and depicted organic things: ants, a fly, a beetle, and leaves. These objects, both 'natural' and fabricated (Figure 1) reflect the history and geography of the site. This echoes the point that curiosity, like other therapeutic practices, does not necessarily entail engagement with 'natural' environments but can also be found through manufactured and discarded objects and places. Even apparently ugly objects can be transformed into what Jane Bennett (2010) terms 'vibrant matter'. She discusses how a glove, some pollen, a dead rat, a cap and a stick in a drain caught her attention. She explains that these objects shimmered between "debris and thing ... stuff to ignore [and] stuff that commanded attention in its own right" (Bennett, 2010, page 4). Ordinary objects, now the subject of interest, and fascination, become extraordinary, even enchanting.



Figure 1: Objects found, observed and depicted in curiosity workshop (photos by authors)

This attention to small or previously unseen things echoes the histories of curiosity, mentioned above. In Early Modern England, tiny visual curiosities became accessible not only to the scientists with access to newly invented microscopes, but also to the public, which took an interest in their work, through publications such as Robert Hooke's *Micrographia* (1665). This fostered new ways of seeing. As art curator and critic Ralph Rugoff (1997, page 14) has argued, tiny objects can 'force us to draw closer in order to scrutinize them' and 'the focussed attention we give tiny art is almost voyeuristic in intensity'. In an informal interview after the workshop, Paul explained how he thought curiosity and taking notice of small things benefited the children involved. He said he noticed that their concentration spans are longer when they are out in the garden. Their activities there mirror techniques used in psychotherapeutics, art and play therapy in which engagement with a range of materials is used to encourage expression of "multi-sensory and non-verbal experiences" (Bingham and Milligan, 2007, page 285) and to heighten "non-visual sensory awareness in a relaxed way" (Bingham and Milligan, 2007, page 291). It also fleshes out the arguments, in the literature on curiosity and wellbeing, on the potential for exploration and absorption to enhance wellbeing.

Curiosity in objects was also important to the 'Memory Boxes' project, which involves people living with dementia, their carers and friends. This project works on the principle, which has been advanced and evidenced elsewhere (Manchester, 2015), that things and places can spark memories

and conversations, which in turn can build relationships. In one scheme, museums loan out boxes of objects. In another, volunteers and family members help make scrap books to contain and trigger memories. Sean, a volunteer who befriends people with dementia, explained that things can “*trigger off memories,*” reassuring people that they can remember some things. He adds that this recollection can be short-lived, but valuable nevertheless. Leanne echoes this point, stressing the everyday nature of many of the objects included in memory boxes, ranging from “*the dockers’ hook*” – a resonant objects, in the port city of Liverpool – and “*things that were related to employment and the advertising*” such as “*cigarette boxes*” (Leanne, Memory Boxes). Unlike other museum holdings, the objects in these memory boxes do not form part of the collections, so they are not formally curated or preserved, and can be handled and borrowed. This mirrors what some people in earlier stages of dementia do independently, which is to pursue old hobbies, handling and working with familiar objects (Yatczak, 2011). Here, objects ignite different kinds of memories: recovering knowledge of things or ideas; also, practical knowledge, concerned with doing things.⁴

As with the objects in the garden, things in the memory boxes are not just visual; their multi-sensory qualities make them particularly good for triggering memories:

Mary: “there’s got to be something that triggers that memory hasn’t there?... I mean you know you say you forget things ... it’s all in there isn’t it but it’s helping ... if you get a trigger, then you...”

Jenny: “It could be a smell...my mother said about the Pears soap... The smell of that, And that’s what’s good about those boxes, the memory boxes isn’t it, so it’s like all your ... you’re almost ... learning styles isn’t it, where it’s visual and auditory and kinaesthetic and all of that I think is really important to prompt somebody’s memory” (Mary and Jenny, Memory Boxes).

⁴ We are grateful to Kathy Burrell for sharing thoughts on this subject with us.

Similarly, Paula who works as a befriender, and who is originally from Russia, found that a particular kind of soap, once made on the Wirral (near Liverpool), also evoked memories for her, providing a point of connection between herself and a woman who has dementia, which bridged their different backgrounds:

"I found a piece of very, very stinky soap made on the Wirral, it said Vivvy on it or something, an orange block and it smelled. It's what they used to make on the Wirral itself here apparently.... I picked up that one and it reminded me of the soap my mum used in Russia to wash clothes, so I could relate ... it's the smell that brought memories back" (Paula, Memory Boxes).

These references to tactile and smelly objects echo Bingham and Milligan's (2007, page 291) argument that non-verbal, sensory engagement "stimulates childhood memories, levels of awareness and ideas, all of which may have continued to retain varying influences over our active thoughts and reactions, while remaining at the fringes of everyday consciousness".

This illustrates a more general point, that when different people find common interest in and are curious about an object or place, even when they do not have prior memories of it, this can become a catalyst for connection between them. One aim of the Memory Boxes project is to trigger curiosity in the object, not just on the part of the person with dementia, but also the carer, in order to spark curiosity in the person they are caring for or befriending. Paula explains how, for someone with short term memory loss, the objects can trigger longer term memories that provide talking points:

"He loves museums, the art galleries, anything like that he really enjoys. And he's just able to talk, because his short-term memory is so poor, when he goes to the museum and he sees all the old things, it really does stimulate good conversation. And he really gets a lot out of going there" (Mary, Memory Boxes).

This reference to conversation, echoing the previous discussion of the 'stinky soap' that proved the catalyst for conversation between a young volunteer with a Russian background and an older resident of Liverpool, who has dementia, underlines the significance of the communicative and interactive practices through which relationships are formed and performed, including doing things together and talking to each other. Richard Sennett (2012) identifies some of the social skills through which these interactions take place. He generalises that empathetic curiosity is important to relationships that underpin everyday life, and that empathetic curiosity depends upon "dialogic" skills such as "listening well, behaving tactfully, finding points of agreement and managing disagreement" (Sennett, 2012, page 6). Where symptoms of dementia are present, and people may not know the answers to direct factual questions, empathetic curiosity brings new challenges. Suggesting how to start a conversation with a person who has dementia, experienced carer Gaynor Hammond (2002) advises that it is best to avoid asking direct questions and better to use things nearby as a talking point. The crucial thing, she advises, is to engage the natural curiosity of the befriender as well as the client. Paula explained that shared curiosity can spark "*free-flowing conversation*," which can reassure a person with dementia that someone is interested in their lives.

The encounters with curiosities and the relationships they facilitate, described here, echo Divia Tolia-Kelly's (2004, page 314) description of the ways in which "active connections with memories through visual and material cultures constitute processes of identification" for South Asians in the UK. With reference to shrines within the homes of South Asian families, Tolia-Kelly explains that "places and moments are brought into the home through these material links" and argues that "memories are made present through the matter of the shrine" (2004, page 320). More generally, Low (2013) argues that memories, prompted by touching and smelling objects, can reinforce a socially mediated sense of self, which is experienced through emotions such as happiness, sadness

and nostalgia, and framed around relationships with others. Here, “smells and memories” work together “shaping self-identity and social relations” (Low, 2013, page 688).

In a similar way, we suggest that in the case of the Memory Boxes, curiosities in the form of objects can be used to connect people to places and to each other. This illustrates how relationships, forged through mutual curiosity, form a broad spectrum, ranging from immediate personal connections to wider networks. The people living with dementia, involved in this project, are not dislocated in the same sense as the diasporic community investigated by Tolia-Kelly, though we might think of dementia as another form of dislocation. Curiosity, sparked through the memory boxes, disrupts the temporal distance between past and present, bringing past places and memories into present-day experiences and encounters, and draws together people who might share that memory.

Expressed in this way, as an absorption in and close attention to particular things, curiosity can be understood as a quality of care and attention. For Michel Foucault, curiosity is “the care one takes for what exists and could exist” (Foucault, 1988, page 327), while Brian Dillon describes this as “a sedulous concentration” (Dillon, 2013, page 17). Each of the three case studies discussed above illustrates this close relationship between curiosities, care and attention. Curiosities found in the garden facilitate children’s attention to the place and their further exploration of the various objects, textures and possibilities it contains. In the Memory Boxes project, curiosities facilitate a relationship of care between people living with dementia and their friends, families and/or carers, offering a starting point for conversation and connection. And curiosity about people and place, cultivated in the Veterans’ Photography project, expresses care for the self and for others. In each case, places are central to expressions of curiosity through the material objects - or curiosities - that, in part, constitute those places and relations of care. This demands closer attention to places, as catalysts for curiosity, and this follows in the next section.

Creating Spaces for Curiosity

In each of the projects discussed here – the creative garden, veterans’ photography and memory boxes – curious practices revolve around ordinary urban, domestic and everyday places. Ordinary places are seen afresh, while commonplace objects are transformed into curiosities. These findings resonate with critiques of the therapeutic landscape tradition, which privilege exceptional spaces and natural settings, paying insufficient attention to urban, domestic and everyday places (Milligan et al, 2004, page 1785).

And yet, in each of the case studies, curiosity remained within certain parameters, requiring material and metaphorical ‘space for curiosity’ (Phillips, 2014). The reasons for this were linked to the risks associated with curiosity, and this fleshes out the more general points that therapeutic engagements can be precarious (Conradson, 2003; 2005), and that therapeutic practices must therefore be employed in selective and discriminating ways. In the garden, for example, curiosity is circumscribed both by and within spatial and temporal boundaries. The project involved the creation of a garden on a site, owned by a housing association, on the plot of a formerly occupied house that burned down. This began with the installation of a strong steel fence, the clearing of rubble, and the planting of seeds in pots, to cultivate seedlings that would later be transplanted (Figure 2). It continued with the addition of topsoil, planters, trees and landscaping.



Figure 2: A corner of the Creative Garden, 2013, showing the strong fence and raised beds, which were sown with flowers (photo by authors).

Sarah, the coordinator of the garden project, encouraged curiosity about the site's past to generate debate about its future. These discussions involved acknowledging concerns about the history of the site. In our first interview, Sarah explained that participants had expressed a desire to keep the footprint of the house. *"People don't seem to want to remove all traces of that building,"* she explained. They *"are really keen for the base of the house to stay"* because they *"have a strong sense of I suppose what used to be there before we came"*. This initial plan would have allowed the history of the site to be both remembered and also seen differently. However, turnover in the garden steering committee brought a change of heart, and a decision was made to remove some foundation stones and skim concrete over others. In a subsequent interview, Sarah explained:

“[Jess] lives next door and she doesn’t want to look out and see that house because that house reminds – not because of that – but because it was a rubbly mess. And also I think because there are different stories about what happened to the people that were living in that house.”

Sarah does not mention the rumoured fire directly here, alluding to it only through the footprint of the burned-down house, ‘that’ which prompts unwelcome memories. This serves as a reminder of how curiosity can risk exposure to disquieting forms of knowledge, and why curiosity can therefore be circumscribed, confined to certain times, places and subjects.

Similarly, some Memory Boxes contained objects or references to places that could trigger uncomfortable or upsetting memories. As Leanne explained, with reference to a man living with dementia:

“I think you do have to be careful about certain things. [A man] lost his brother in the war, so he just doesn’t like to look at war things or ... I mean a lot of people like to talk about their experiences in the war but I think a lot of people have very difficult experiences. And I think you have to know a bit about the person really to be able to gauge it as to what will be upsetting and what won’t really, I think you have to be careful. I think you can’t always assume it’s going to be a happy memory”.

One way of responding to this risk is to create spaces in which it may be safe to be curious. Discussion of the veterans’ photographs took place in a space facilitated by the project leader, Simon. He said that, as a former veteran himself, he could create a setting in which other veterans would feel confident and secure: *“I think that’s why in fact they were quite open with me because they thought I was one of them”*. The importance of this connection was starkly evident to us when

we joined the group, attempting to conduct participant observation. It was clear to us that our presence, as outsiders without a history of military service, stifled open discussion.

In the garden, the creation of a space conducive to curiosity was more tangible. The security of the garden – symbolised by the strong fence (Figure 2) – was important because the site is adjacent to a large open field, which has negative connotations for the residents. The field is said to be frequented by gangs and drug dealers, and is *“used quite a lot for dumping [and] fires”* (Jess, local resident). Adult participants in the project, most of whom have young children, told us they feel the need to remain on their guard in and near this waste ground, which they see as a hazard rather than an amenity. Many would rather it was built over. Hurrying through, they do not feel so able to take notice or be curious about elements of this space. Paul suggested that the boundary of the garden provides a degree of safety that enables people *“to take notice and be interested in what they were doing in an unguarded way”*.

That said, the fence – though it is tall, steel with spikes and a locked gate to deter vandals and thieves – remains permeable in other ways. During our time in the garden, dog walkers and other passers-by spoke to the gardeners, and some others dropped in. One afternoon, when we were trying to light a barbeque in the garden, a man came in to offer us a light. The fence had preserved a sense of security while leaving open some possibilities for encounter, establishing what Massey (1991, page 24) has called a *“progressive sense of place”*. The boundaries define a space in which people let down their guard, somewhat, interacting with each other and others too, in part through a shared interest in the site itself and in what they can do with it: a collective curiosity. Though the space for this curiosity can be anywhere, it is not everywhere, and not all the time, but is bounded, spatially and temporally, materially and metaphorically.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have explored the ways in which curiosity may be a catalyst in relationships between wellbeing and place. Doing so, we have developed an understanding of curiosity, observed within a series of experiences and practices: a momentary sense of wonder at the ‘magic’ of a germinating seed or found object, sparking questions and ideas; learning to see a place differently by taking and sharing photographs of it; experiences of connection with another person, sparked by absorption in a place or object. Instances such as these speak to broader questions about the form that curiosity takes when it is mobilised as wellbeing practice, and how it might be understood and supported. We identified two sets of curious practices, which have been developed within wellbeing schemes. One emphasises seeing and seeing differently, with particular attention to places. The other is concerned with attentiveness to things that might be found within those places, such as the insects and industrial relics in the creative garden and the polished boots in an ex-soldier’s untidy home: ordinary things, transformed into curiosities. These insights into curiosity emerge from projects, and research about projects, which are each case normative, not simply observing but actively cultivating particular forms of curiosity for wellbeing. The veterans’ project, for example, develops specifically visual forms of curiosity, whereas the garden project focuses upon creative and hands-on attention to objects.

The examples we have discussed in this paper highlight shared, collective and interactive forms and expressions of curiosity. On the one hand, people may be curious about each other. On the other, they may be drawn together through common curiosity, which is directed at things and ideas. This fleshes out Rachel Smith’s (2008) assertion that curiosity has the potential “to link people together and offer new modes of engagement with the world” (page 159), which can “produce new forms of social connection” (page iii). This is also central to the way in which curiosity may help us understand

the relationship between wellbeing and place. The places in which and about which people express curiosity revolve around relationships and interactions. They are sites at which people are curious together and about each other. The practices through which people are curious therefore promote reflection on the self through connection with others, facilitating relationships that may be therapeutic. Two key points emerge about relationships between place and beneficial forms of wellbeing.

First, the empirical examples we have discussed here stand to make important contributions to recent work on therapeutic landscapes and on wellbeing and place. In each of these case studies, place is not simply a backdrop for either curiosity or wellbeing; it enables and is constituted by the relations between people and objects that emerge through a range of practices. As such, as earlier critiques of therapeutic landscape literatures have suggested (Wakefield and McMullen, 2005), it is necessary to avoid any grand claims about what elements of place might engender curiosity which may be beneficial for wellbeing. Rather, as the discussion in this paper reveals, wellbeing, place and curiosity are relational – constitutive of, and constituted by objects, practices and people. These arguments resonate with theoretical claims about the relationality of place and wellbeing introduced earlier in this paper (e.g. Atkinson et al., 2012), and with practical and policy initiatives that apply these principles through schemes such as the ‘Connect’ strand of LDHW. Where we go beyond the state of the art, in this respect, is by bringing curiosity into this mix, as a catalyst in relationships between place and wellbeing, and by insisting upon the relationality of curiosity. Doing so, we challenge commonplace understandings of curiosity as a naturally personal, individual experience. We argue that relational curiosity, practiced with others, and sometimes directed at that, has particular significance for wellbeing.

Secondly, this therapeutic relationship is not straightforward. Curiosity can be risky and, like some other therapeutic practices, precarious (Conradson, 2003; 2005). It has been argued that, in its purest form, curiosity is arguably fundamentally risky, since open-ended enquiries can lead anywhere, overturning any stone, uncovering knowledge that may be useful, enlightening, or alternatively invasive and/or dangerous. Risks associated with curiosity were visible to the participants in this project, whose engagement with curiosity-driven projects required them to measure and negotiate or mitigate these risks. All three of the case studies indicated how curiosity can open a can of worms, eliciting stressful personal and collective memories, which are not always palatable for everyone involved. Thus, while we found and argued that it is possible to 'take notice' and be curious anywhere, and in ordinary rather than exceptional places, we also found that spaces for curiosity tend to be circumscribed, spatially and temporally ring-fenced, as a way of managing the risks associated with some forms and expressions of curiosity. This is an important finding in practical terms. As well as projects such as those that we have discussed in this paper, the LDHW and the broader policy on which it is based, is intended to be mobilised as public health advice outside of any managed intervention. Thus, the 'five ways to wellbeing' are intended to be incorporated into people's daily lives as routes to wellbeing. This mass mobilisation arguably dilutes practices and philosophies that cannot be learned overnight, or explained through simple advertising campaigns. It also fails to recognise the risks associated with 'being curious', and that the capacity to act on this advice in a way that will be beneficial for wellbeing is dependent on particular capacities, spaces and relationships which are not universally available: the spaces and places of curiosity matter for wellbeing.

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