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“You’re sort of building community in a bigger way”: exploring the potential of creative, nature-based activities to facilitate community connections

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ABSTRACT

Background: This paper explores the opportunities that creative, nature-based activities offer for mobilising social connections via community-centred approaches to improve individual and collective wellbeing.

Methods: The study involved ethnographic methods and data was gathered from a nature for wellbeing project implemented in a rural village in North East England.

Results: The findings indicate creative, nature-based activities delivered within an environment marked by an ethic of care and kindness enabled the project to engage with participants at individual and collective levels simultaneously, which enhanced the project’s ability to mobilise community skills and assets, and affect connectedness, equity and control within social groups facing significant disadvantages.

Conclusion: Creative, nature-based activities, delivered with an ethic of care, present an opportunity to recognise and engage complex and, at times, opposing undercurrents inherent in social connections between individuals and social groups.

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Community-centred approaches; creativity-based activities; ethic of care

Introduction

A significant body of literature published in the past decade has illustrated that creativity-based initiatives can impact positively on wellbeing, particularly through modifying behaviours that affect physical and mental health, across the life course in many different ways (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, H. and W, 2017; Bungay & Clift, 2010; Fancourt & Finn, 2019; Fancourt et al., 2019, 2021; Fletcher & Hackett, 2021; Richert & Decloedt, 2018; Stickley & Hui, 2012a). Many studies have indicated that social and health impacts of participation in creativity-based activities are intertwined (Belfiore & Bennett, 2008; Blackman, 2014; Cameron et al., 2013). Specifically it is claimed that pathways to impact centre around opportunities to engage in shared cultural practices and values, for validation and affirmation of identity, and the formation of positive social connections

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through feelings of empathy, trust, hope and belonging (Hilary Bungay & Clift, 2010; Daykin et al., 2020; Mansfield & Et, 2020; Stickley & Eades, 2013; Stickley & Hui, 2012b). It is suggested that processes associated with bonding and bridging could enhance participants' social and cultural capital and impact the social determinants of health (Gordon-Nesbitt & Howarth, 2020, p. 15). However, fewer studies focus on *how* participation in creativity-based activities affects individual and community wellbeing; a gap which this paper aims to address through a focus on the dynamics involved in the operationalisation of these activities.

Placing creativity-based approaches within community-centred approaches

Recent decades have witnessed increased interest in community-centred approaches as an effective way to address complex social and health care issues facing disadvantaged populations (Stansfield et al., 2020a). Community-centred approaches focus on mobilising community assets to enable people to have greater control over their health and lives, and are underpinned by core values of power, trust and relationships (Egan et al., 2021; Pollard et al., 2021; Popay et al., 2020; South, 2015; Stansfield et al., 2020a). The interest in such approaches has been triggered by the understanding that empowering communities facing significant disadvantages can facilitate sustainable pathways to improving health and reducing inequalities (Marmot, 2007, 2020) through enabling voice and control, equity and social connectedness (Eden & Lowndes, 2013; Holmes & Joseph, 2011; South, 2015; Stansfield et al., 2020b).

However, recently published literature encourages us to critically reflect on the key premises of community-centred approaches when implementing them. For instance, Popay et al. (2020) argue that community-centred approaches could run the risk of placing greater focus on what needs to change within a community, overlooking the internal and external dynamics and forces that affect that community's capabilities and capacities to act. Ahmed and Fortier (2003) alert us to various plays of power embedded in notions of belonging associated with the idea of community – that communities are sites where social differences are highlighted and performed. Amit (2012) argues, most current models of community-centred approaches are founded on an understanding that social groups that form collectives are “capable of moving from shared imagination to collective action” (ibid. 15).

Considering the concept of consociation enables us to be aware of the complexities inherent in community relationships (Amit, 2002, 2010, 2012, 2016). As Amit argues, it is as consociates – associations that emerge out of everyday collaborations – that we lay foundations for connection and belonging. Consociational connections develop when experiences are shared alongside shared narratives, which are borne out of those experiences (Amit, 2012). Facilitated through co-participation, interpretation and narrative exchange, consociation “will always be imbued with a personalized and experiential character, involving ‘the creation of a set of shared, but highly specific experiences, relationships, and identities that can be taken back to particular localities and interactional settings and employed and enjoyed in quite specialized roles with limited numbers of people’” (ibid. 26). A key mechanism through which consociation is maintained is joint commitment. Amit (2010) explains that in joint commitment, one is committed individually to a collective such that it stands or falls as long as the other is committed. While joint

commitment could take diverse forms – partial or comprehensive, fleeting or enduring – it relies on mutual interdependence. It resembles a “pooling of wills” which is likely to carry tensions, conflict, and anxiety (ibid. 359). Imbued with the potential for tension, highlighted in Amit’s notion of consociation is the need for recognition and management of conflicting views and wills. In this conceptualisation of social relations, disjuncture is an inherent quality, and by extension a feature of the ebbs and flows of community life. It does not mark a rupture or discontinuation, as often proposed, but entails a potential member’s active and conscious wish and their creative capacity to refashion their boundaries and sense of belonging. Alternatively, instances of disjuncture may reflect one’s attempt to “shift the basis of their social interactions and relationships by establishing new ties, modalities of social interaction and/or engagement” (Amit, 2016, p. 33). Considering consociation as a basis of community relationships, while being mindful of the dynamism inherent in social relations, would enable researchers interested in understanding community relationships to think about the “kinds of efforts [that] have to be mobilized to sustain new forms of association” (ibid. 33). A granular focus on social relations, as encouraged through a consociational approach, would enable the facilitation of strong social identities, which could become a bedrock of positive psychological resources for its group members (Jetten et al., 2017).

This paper draws from an ethnographic study conducted with a community project, which we call EARTH (pseudonym). It forms part of a wider research study conducted to evaluate the impact of Well Newcastle Gateshead (WNG) (<https://www.wellnewcastlegateshead.org.uk/>). WNG was a collaborative project between Blue Stone Consortium, Public Health England, and two Local Authorities in North East England which aimed to identify pathways to engage communities in arts and cultural activities as a catalyst to improve health and wellbeing. WNG focused on four wards in North East England, which were selected as being among the most socio-economically deprived areas in the North East, as determined by criteria including Index of Multiple Deprivation, health and social deprivation. This included village X. The WNG evaluation research comprised of three case studies of WNG funded projects, which reflected its geographical and thematic foci and, focused on the question “What are the pathways to impact of arts-based interventions on health and wellbeing?”. This paper explores how one case study, EARTH, harnessed the potential of creative, nature-based activities by adopting a nuanced understanding of social relations and by embedding the project within an ethic of care.

Method

The intervention

EARTH was a community project facilitated through a partnership between Stomping Grounds and another Community Interest Company. Stomping Grounds is a social enterprise, based in North East England, which aims to reconnect communities with nature (See www.stomping-grounds.org for more information). The Community Interest Company aimed to improve community wellbeing through facilitating access to nature. The primary objective of EARTH was to improve the mental health and wellbeing of vulnerable adult women living in Village X through immersion in nature. Village X is a rural, remote, socio-economically deprived village in North

East England with a population of about 10,000 people. While the village has attracted attention as a locus of regeneration in recent years, some local authority and VCS practitioners interviewed for the study pointed out that some sections of the village population are less likely to engage in regenerative efforts than others. EARTH's vision was to use creative, nature-based activities to engage all sections of village X's population.

In the proposal submitted to WNG, EARTH argued that women, especially women living in socio-economically deprived localities, often feel less safe and less comfortable than men accessing nature and bushcraft. EARTH suggested that facilitating a connection with nature would help women living in village X to improve their wellbeing. The project was targeted at working age to older women, from diverse socio-economic backgrounds with experience of complex health conditions. Planned as a 12-month project, EARTH was implemented in partnership with Forestry England and a local woodland-based charity. It aimed to reduce feelings of social isolation and build a sense of belonging within the village, develop new skills, and feelings of safety in green spaces.

EARTH was in the process of recruiting participants through locally based organisations and the local GP practice when national COVID-19 restrictions were implemented in March 2020. During the first lockdown, EARTH staff worked in partnership with another local organisation to provide essentials for villagers in need (Well Newcastle Gateshead – End of Year Report 2020; personal communications noted in Field Notes April 2020 – June 2020). Conversations observed between project staff and potential participants during this time led EARTH staff to adapt its offer to suit villagers' needs and circumstances. As a result, EARTH staff delivered 3-hour sessions, fortnightly. The sessions were held in the woodlands near the village, as this was perceived to increase accessibility to a wide range of participants. The sessions were organised around foraging, cooking food on the campfire and craft activity inspired by and using natural materials such as willow, leaves, wood etc.

Study design and ethics

Ethnography as a methodological approach enables the observation of behaviours and activities that take place in a given social setting, taking into account the context, how interpersonal dynamics influence observed behaviours and how participants understand their experiences (Wilson & Chaddha, 2009). Core elements of ethnographic approaches include a relatively prolonged engagement with the research site, and the use of a combination of qualitative research methods alongside participant observation (Willis & Trondman, 2000). Ethnography was chosen for the present study to facilitate a granular understanding of mechanisms mobilised within the context of EARTH.

Approval for the research was obtained from Newcastle University Research Ethics Committee (Ref: 15858/2018) and Gateshead Council. This paper focuses on the findings from EARTH, as, although small in scale, this ethnographic study enabled in-depth engagement with project staff and participants over a longer period, which facilitated a detailed understanding of its underlying processes.

Table 1. Data collection Overview.

Study components	Methods of data collection
Developing a contextual understanding of Village X	Informal conversations with EARTH Project Staff and WNG staff recorded in a field diary. Interviews with VCS personnel active in Village X and the NE region ($n = 2$) Interviews with LA officials ($n = 4$) Interviews with elected members of the ward ($n = 2$)
Developing an understanding of EARTH	Participant observation – 9 sessions (Approx. 24 hours. MS maintained a field diary, which was written following each session) Interviews with EARTH project workers - $n = 2$ (48 minutes and 56 minutes; interviewed via Zoom®) Project records – EARTH project proposal, interim and final evaluation reports submitted to WNG; records of planning meetings in the form of WhatsApp conversations from July 2020 to January 2021; documentation of project workers' reflections on delivery sessions from April 2020 to January 2021
Developing an understanding of participant perspectives/experiences	Interviews with participants - $n = 2$ (55 minutes and 135 minutes; 1 face-to-face interview and 1 via Zoom®), which were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Informal conversations with participants during participant observation sessions, recorded in field diary. Observation of 2 focus group discussions, facilitated by EARTH staff as part of their evaluations in Oct 2020 and Aug 2021.

Data collection

Data was collected from April 2020 to August 2021. The table below presents details of the data collection methods. [Table 1](#) presents an overview of data collection methods.

Participants

17 women signed up for the project and 11 attended on more than one occasion (Well Newcastle Gateshead – End of Year Report 2020). Aged between 40 to 70, the women included some who were born and bred in the village and others who had been relocated to the village via social housing provision. EARTH staff discouraged the researcher from gathering demographic data from participants as it was considered requesting personal data would negatively affect the trust building work. Observations noted a core group of 4 women, who attended the activities regularly. Number of participants at observed sessions ranged from 5 to 11.

Analysis

All gathered data and field diaries were coded thematically, using a grounded approach, where themes data were coded into were derived from the data itself (Charmaz, 2006). Thematic coding was organised using NVivo 12. The coded data were analysed by MS using a hermeneutic approach where the meaning of actions and interactions were interpreted and reinterpreted whilst embedding the data in its context of origin, and relied on inductive logic (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021; Morgan, 2021). Application of a hermeneutic approach to data analysis enabled us to probe into underlying meanings and mechanisms of themes, which were identified through a grounded approach.

Findings

Findings from EARTH case study indicated 4 broad, interconnected themes associated with social relationships and nature and creativity-based activities. These appeared to work at two levels: relationships between community members and project workers, and relationships between community members. The findings are presented under the sub-headings of 1. Making of consociates; 2. Caring Connections; 3. Reciprocity; 4. Ebbs and Flows.

Making of consociates – creating affable connections

EARTH brought together participants from the village, the majority of whom did not know each other previously, despite living near one another. The common thread that initially brought the group together was that participants had expressed an interest in creative activity and/or nature-based activity during EARTH's participant recruitment drive. EARTH sessions offered multiple ways for group members to take part and project staff invited participants to join activities in ways they felt comfortable. Observations noted that, during sessions, some members chat, some take part in craft activities on offer, some forage, others help with food preparations. Women appeared to choose how to participate, depending on the way they felt that day. Some volunteered to do certain activities they felt confident doing. For instance, a participant who frequently volunteered to get the fire started commented that she was good at it (fieldnotes 9 October 2020). Others volunteered to learn new skills when the participants reported their mood felt right. One participant, who had dropped in for a quick visit to the group, volunteered to chop firewood – something which she had not done before – and left after noting that was what she needed on that day, implying chopping firewood was cathartic (fieldnotes NaN Invalid Date NaN). When group members collectively discussed and decided future activities, participants were encouraged to lead the activity which their skills permitted. At an interview, a participant commented that she valued the fluid and relaxed ways in which women could join in:

some people can talk to you or certain people you talk to and, some people, they're just happier just doing, making stuff and you find your like commonality with them making stuff [] Someone will bring a pie or something [] and someone else will make the tea and someone else would be really good at that. So you've all got your little, your little thing, and you're part of a, little sort of, your little community in itself, aren't you? Which is lovely. (Interview; EARTH Participant 1)

This participant explained that the fluid potential to participate in the project and its location – on the boundary of the village where the focus was on creative engagement with nature – enabled its participants to showcase their, sometimes hidden, talents and skills, try new roles and activities which enabled them to see each other in a different light. This led to connections which might not have been possible otherwise. This was highlighted by the same participant:

... even though socially, we're probably a million miles apart. In that group, we're not which is, [] it's special ... people can seem like they have no education, and they've got little respect for themselves or this, that and the other. But their art is incredible. And you [] just think, you know, that's the beauty of it, because you wouldn't see that otherwise. It's, you know, in the way our society is structured, you wouldn't see it would you? [] When they were allowed to come into their own, it's erm, it's just fantastic. [] And it just, it's a leveller, isn't it? It's a lovely leveller. (Interview; EARTH Participant 1)

A shared interest in creative activities and immersion in nature brought participants to EARTH, where they were free to participate as they felt comfortable, thus enhancing opportunities for creativity. The creative, nature-based activities they shared enabled participants to appreciate and value one another differently and feel a sense of respect. In the context of EARTH, creative activities appear to generate mutual respect leading to collaborative connections between the group members who began to treat one another as consociates.

Caring connections – laying the ground for joint commitment

EARTH staff's response to COVID-19 restrictions appeared to demonstrate to the women their commitment to care. When the restrictions were announced, staff responded to a text message sent by a woman who had registered to be a participant of EARTH, by providing food and groceries for families as well as adults who live alone. With time, craft materials and nature packs were added to the deliveries. When and where possible, the delivered packages were personalised as in the instance where the staff included flowers in addition to the food delivery. In response, EARTH staff received the following text message:

Thank you so much for the flowers, I have been struggling with my depression this week and it really brightened my day. (Cited in EARTH's Well Newcastle Gateshead – End of Year Report 2020: 01)

EARTH staff members continued these practical activities as COVID-19 restrictions lifted, maintaining relationships with women who could not attend project sessions by delivering food and craft materials (Interviews with project staff, Staff observations, Field Notes – multiple entries). Conversations during project sessions indicated that these acts of connection resulted in EARTH being seen by participants as a caring space. Project activities that revolved around cooking and eating together seemed to strengthen these perceptions. Participants often mentioned how good it felt to have someone cook them a hot meal or make them a cup of tea, alluding to the perception that providing a warm meal and a cup of tea are acts of kindness. Participant observation indicated that EARTH participants and staff discussed the importance of being kind to oneself and being kind to one another, suggesting a strong association between sensitivity and creativity. The combination of these dynamics appears to mark out EARTH as a space of caring by and for women.

Findings indicated that caring connections required active management. Perceptions of care enabled participants to reach out to EARTH staff in times of need, both in relation to concerns regarding the project, as well as personal or family matters. Fieldwork observations noted several occasions when participants sought support from EARTH

staff to deal with complex, personal circumstances and staff responded by liaising with various services to address these needs (Fieldnotes, multiple entries). In these instances, staff managed their interventions sensitively and respectfully. For instance, when a participant who, having faced a domestic crisis, sought support but decided to return home despite the situation remaining unresolved, staff shared their reservations, but respected the participant's reasons and wishes, and recognised the limits of their power to intervene. The conversation indicated that the staff sought not to judge but to encourage and support participants to take control of their own circumstances when they were ready. In a similar vein, another staff member noted that maintaining caring connections requires active and continuous engagement and a non-judgmental outlook, both at a personal and a collective level.

It's like a micro version of community and society, isn't it? It's recognising that everybody's different, has a part to play within an entire group. And it's sort of [] building on each of their strengths, so that they feel empowered to do that on a wider scale as well. So that [] you're sort of building community in a bigger way. And like, I know, for example, [participant] has a lot to offer, but has had quite a few knock backs in the [] community. [] So having that, where she can feel that she's listened to, and that she's important and that her ideas are valued is really, really important for her because then she feels part of the community. Again, she's not being cut off from it, because [] she's too much. (Interview, EARTH staff)

From EARTH staff's perspective, the careful cultivation and management of connections with individuals and the group necessitated that they held a holistic view of the participant which comprised of understanding a participant's circumstances, strengths and challenges facing them. With that understanding, staff appeared to be led by the participants, responding to their wider needs through signposting and ongoing support, where necessary.

A reciprocal environment – nurturing joint commitment

EARTH embraced an ethos of collaboration where staff worked with participants to deliver the project, building confidence and capacity by co-designing a program of activities. A practice that illustrated this, noted in participant interviews and researcher's observations, was that activities for subsequent sessions were collaboratively agreed upon.

It's just great, because you get these ideas And I'll sort of say, I'd really like to do that. And then [project staff] has to go off and find the sort of resources and, [] then someone else would go, "Oh, yeah, I know how to do it," and then they'll show you how to do it. [] And I'm just sort of like rubbing my hands with glee, because someone's showing me how to do this thing that [] always want[ed] to do and I love it. [] so I'll take people some chips. It's been, a little thank you really, because it's so nice. (Interview; EARTH Participant 2)

As this participant noted, having scope to pursue personal interests and feeling that each contribution was valued helped strengthen the connection and commitment women felt for the project – enabling both staff and group members to feel they had given back. As EARTH was focused on creative, nature-based activities, this opened space to explore a range of options, which were as varied as pewter crafting to baking in open fires. The potential for diverse activities seemed to enable participants to contribute in different ways, sharing ideas, skills and labour, and leading activities when they had the skills.

Demonstrating a commitment to sharing knowledge, staff and participants brought books on diverse themes such as woodland craft, foraging, recipe books etc. to project sessions, which everyone would leaf through and discuss (Researcher's Field Notes; 23 October 2020). Such practices, which placed equal value on diverse sources of knowledge and expertise, suggested mutuality in delivering EARTH, rather than positing staff as experts imparting knowhow to community members (Noted in multiple observed sessions). On occasion, project staff facilitated opportunities for participants to acquire further skills outside EARTH. The participants who were supported in such ways engaged in cycles of reciprocity, looking to contribute to the group either with their time or newly acquired craftwork skills. For instance, a participant who followed a first aid course through an EARTH staff contact, shared her wish to contribute in future:

[the first aid course] was just for . outdoor training basically. Well, what I am hoping ... that when after all this lockdown disappears, I could come and volunteer more for. [host organizations] (Interview; EARTH Participant 2)

The researcher noted that sharing vulnerabilities alongside strengths and skills further enriched a sense of affinity in the group. For instance, on two occasions, crafting activities revolved around self-reflection and catharsis. One activity entailed making of stick models representing fears and vulnerabilities and burning the figure as a way of dispelling what it represents. The other activity, done at a session before the dawn of the new year, entailed group members being invited to write down a distressing event/experience/emotion that they had faced in the year gone by and fuel the open fire with it. Staff explained that their objective in doing this activity was to think about catharsis as well as becoming aware of how negative experiences could spawn positivity, as in fuelling the fire that provided warmth to the group. On both these occasions, both participants and staff shared fears, worries and concerns about themselves and their immediate social worlds. Following the activity, the group shared that they found the activity to be “therapeutic” as these activities helped them to dispel negativity and raised their awareness that they were not alone in their worries and fears (Field Notes November 06 and 18 December 2020). Sharing vulnerabilities appeared to engender a sense of safety where participants described the project space as one in which they could speak openly without being judged, which was contrasted with their wider societal experience which frequently left them feeling overlooked or stigmatised (Fieldnotes 9 October 2020).

Staff appeared to carefully manage and maintain the reciprocal environment, both through being attentive to interpersonal dynamics within the group and the explicit recognition of diverse participant contributions. For instance, when participants offered to prepare meals for the group, which at times they pre-cooked at home, the costs of material were always borne by EARTH. If a participant refused financial reimbursement, the staff sought alternate ways of maintaining the balance of transactions. On one occasion, staff gave flowers and a basket of treats to a participant who refused money as a way of paying back for a meal she had prepared for the group (EARTH staff WhatsApp conversation, November 2020). Such acts appeared to acknowledge the mutuality of exchanges within EARTH. It did not imply assumed notions of equality. The explicit acknowledgement that all contributions are valued seemed to feed participants' sense of self-worth where they considered themselves to be capable of making valued contributions, as indicated by the participant cited above.

Ebbs and flows

The findings indicated that the connections the participants felt towards one another, towards villagers and EARTH staff were complex and fluid. EARTH brought together women from a rural, remote village, which was seen by many outsiders as a tight-knit community. However, EARTH staff described relationships between some of the villagers as strained and, at times, conflicted. While many of the villagers had lived there all their lives, others were more recent arrivals, who did not have entrenched links with the village in the same ways. Some of these more recent residents were social housing tenants, with complex needs. One of the key challenges project staff anticipated was managing this complexity. As previously noted, staff anticipated that maintaining caring connections with the village at individual and community levels helped them to navigate this complexity.

Embedded within an ethic of care, EARTH brought together women with shared interests in creative, nature-based activities, which helped connect villagers and build a sense of identity and belonging. Participants noted perceptions in their immediate social circles that bushcraft is not a “women’s activity”, thus positioning participants’ interest in outdoors and bushcraft as unconventional. The space to share this interest and witness each other’s growing skills and talents paved the way for participants to respect and appreciate one another in novel ways. With time, participants seemed to transfer the connections made within the project to community level connections. A participant, who had recently relocated to the village and had previously found it difficult to connect with other villagers, commented that the project provided them with opportunities to build social relationships and form connections, which did not previously exist:

I’ll stop and say hello to people now and just briefly, but there wouldn’t be any reason to before []. I’m always very sociable, but some people they wouldn’t know who you are. And there’s a lot of distrust around here. (Interview; EARTH Participant 1)

At the same time, group members shared awareness of their differences. Conversations during project activity sessions revolved around various themes, from sharing personal experiences to opinions about the wider world. At times, opinions were gently contested, with warmth, humour and wit, which seemed to encourage staff and participants to critically reflect on one another’s views. An example was when an anecdote about appropriate colours for a dress for a maid of honour at a wedding was used to prompt a conversation on beliefs about women’s capacities and capabilities (Fieldnotes, 9 October 2020). While the disagreements did not result in open disputes, some took offence at things that were said and done during and outside the project sessions, which were shared privately with project staff (EARTH staff WhatsApp conversation, Sep – Dec 2020). These stories of discontent, ranging from a set of eyes averted on the street to what some considered to be socially unacceptable behaviours in the group, indicated the ambiguity some participants felt towards others in the group. A similar observation was made about the push-pull relationship some participants had with the staff, on occasion reaching out and at other times, pushing them away. For instance, some participants who were experiencing complex mental health issues and financial challenges responded less positively to EARTH staff, when their anxieties were high. EARTH staff, while they found these exchanges to be challenging and unsettling, understood these ebbs and flows to be resulting from the complex challenges facing participants.

The group's relationship with the wider village followed similar ebbs and flows. While some participants felt connected to the village community through familial and work commitments, others indicated ambiguity. For those who felt a less secure sense of belonging, the project provided an alternate space connected to, but different from, the village. A participant who was experiencing antagonistic relations with a neighbour described how the project offered the opportunity to take her away from conflict and to establish connections with other fellow villagers while demonstrating to her neighbour that she is a connected social being with friends and allies:

The [project] helps me because he'll see me you know, having fun [] being out there and chatting to people and having fun and [] like they'll see me like down there. I'm not [] I'm [] thriving. I'm not hiding away. And it's like, this is the thing to have. It gives you a reason to come out of the house and be amongst people who are friendly ... (Interview; EARTH participant 1)

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that EARTH mobilised capacities and values associated with creative, nature-based activities to facilitate conditions to nurture social relationships, which embraced the complexity Amit outlined (Amit, 2012, 2016). For instance, the breadth of creative, nature-based activities available within EARTH offered a range of possibilities for participation and contribution. Participating in ways that they felt comfortable seemed to enable a group of women, who previously described themselves as being on the margins, to see and present themselves in a different light – as women with skills and opinions, who challenged stereotypical expectations of acceptable female conduct. In doing so, they developed a shared narrative and identity as women capable of making valued contributions, through a sense of camaraderie and social inclusion with like-minded others. These findings resonate with similar studies, which have highlighted the potential for creative and arts-based activities to impact upon personal resources by strengthening personal identity and interpersonal relationships (Daykin et al., 2020; Jensen, 2019; Stickley & Eades, 2013). The findings also highlighted the key role creative and arts-based project workers play in the facilitation of safe spaces, within which positive changes could be experienced (Poulos et al., 2019; Stickley & Hui, 2012a).

Both staff and participants seemed to associate EARTH with a space for sensitivity and reflection, which facilitated an active engagement with an ethic of care. It seemed that the opportunity to attend to the needs of a wider group of villagers during COVID-19 restrictions in 2020 enabled the EARTH staff to demonstrate their commitment to care. As the project progressed, it continued to harvest the potential of commensality (practices of eating together) to extend this ethic of care, connecting participants with one another through countless cups of tea and meals cooked over an open fire (Marovelli, 2019; Smith & Harvey, 2021). A combination of practices involving commensality, creativity and reciprocity seemed to invite the participants to consider each other through a lens of care. While it required persistent and hard emotional labour on the part of EARTH staff and participants, the findings suggest that this approach led to those involved feeling valued and capable of contributing to their own wellbeing and that of the group. The acknowledgement and acceptance of diversity within the group indicated that it was not

convergence of views that the project sought to support but an ideology of co-existence – a recognition of a form of mutually beneficial, healthy interdependence.

Findings suggest that this active engagement with an ethic of care enabled the staff and participants to treat EARTH as a safe space, which acknowledged vulnerability and the need for mutual care and support. This resonates with published literature that has highlighted that sensitively adopted creativity and arts-based practices can facilitate safe spaces for populations, particularly those who have previously felt vulnerable (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, H. and W, 2017; Gillibrand et al., 2023; Karabanow & Naylor, 2015; Lenette, 2022; Nunn, 2022; Pavarini et al., 2021; Stickley & Hui, 2012a; White, 2009) and can give rise to positive psychological resources (Jetten et al., 2017). Further, the project's connection with nature broadened the potential to reflect on caring connections with the wider ecosystem, starting with self-care. Frequent evocations of kindness to self, one another, community and the planet during project delivery sessions suggested that kindness is an infrastructural quality within which EARTH was embedded (Anderson & Brownlie, 2019). Staff and participants embraced acceptance and kindness as a central quality of the project space indicating that it engendered a sociality of kindness (Ahmed, 2004). The narrative that was shared within the group emphasized the circularity of kindness – done in kindness, received in kindness and returned in kindness and suggested that it enabled the participants and staff to navigate tensions and maintain relations both within and beyond the confines of the project.

Lastly, the findings present an opportunity to reflect on the practice of engaging creativity and arts-based activities to improve health and wellbeing. At the forefront of EARTH staff members' practice was an understanding of the dynamics of power. While EARTH staff remained the architects – the ones who had control over the funding and governance of the project – both the staff and the participants reflected a practice of co-designing and managing activities with the EARTH group rather than managing power over the EARTH group (Popay et al., 2020). EARTH's practices of "power with the group" were located within a logic of care (Mol, 2008), where staff appeared as wanting to act without seeking control. Staff often shared that the way individuals felt in themselves, and how they related to one another in the group needed to be considered in efforts to support and promote individual and collective wellbeing (Jensen, 2014). Staff members indicated that their understanding of social relations within EARTH was nuanced. In the first instance, they set out to model and build positive relationships with participating individuals at a one-to-one level. Then, while fostering these relationships, staff members appeared to facilitate positive relationships between individual participants of the EARTH group and the wider village. This approach recognised the potential for disjuncture in social relations (Amit, 2016) and engaged this quality via boundary work (Reynolds, 2018). Staff considered the process of making and maintaining relationships within the group to be continuous, recognising that perceptions of belonging were fluid and varied (Traill, 2021) and dynamic relations within the group shaped processes of inclusion and exclusion (Popay et al., 2008). EARTH staff's practice reflected an active engagement with the key components of arts-health practice, where the practitioner held the participant at the locus of activities, while tending to the ways the broader environment and arts practice affected the participant's wellbeing (Tan, 2020). While our research was not able to explore this theme across multiple sites, our engagement with EARTH hinted at the associated risks and costs experienced by practitioners in arts-health practices, further highlighting the need for sound practice guidelines,

codes of conduct and, most importantly, support systems to underpin the arts-health practice (Belfiore, 2021; Bungay et al., 2023; Jensen, 2014).

This paper is based on findings from a small-scale ethnographic study carried out in collaboration with a project that engaged a defined number of participants, thereby affecting generalisability of its findings. COVID-19 restrictions impacted upon the implementation of planned research methods. This required a flexible response from the research team and participants, who demonstrated their willingness to adapt. Additionally, the research could not capture the views and experiences of those who did not engage or had only a fleeting engagement with EARTH. However, the strengths of the study are its in-depth focus on a population which is rarely involved in research that enabled a detailed view into the ways diverse dynamics related to the project were influenced by and, in turn, influenced the social relationships within and beyond the EARTH project. This helped the researchers to draw out influential mechanisms and pathways which could inform the design and implementation of similar interventions.

While this paper is based on small-scale research, our findings indicate that further research that takes a contextualised and in-depth approach to investigating the effects of arts-based, community interventions could enable a deep understanding of implementation processes and less tangible effects of creative, nature-based activities on health and wellbeing. Such analyses would bring to light contexts and mechanisms associated with an intervention that could affect its impact.

Conclusion

In this paper, we explored the opportunities offered by creativity-based activities for mobilising social connections via community-centred approaches to improve individual and collective wellbeing. It focused on the findings from an ethnographic study conducted in a rural village in the North East of England in collaboration with EARTH, as part of a wider evaluation of Well Newcastle Gateshead. Our findings indicated, within EARTH, a nuanced understanding of local social relations and a commitment to an ethic of care enabled its staff to effectively engage a group of people who had previously felt marginalised. In addition, they harnessed the opportunities presented within creative, nature-based activities and understood the potential of commensality. EARTH staff demonstrated how they engaged in the task of “building community in a bigger way” by mobilising community skills and assets with an ethic of care, thus facilitating connectedness, equity and control within communities facing significant disadvantages (Marmot, 2020; Stansfield et al., 2020a).

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