

**'It's about giving yourself a sense of belonging':  
community-based history and well-being in South  
Yorkshire**

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## 'It's about giving yourself a sense of belonging': community-based history and well-being in South Yorkshire

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### Abstract

Community-based history is a highly popular activity in neighbourhoods across the UK. The practice of participants doing history, often their own, for themselves, marks its difference from other forms of public history. This article explores the potential of involvement in community-based history in the South Yorkshire region to contribute to social identity and well-being and to inform public policy concerning health and well-being. We demonstrate the role of community-based history in building social capital and creating social links, tackling the negative effects of isolation, providing meaning, generating public and self-esteem and contributing to personal identity and belonging, as well as improving and strengthening local communities. Our findings reveal the relevance of community history in shaping notions of place and a sense of well-being through citizen engagement, with implications for community governance. At the same time, the limitations of our sample, particularly in relation to 'race' and whiteness, mirror an overwhelmingly White British participation in the wider heritage sector. This confirms that issues concerning whose history is represented, by whom, for what purpose and in what context, require consideration and raises questions regarding the role of community history in enabling a nostalgic and exclusive place-making with negative implications for non-British and/or non-white inhabitants.

Key words: community-based history and heritage, well-being, belonging, place-making, exclusion.

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### Introduction

Well-being' has emerged as a 'governing policy concept' in recent years. Although a contested term, it is widely understood to suggest a move away from a focus on the primacy of material prosperity and GDP and towards an understanding of individuals as constituted by the material, cultural, social and emotional aspects of their lives (Atkinson et al, 2012, p. 2). Local communities and the social relationships therein play an important role in individual well-being. Numerous studies have explored how communities operate to create social groups within which people understand, shape and define who they are as individuals, thereby providing a range of social roles and activities which offer structure, purpose, value and social identity, all important

determinants of self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1979; Tajfel, 1972; Thoits, 1983). Participation within neighbourhood groups and the sense of belonging that ensues can mitigate against the potentially negative impact of globalisation and migration, social changes which have resulted in a fragmentation of community and family life, increased social 'disembeddedness' and contributed to the weakening of social networks, with implications for physical health, social identity and well-being (Sani, 2012; Phillipson, 2007). Belonging impacts on social capital, defined by Lee as 'networks, norms and trust found in the structure of relations between people', a feature of social groups and communities and correlated with well-being (Lee, 2010, p. 1840). Other studies have highlighted the association of stronger attachments to geographical place, moderated by age, duration of residence and strength of local ties, with benefits including social support, sense of continuity, purpose, meaning, life satisfaction, emotional health, healthy behaviours, physiological function and even mortality rates (Lee, 2010, p.1840, Lewicka, 2011; Folland, 2007; Helliwell and Barrington-Leigh, 2011; Holt-Lunstad et al, 2010).

Studies have explored the relationship of history-related activities to individual well-being. The focus on belonging and the power of memory and on 'emotional travels in time' form a staple of the benefits attributed to participation in public history, broadly defined to include museums and other heritage sites and activities (Samuel, 1994; Jordanova, 2006; Ashton and Kean, 2012; Kean and Martin, 2013; Lloyd and Moore, 2015, p.238). Laurajane Smith has emphasised that participation in the cultural process of heritage enables the construction of identities and narratives for individuals, families and communities (Smith, 2006). Such analyses echo the arguments of oral historians regarding reminiscence work (Bornat, 1994; Berridge, 1996; Bornat and Walmsley, 2008; Winslow and Smith, 2010). Sociologists have made similar points regarding the role of family history in enabling 'identity-work' and the exploration of 'the intangible elements of connection and emotion' (Smart, 2007, p.188; Kramer, 2011; Bottero, 2013). Despite this emergent interest in history and well-being, however, the significance for participants of their involvement in the growing field of community-based history, the focus of this study, has been little explored.

While community history and public history share many characteristics, including an emphasis on collaborative work, communicating with a wide audience and a focus on history as applied to 'real-world' issues (Liddington, 2002; Liddington and Ditchfield, 2005), a key difference concerns the extent of their respective embeddedness in communities. Community history, stimulated by the Heritage Lottery Fund (1994) and the identification of the potential of history projects in enabling the 'capacity building' required by community regeneration initiatives, has seen an exponential development during the past two decades (Twells, 2008). Its focus is people engaged in the practice of 'doing' history in their own communities, as opposed to visiting public history and heritage sites to participate in activities curated by heritage professionals. Community history activities might include collecting and curating photographs, often on Facebook pages, writing books and web articles, genealogy, conducting heritage walks, re-enactments, producing resources for schools and heritage tourism, and engagement with wider community development. Community history has extended public participation in historical research and practice beyond the traditional 'local history society' demographic of retired professionals in suburbs and affluent villages, to represent an expansion of the group referred to by Raphael Samuel (1994) as 'under-labourers', people working quite separately from academics in the production of 'grass-roots' histories. Increasingly the movement has influenced the practice of public history – in, for example, museums professionals seeking greater community collaborations and embracing methodologies centred on personal investment and what Filene terms

the 'passionate history spirit' and 'boundary-breaking creativity' of community history (Filene, 2012, p.31; Crooke, 2008).

The first part of this article focuses on involvement in community-based history in the South Yorkshire region to explore the implications of participation for physical, cognitive, emotional and psychosocial well-being. We demonstrate the diverse reasons why people engage with community history projects and explore their significance in terms of: building social capital and creating social links, tackling the negative effects of isolation, providing meaning, generating public and self-esteem and contributing to personal identity and belonging, as well as improving and strengthening local communities. Our findings have implications for interventionist measures in public policy concerning health and well-being, contributing to studies which report positive outcomes from interventions to improve social connectedness and increase social engagement (Musick and Wilson, 2003; Knight et al, 2008; Haslam et al, 2009). Holt-Lunstad et al (2010) argue that, given the clarity of the relationship between social capital and well-being, research should now focus on pathways between them and interventions to tackle social isolation. Community history appears to be one such intervention.

Our research also raises questions about the limitations of community history and its function as a place-making activity. Cultural geographers have shown that place is not only a location made meaningful through subjective attachment – in Yi-Fu Tuan's words, a 'field of care', an outcome of 'an affective bond between people and place' (Tuan, 1974, p.7; Agnew, 1987; Thrift, 2004) - but is produced socially, invested with meanings shaped by relationships of power and subject to contestation, renegotiation and change (Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 1989, 1999; Massey, 1995, 2005). As Doreen Massey has argued, history plays a role here: *'the identities of places are very much bound up with the histories that are told of them; how these histories are told, and what history turns out to be dominant'* (Massey, 1995).

Heritage Studies scholars also emphasise contestation and power. Heritage, defined by Ashworth and Graham as 'the medium through which senses of place are created from senses of time', is necessarily plural and contested, subject to a 'continuous interplay of the official/unofficial and insider/outsider dichotomies that characterize every single manifestation of heritage' (Ashworth and Graham, 2005, p. 11; Ashworth et al, 2007). Laurajane Smith developed the term 'authorised heritage discourse' to refer to the process by which the cultural symbols of a particular social group (white, middle and upper class) are privileged and the right to identify and champion heritage confined to specific groups of professional expertise (archaeologists, architects and art historians), thereby serving to marginalise subaltern definitions and practices (Smith, 2006; Waterton, 2009; Waterton and Smith, 2010; Smith and Waterton, 2012, p.155). Scholars have explored such processes in relation to local communities (Jones, 2004; Waterton, 2005; Robertson, 2008), working class communities (Mellor and Stephenson, 2005; Dodds et al, 2006; Dicks, 2008) and 'race' (Hall, 1999; Littler and Naidoo, 2004; Naidoo, 2005; Littler, 2008). Such exclusions resonate in wider informal fields of historical recovery in which nostalgic representations of communities are bound up with understandings of 'race' and British (and English) identity (Pente and Ward, 2018; Thorleifsson, 2016).

This research focuses on South Yorkshire, a former industrial centre of Great Britain and in the postwar years a site of considerable social and economic change, including industrial decline and widespread immigration. On the one hand, the study explores the way in which identity, wellbeing and belonging are expressed in community history and heritage and are invested in subjective notions of 'place'. At the same time, the limitations of our sample, particularly in relation to 'race' and whiteness, mirror

participation in the wider heritage sector and confirm that issues concerning whose history is represented, by whom, for what purpose and in what context, require consideration. The study opens up debate as to how 'history', 'heritage' and 'culture' are framed and 'performed' by those who engage with community-based history.

## Methodology

As a research team comprised of a historian, psychologist, health researcher and specialists in the voluntary sector and sport and recreation, we were able to draw on methods and concepts in the humanities and social sciences and to engage explicitly with wider, national measures and indicators of well-being. We adopted a modified Grounded Theory (GT) methodology. GT is a systematic, inductive approach to qualitative research inquiry, based upon collecting and analysing rich data from people with experience of the studied phenomenon (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1988) and in which findings are interpretive, reflecting both the novel data and the researchers' ideas (Corbin, 1990; Corbin and Strauss, 2008). We developed two concurrent modes of data collection: a survey and in-depth interviews. We approached members of over 200 community history and heritage groups in South Yorkshire via group websites and, in some cases, during community history events, and invited them to participate in the study. The only eligibility criteria we applied were that participants were aged 18+ and that they were participant in community history and heritage activities. No exclusion criteria were applied. Of the 93 people who completed the survey, 42 indicated willingness to take part in an interview. They were supplied with full information about the interviews and written consent was obtained prior to participation. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the local University Research Ethics Committee.

A total of 24 individuals participated in interviews, including 10 men and 14 women, who ranged in age from 40 to 77, with the majority of participants (17) in their 50s and 60s. All lived in South Yorkshire and described themselves as White British. Although no obvious resistance to participation was expressed, our attempts to engage and interview the two BAME survey participants were unsuccessful. Experience with history and heritage activities ranged from under one to over ten years' duration; 15 described themselves as committee members, and nine as group members. Participants represented different local history projects, including a focus on localities, buildings, monuments, industry, social, ethnic or health-related communities and archaeology. They came from varied geographical areas (all regions of South Yorkshire) and types of locality (wealthy and deprived; urban, suburban, semi-rural and rural). Many participants were involved in numerous groups within their local area.

In interviews, participants were asked to talk about their initial motivations, how expectations had been realised and motivations had changed over time, and to reflect on the importance of history in their lives. They discussed their experiences, both positive and negative, of involvement in history and heritage activities and the impact of these upon themselves, others in the groups and the community as a whole. They were guided to consider both identity- and well-being- related experiences and impacts. An interview schedule was developed to address the above points and the same questions were asked of each participant. Opportunities were given to raise unanticipated topics, consistent with the exploratory approach. We conducted interviews in a variety of community locations, including libraries, town halls, village community rooms, local museums, cemetery buildings, as well as in participants' homes. Interview duration was approximately 45-50 minutes. Audio recordings were professionally transcribed and anonymised. We held research team meetings during

data collection to review progress with recruitment, select more potential participants for invitation and discuss experiences and ideas. When it became clear in discussion that no new ideas were arising in interviews, no more survey participants were contacted.

Our GT-inspired thematic analysis involved detailed open coding and categorisation of all data (Lichtman, 2014). Through a process of constant comparative analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), we developed themes and subthemes which represented our interpretations of participant accounts (Braun and Clarke, 2012). Analysis generated sixteen subthemes which were collapsed into two overarching themes, 'Making a Difference,' and 'Rewards and Challenges.'

### Findings: Making a Difference

Making a Difference describes the motivations for, and aims, activities and processes of, participants' community history and heritage involvement and their perceived impacts upon the local area and community. It describes the active process participants were engaged with and aimed to achieve, in their own lives, the lives of others and the community as a whole. Subthemes of 'Making a Difference' were 'Joining in,' 'Improving the local environment', 'Informing and educating', 'Getting people involved', 'Making broader links' and 'Creating a legacy.'

#### *Joining In*

The majority of participants had chosen to join community history and heritage groups on finishing work, through ill-health or retirement, or when other commitments were reduced, and had looked for something which would keep them active and avoid 'stagnation'. (P15) A fundamental motivation was a fascination with history. Many of our participants described themselves as having a deep and long-held love of history, often inspired during childhood by parents or teachers:

*When I look back on my life I think I was always really keen on history. I look in my mother's photo album and there we are at Scarborough Castle, with the dog, and having a great time and I've said 'look I must have started really young'. (P18)*

Typically, social history interested our participants, and particularly the small 'patch' histories associated with 'history from below'.

*People always think about knights in shining armour, which is fascinating, but then what about people at the bottom? (P4)*

Some participants had taken qualifications in history and sometimes worked alongside academics. They had experience of in-depth research and dissemination of findings through books or lectures. For others their interest in history was personal and emotional:

*I feel a very big emotional link with the past, yeah. In Sheffield, 'cos all my family are from Sheffield and I live in Hunters Bar which is, I know it's a bit trendy now, but actually that's where my family are from. So it is about discovering about oneself. (P10)*

Linked to this, participants were seeking activities and projects that intrigued, engaged and challenged them. Many expressed an enjoyment of the process of

historical discovery and talked about the excitement and pleasure they took in making new discoveries and insights; 'the detective thing' (P19):

*There's challenge, there's curiosity, there's satisfaction, when you make links that previously weren't there. (P6)*

Participants viewed their activities as helping to write history by telling little known stories and embellishing existing local history with new characters, greater detail and better understanding.

### ***Improving the local environment***

Participants were also clear that they wished to make a contribution to their communities, to do 'something which would benefit others but would not be serious.' (P6) Their involvement was sometimes motivated by the wish to protect or restore historical character (for example, of local buildings) and to tackle negative aspects or perceptions of their community and highlight its cultural heritage. 'Improving the environment' was particularly important in less affluent or deprived areas, where a poor reputation and negative stereotypes impacted negatively upon inhabitants:

*Everything they said bad about Barnsley kind of reflected on me... I was hearing loads of stuff which I didn't think was right about the area, for example, that we have no culture... I was feeling kind of helpless and thinking, I must know more if I am to challenge this. (P1)*

Participants expressed a desire to protect their community and its amenities, to 'counter... ignorance and vandalism' (P11) and make it a better place to live:

*The locality was my main aim, especially to give confidence to the elderly people who felt a bit afraid of going out in the town and the cemetery. (P16)*

New tourist attractions, green spaces, restored landmarks, museums and exhibitions: these were considered to 'cheer people up' and generally enhance their lives; 'it gives them a bit of magic.' (P1). Community history was a way of empowering themselves and the community to offer alternative views of an area, demonstrate its cultural heritage and value, and work for improvements in terms of physical environment, facilities, access, experience, identity and reputation.

### ***Informing and Educating***

Participants were engaged in a host of activities designed to inform and educate local people and visitors about their local area or landmarks and bring to their attention aspects that they might otherwise be unaware of. These included hosting events, running talks and tours, working with local schools and youth groups, and disseminating information via leaflets, newsletters, books and internet sites.

*There's some nice old buildings left and it's important people are aware of them, because you can hurry along and not look up - someone did a walk around Rotherham called 'Look Up.' (P3)*

There were efforts to give people and visitors a real understanding of the locality and build their interest in it:

*You can say, 'oh look, there's an old pit' or there's a hill fort or 'this is a burial mound', or 'this is this, that or the other'; you can chat to people and tell them what there is. (P4)*

It was a positive and affirming experience, especially in the context of deindustrialisation:

*I'd like to think it made people realise that Rossington had actually got a history which was somewhat longer than the opening of the coal mine. They started to look and look around. (P11)*

The pleasure participants took in public interest in and response to their efforts reflected their own enjoyment of the process of historical discovery:

*I like seeing somebody happy when they've discovered a nugget of information or we've done an exhibition. It's the wow factor. (P6)*

### **Getting people involved**

Participants hoped that people from within the community would not only enjoy the benefits for their area and enhanced personal knowledge, but also be stimulated to get more actively involved. Efforts were sometimes successful - 'we seem to have motivated quite a few people' (P17). Most participants, however, were aware that interest in local history and heritage was limited to particular groups, most often older or retired people. Local history was felt to be stereotyped as an activity – 'fuddy duddy,' 'old-fashioned,' 'dry and formal,' 'dull and boring' (various) – which could be off-putting. Such stereotypes and the busy lives of younger adults were perceived as understandable barriers to wider involvement. Nonetheless groups strove to overcome reluctance and reach out to children, young people and families through community events, modern media such as websites and blogs, and by working with schools and scout groups.

*It's a challenging aspect to get involved in the local community here...there is a rough part round here who do vandalism and that, and we try to win them over, you see, we try and talk to them. We even put football games and that on for them, and put a children's playground at the top...it's not us and them. It's always about how we can bring them in. (P15)*

When these endeavours worked, participants enjoyed the pleasure taken by young people - and adults - in history and heritage-related activities:

*The children are wonderful, they soak it all up like a sponge, and love the idea of researching a soldier and finding a soldier connected to their area. (P2)*

Involving people was considered vital to a group's aims. Participants were also mindful of the implication of exclusively elderly membership for the continuity of the groups themselves. Nonetheless, participants acknowledged that elderly recruits at least allowed them to maintain group numbers and continue their work:

*We keep saying that nearly all the volunteers are of a certain age but we still keep getting new volunteers a certain age, so I think it'll stagger on for a time. (P20)*



### **Making broader links**

While participants clearly described a focus on their local area, some groups actively aimed to forge and maintain geographically broader links, either with other nearby groups or with those further afield who were exploring similar aspects of history. One participant ran a website designed to bring groups together:

*You see a lot of small areas where they kind of feel very lonely. They're in their tiny little group and they haven't got enough people to get publicity out and because I can get publicity in ... instead of getting maybe two people, thirty people turn up, and there, the whole essence of the group changes. There are about 40 groups that I'm linked in with in one way an' another. (P12)*

Participants recalled how people from countries such as Canada and New Zealand, for example, would make contact as they explored their own family histories in which South Yorkshire played a part. Some groups self-identified as allied with national or international networks of sites, such as those related to Viking or Roman history: 'we try to make contact with other Cluniac sites in Britain'. (P1) Others perceived a role in timely national historical projects, in particular those engaged in telling stories about World War 1:

*Given that it's the centenary of the First World War, we're raising awareness of the thousands of men from Barnsley that fought and fell. (P2)*

Linking with other groups was seen to promote learning from one another, sharing and strengthening group resources. Hence, local history and heritage were not always just local: 'it's part of our local community which is part of a much bigger community' (P21); 'you're providing something for the community in the widest sense.' (P20)

### **Creating a legacy**

While the term 'legacy' was used by only one of the participants, the sense of the importance of this was implicit in much of the data. Creating a legacy meant going beyond improving the area for current inhabitants to build an inheritance for the future:

*Creating that life story... people are doing it as a legacy. It's about sharing heritage, I suppose. (P10)*

Participants were aware that history could quickly disappear through rapid social and environmental change. When buildings were demolished or people died, their stories often went with them, unless someone took steps to collect, store and keep these alive for the future. People saw this as a key part of their role as community historians:

*I've recorded all the monuments that were in there and things like that, and collected together all the pictures to show that it actually did exist. It was very important. (P 3)*

It was seen as vital to pass on both the information and the enthusiasm for history and heritage to 'the next generation of people who're going to look after these areas and have a love for them'. (P4)

In contrast to Basu's findings (2007) that people pursue family history for social and identity reasons, initial motivations for community history reported here emphasised

the prosocial and intellectual - interest in history and the research process, the desire to contribute and making a difference to the area. Ongoing motivations for continued engagement were more emotional, social and personal. They included reasons identified by Basu, such as feeling connected, having roots and gaining a sense of meaning and belonging. Therefore, different reasons exist, at least for these participants, for initiating engagement and maintaining it. Importantly, here and in other studies (Swindells et al, 2013), motivation was intrinsic, that is, based upon personal interest, rather than external pressures or monetary reward. Intrinsic motivation has been associated with positive effects upon people's performance, persistence, creativity, vitality, self-esteem and well-being. This may be one factor which explains some of the apparent benefits, which are described in the second theme, 'Rewards and Challenges.'

## Rewards and Challenges

Participants reported finding their experiences as local historians highly rewarding but there were also challenges. Rewards included 'Making Connections' 'Achievement and Respect' and 'Wellbeing,' whereas challenges included 'People,' 'Resources' and 'Finding a Balance.'

### ***Belonging and connectedness***

Participants spoke in overwhelmingly positive terms of the social elements of the experience of community history, describing their pleasure in meeting new and 'like-minded people' (P14), making 'some really good friends' (P11), and the sense of closeness with and support from others in the group. New social connections proved especially valuable to those who had lost friends and spouses through retirement, bereavement and relocation, as well as for those who were vulnerable or isolated for various reasons.

Beyond this, exploring, learning about and improving their neighbourhoods made participants feel more than ever that they belonged and were rooted in their communities, whether they were a long-term or newer resident:

*It is about giving yourself a sense of belonging. You know this is your community and you've grown up in it and yeah you're part of it, how you shaped it, changed it or whatever. (P10)*

*It's nice to feel rooted. Our roots aren't in Sheffield, so we've had to build new roots. (P7)*

Rootedness contributed to an enhanced awareness and understanding of participants' own identity and their place in the locality and history:

*I think it gives you a sense of place, and a sense of identity, and a sense of who you are. It's a very esoteric sort of thing, and difficult to put into words. (P8)*

*I think we have to know where we've come from in order to know where we're going and, I think, who we are. It's where we've come from as much as anything else. And I think to be on the Common and think about who's been on there hundreds of years ago and how it was used, and walking the same path as ancestors and seeing the same view, I think it has a real impact on us, it does on*

*me. I think that kind of feeling they get is a shared path and a shared understanding of where we are and who we are. (P21)*

### **Achievement and respect**

Participants also described developing new skills and purpose, and the positive impact of these upon their sense of self, self-esteem and achievement. Group activities gave them something important and worthwhile to do and enriched their lives:

*I've got a goal to aim at rather than just day-to-day clean the house, do the cooking, go and do some food shopping, that's, there's more to it than that. And I think too, I've noticed that my eldest son, he, got really enthusiastic about it cos he hasn't seen this side of me before. (P12)*

Often with little prior experience, participants engaged in many new activities, such as public speaking, teaching, events organising, fundraising, setting up charities, writing, and mastering new digital technologies. These were spoken of with satisfaction. People enjoyed gaining new skills or applying existing ones, and witnessing this in others. For example, one participant described the effects upon a group member who had reluctantly agreed to take on re-enactment activities:

*So she stepped forward and took this particular role and now she's one of the best re-enactors that you've ever seen. Even the biographer of the book of the part that she plays (Bess of Hardwick) came here unannounced one day and gave her £50 after she'd done it for her staggering performance. And she wouldn't say boo to a goose beforehand, she was so nervous and everything but she's confident now, she transforms the whole room. These are things which have brought people out and given them a new focus in life. (P1)*

Participants spoke with pride of their work, acquired skills, sense of achievement and new potential:

*I'm a national speaker now. I go all over the country, doing talks... I've been picked for three literary festivals. (P15)*

Participants' own self-respect and esteem was mirrored by a belief that people in their communities were 'appreciative' (P17, P18) and 'looked kindly upon you because of the efforts you've put in' (P8). Some had met scepticism and found others had 'scoffed' at their aims; however these participants were proud to report that doubt had turned to respect and they were seen as 'someone doing something,' 'helpful,' and 'interesting' (various). Others' esteem was demonstrated through support for their hard work. Participants described with surprise and delight how large numbers of people would appear for a guided walk or a local history talk:

*It's amazing: we organised a walk around one of the cemeteries and told just a few people... when we turned up there were 50 people there! (P3)*

Good attendance suggested they were offering something of value and interest to the community. One participant described the resulting sense of 'dignity', 'self-esteem' and 'that feeling of self-worth, that you are valued' (P10). Those previously in low-ranking paid employment positions had, within this voluntary context, found a new voice, importance and considerable respect from others. They believed they had earned 'street cred and popular support' (P17) within the groups, neighbourhoods and broader communities with whom they forged links.

*We got nominated for the Queen's award for voluntary service. That's the actual award – that's a citation ('reduced the fear of crime and made it a place of peace and reflection'). Proud of that. That's really deserved, an achievement isn't it – it's the equivalent of you getting an MBE. We were proposed by the police actually and supported by one of our councillors, so it's not something we applied for; we didn't know anything about it until suddenly... (P17)*

### **Wellbeing**

Being able to make a difference, satisfying personal interests in history and locality, and rising above the challenges - as well as the sense of achievement and respect - contributed to participants' well-being:

*I do get a sense of well-being, I feel quite content. (P8)*

Benefits seemed to be psychological, social, physical and intellectual:

*I'm a lot fitter. I weigh a lot less than I did when I was working, because I drove a desk for 37 years! And this is quite a physical activity. And it's a lot cheaper than going to the gym. So I think there's a massive benefit. There's probably also a mental benefit that you've got something to think about, plan for. You've got organisational projects and correspondence and such and it keeps the brain matter together. (P20)*

Participants' involvement had helped them cope with changing and difficult times, such as retirement, redundancy, work stress, ill health and bereavement. They described how community history activities had stopped them becoming depressed and isolated. Instead they had given them satisfaction, confidence, enjoyment in life and a sense of purpose. They had helped to relieve stress, keep the mind active, distract from difficulties and had given people something positive to focus on.

*You're not thinking about the stresses of work or the stresses of home, you're concentrating and it's very compelling. (P4)*

*I won't say it's what we did, but he got out of his depression. The fact he was out of his chair and getting his hands mucky again was a big move for him. (P5)*

Community History is clearly beneficial for participants, who report enriched life experiences, satisfaction, happiness and enhanced physical, psychological, social, emotional and intellectual well-being. Findings suggested that group activities were positive for anyone, but in particular for those who were struggling with life change, stress, or mental or physical ill-health. Social connections; belonging and identity; the development of skills, purpose and achievement; others' esteem; happiness and well-being: these were not motivators for initial engagement, but acted as ongoing motivators, keeping people involved.

### **Finding resources; Finding a balance**

While we had anticipated positive accounts in this study, given the evidence in the associated literature, we also asked participants to discuss any downsides to their engagement. One of the challenges included accessing funding, which was essential for fulfilling their aims and developing the membership, and the importance of a place to meet and research, store and display artefacts. The responsibilities that fell to those

who acted as committee members, such as treasurer, chair or secretary, could also create anxiety; 'getting the balance' was all important (P15).

## **People**

Working with other people could also prove challenging. Participants spoke of 'personality clashes' (P15) and 'tensions' (P20). One even spoke of being 'quite badly bullied' (P12) within their group. In addition, differences in priorities and enthusiasm caused frustration and slowed progress, as did inter-group disputes over perceived 'ownership' of the same territory or landmarks. Participants recounted examples of 'petty' behaviour, such as refusing to cooperate and share information, and of people leaving groups to avoid the associated stress:

*We've had tensions from a group that don't want us to do any conservation work on the site. And that has provided some anxious moments; we've had to be present at meetings when they've objected to things, quite seriously. And we've been confronted by one or two individuals on the Common when we've been doing some work. (P21)*

Some participants reported having their legitimacy questioned because they were 'amateur.'

*It took a while to be accepted by some of the more academic groups because I haven't got any University education whatsoever. Everything I know, I've learned through reading and hands-on experiences, so it's trying to get an acceptance. (P4)*

Perceived illegitimacy could also arise because they were an 'outsider' who lacked local credibility and knowledge:

*And it's that connection that I haven't got with the XXX group, no matter how hard I try, I can't feel part of them. They are quite happy to point out that 'Oh well you don't come from XXX' [Sighs]. Yes but I live there now! And I live in a house that's 80 years old and I know the history of it!' (P2)*

*Some groups are a bit insular and not very welcoming. That's why I said it's a good idea to sort of look around first, because some groups that I've visited you do feel like, they weren't expecting you and why are you here. (P12)*

While participants spoke honestly about some of the downsides of involvement, they typically spoke of these as either manageable or challenging. Overcoming and meeting these challenges contributed to their sense of achievement and of themselves as determined and persistent. This supports the findings of Musick and Wilson (2003) that sustained volunteering had benefits partly through persistence despite challenges; thus overcoming negatives may be an important part of the experience and contribute significantly to well-being effects. While participants in our sample were rarely discouraged by these responses, it is hard to say what impact similar experiences might have on other people with a perceived lesser claim on a place. This point will be considered in the discussion section below, 'Whose Belonging.'

## Discussion: Whose Belonging?

One significant limitation of community history, across Britain as well as in South Yorkshire, is the extent to which it is a largely white activity. One of our respondents claimed that heritage gives people a sense of identity regardless of their background:

*It doesn't matter where they come from originally, you know? If you're in, I don't know, Burngreave, then the Burngreave heritage is important to you whether you come from Somalia or wherever, because you are now part of the Burngreave community. (P12)*

However, this is not borne out by evidence. Despite the existence of BAME community history projects in different parts of the country - see for example 'Black on Both Sides' and other WW1 projects funded by the HLF (<https://www.hlf.org.uk/about-us/news-features/black-british-heritage/diverse-perspectives-first-world-war>), the Arthur Wharton Heritage Project by Football Unites, Racism Divides (<http://www.furd.org>), the Northamptonshire Black History Association (<http://www.northants-black-history.org.uk>) or the Leicester Oral History Archive Collection (<https://www.le.ac.uk/emoha>) - there have been very few community history groups in South Yorkshire which focus on BAME history. In our study, while 3% of respondents to our initial questionnaire were from BAME communities, none put themselves forward to participate in the final interviews. In this discussion, we suggest that rather than a result of our poor sampling, or even simply a product of the insularity and degree of welcome offered by individual groups, as discussed above, a focus on White British history and identity is a characteristic of heritage and community history more broadly.

Scholars have explored the constructed and exclusionary nature of 'heritage'. Definitions of heritage as the cultural symbols of the upper and middle classes (Smith, 2006) have particular ramifications in terms of 'race' and histories of empire. Building on the work of Stuart Hall, Littler and Naidoo argue that 'race' is simultaneously central to and erased from a national heritage that continues to emphasise stately homes and afternoon tea while neglecting the long and entwined relationship between Britain and empire, including the presence of non-white communities, the brutality of the Empire and the legacies of imperialism in the present day (Littler and Naidoo, 2005, p.1). Examples of this can be seen in the events and discussions surrounding the 2007 bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade, where an emphasis on the predominance of Wilberforce and the apparently straightforwardly humanitarian motivations of C19th philanthropists over-rode other interpretations; dominant and positive ideas of Britishness shone through at both national and local levels (Twells, 2016; Waterton and Wilson, 2009). In her discussion of visitors to a stately home who did not wish to have the family's slave-holding past and source of their wealth brought to their attention, Laurajane Smith argues that the inclusion of 'race' is particularly disruptive of comforting and common-sense definitions of British heritage (Smith, 2009). Gould and Quereshi (2014) suggest that oral histories with members of BAME communities seek to minimise this disruption by promoting narratives that are "safe" and "inclusive" and that reinforce dominant narratives of British history whilst also meeting the community need to represent itself in a positive light.

While community history can be seen as a form of 'vernacular history' (Bodnar, 1992) in that it develops outside of educational and state establishments and is therefore more prone to reflect alternative or dissonant historical perspectives (Barton and McCully, 2010; McCabe, 2012; Dicks, 2008; Crooke, 2008; Smith, 2006; McBride, 2001; Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1996), the question of how community historians

choose what is important in terms of local history and how they frame it (and themselves within it) is clearly relevant. As Wertsch (2002) argues, how people learn about history is underpinned by previously held 'narrative templates' which are shaped in school, by museums, the family and community. What Barnor Hesse has referred to as the effacing of 'race' through forgetfulness (Littler and Naidoo, 2005, p. 8) is evident in the AHD and in a school history curriculum which attempts to foreground a celebratory and uncritical story of Britain's march to greatness (Twells, 2016). Informal arenas of historical recovery and production, such as the local history films about Rotherham and corresponding below-the-line comments discussed by Pente and Ward (2018), are similarly exclusionary of alternative perspectives, harking back to a romanticised lost world before pit and steel plant closures and representing economic (and a perceived moral) decline as a result of immigration. Accusations of 'nostalgia' - defined as a preference for 'something lost over what remains' - can obscure the potentially dissonant nature of local history as a 'potent form of subaltern memory' (Atia and Davies, 2010, pp.181, 183; Bonnett and Alexander, 2013, p.396; Blunt, 2003) and work to de-legitimise 'heritage from below' (Robertson, 2008; Smith, Shackel and Campbell, 2011). In this context, however, the erroneous representation of the history of traditional working class communities as a 'white past' which preceded an unwanted 'multicultural present' (Littler, 2008) cannot accommodate Black and immigrant historical narratives specifically, or histories which link the local and the global more broadly (Sheeran and Sheeran, 2009). As argued by Littler and Naidoo, the 'racialised dynamics of the new heritage populism' is 'often marked by their continued dependence on relatively uncritical pre-existing narratives of whiteness and empire' (Littler and Naidoo, 2004, p.9; Littler, 2008).

Many projects in our area successfully combined an emphasis on industrial working-class history with a secure linkage to official narratives concerning the Industrial Revolution, the First World War or Christian heritage, for example. Nostalgia in our study tended to focus on three main areas: lost buildings, either destroyed in the postwar period (P19) or not preserved by councils in the present day (P3); what was termed the 'downwards slide' regarding the loss of shops and facilities (P9); and the disappearing working-class communities of 'old Sheffield' (P10). While some respondents cautioned against romanticising the past on account of the poverty and the negative impact of heavy industry (P5), more emphasised what had been lost with the destruction of that industry.

*Sheffield was a community with a real sense of purpose ... in the pubs and clubs people talked about one thing, it wasn't football and it wasn't fishing, it was work. Sheffield was a working city... Sheffield has lost so much of its strength and purpose with the demise of the steel industry. (P11)*

This interviewee rejected uncritical nostalgic narratives, expressing interest in the wider context for local history:

*History is basically past politics ...You need to know something about the international or the national to know why it [the price of coal] affected a small community in the way it did. (P11)*

Others agreed that it was important to understand the context of the present: for example, the transition to seemingly 'dead' pit villages now full of commuters, 'understanding where you live and how it came about' (P3). Indeed, through understanding historical change, some interviewees felt better equipped to manage change in the present:

p. 00. 'It's about giving yourself a sense of belonging': community-based history and well-being in South Yorkshire

*It gives me a sort of respect for the lives of generations that went before... It also ... helps me to be a little more tolerant about why things have to change, because I've seen changes from the past... (P7)*

*... it's a living environment that has to change and has always been used by local communities. (P21)*

Others were explicitly disinterested in the 'petty politics' of twentieth-century history (P11) or were silent on the subject of wider narratives.

While an explicitly racialised lament was absent from our study, that community history can operate in exclusionary ways was also very clear. For some respondents who were 'incomers' to their neighbourhoods, community history enabled them to feel integrated within the community:

*a lot of them find, when we do a little bit of local history, it helps them feel to be part of a bigger community. (P11)*

*it gives me a feeling of belonging, of rootedness. (P10)*

This could be the case even if they felt their emotional ties were to other places:

*'[community history] tells me something about the community... in which I happen to live. And so it's given me an increased knowledge and understanding of that particular community and introduced me to some new people... that's the extent of it really.' (P13)*

But while there is plentiful evidence that some incomers use involvement in heritage to create 'elective belonging' (Savage et al, 2005), the emphasis on length of residence or 'autobiographical insideness' (Rowles, 1983; Relph, 1976; Hawke, 2012) could clearly have implications for people who are more recent arrivals. Prior connectedness was identified as a prerequisite for meaningful involvement:

*to get involved with local history... you need to feel a certain amount of personal connection. (P2)*

As suggested by some of the comments discussed above, insularity and territoriality mitigated against this:

*Coming in as a newcomer, I was amazed at how sort of territorial it was (P3)*

As Degnen argues in her study of Dodworth, 'memory talk' is both about creating a sense of belonging and is exclusionary: 'a way of discerning who is of the village, and who the village belongs to and as such is something that can be used as a form of differentiation and exclusion as much as to create a sense of belonging.' (Degnen, 2005, pp.736, 742)

While acceptance, legitimacy and respect were important parts of a positive experience of community history, the existence of battles over 'ownership' of local history and of groups being less than welcoming to people who can't claim such an intimate connection may also limit their appeal to groups with differing perspectives and experiences. This may be exacerbated by the wider context of 'official' and informal narratives which tend to coalesce around a myth of 'white past, multicultural present', or which are oblivious to the entwined nature of British history and the history of empire, are uncritical of imperialism or are imbued with 'the liberal myth of seamless



progress' (Littler, 2008). At the very least, this raises the question of whether BAME lack of engagement is a response to this dynamic.

## Conclusions

Our research suggests that people who engage with community history activities are motivated initially by an interest in history, a commitment to their local area and community, the wish to contribute to society, the desire to interact with socially like-minded individuals and to make discoveries. Community history means making a difference and is characterised by improving the locality, educating and involving people, making links, both locally and beyond, and creating a legacy for the future. Motivations for engagement develop over time, with ongoing involvement inspired by unanticipated rewards: making social connections, gaining a sense of identity and belonging, satisfaction in new skills and achievements, the respect of other people, and improvements in physical, cognitive, emotional and psychosocial well-being.

Holt-Lunstad (2010) suggests that research should explore both the apparent link between social capital and well-being and the potential for interventions to increase social capital and tackle the negative effects of social isolation. Community history is demonstrated here as powerful in building social capital in a variety of ways. It creates social links between a broad range of people and groups, from which supportive relationships may be formed (House, 1981). Activities and social contacts provide participants with absorbing activities, a new focus and a sense of purpose and meaning, the importance of which has long been recognised (Durkheim, 1897). The sense of making a positive difference and overcoming challenges boosts self-esteem and recognition by others (Thoits, 1983; Hagerty et al, 1992). Public and self-esteem are linked to lower levels of stress and depression (Ratner et al, 2013). As explored by Jovchelovitch (2012) and others, learning about one's community, its history, stories and identity, contributes to personal identity and belonging. In addition to personal benefits, these participants suggest their efforts had helped improve and strengthen local communities. Community heritage builds pride, belonging and self-efficacy at a community level and may be particularly beneficial where communities are based in poor or deprived areas (Nowell et al, 2006; Carlisle et al, 2012, p.134).

Social capital and positive interactions with others have been associated in previous work with emotional well-being and reduced mortality (Emmons and Diener, 1985; Folland, 2007; Helliwell et al., 2011; Lee, 2010). In keeping with this, our participants' experiences of community history groups seemed to result in enriched life experiences, satisfaction, happiness and enhanced physical, psychological, social emotional and intellectual well-being. The findings of this study go some way towards addressing Holt-Lunstad's recommendations (2010), as they help to explain links between social relationships and well-being and may suggest potential interventions for those lacking in social capital. This study also adds detail to recent evidence from the public health field suggesting a link between culture and well-being (Arts Council England, 2014) and creativity and mental health (Swindells et al, 2013). For this, support from governmental agencies, particularly in the form of spaces and funding for groups' activities, would make a clear difference to the experience and positive impact of local history and heritage work. Our findings also suggest that community history groups, which create such positive experiences and outcomes for their communities, could play a greater role in heritage management and museum curation (Crooke, 2007; Watson, 2007; Smith and Waterton, 2009). Indeed, our findings resonate with the approach to public administration, in which active, engaged citizens move from

being consumers to co-creators and producers of things which are valuable and beneficial to public life (Bryson et al., 2014; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2011).

If community history projects are to be considered as an intervention to tackle isolation and loneliness, including among vulnerable individuals, it seems important to have a thorough appreciation for both positive and negative experiences, as well as how to initiate and maintain motivation. One of the limitations with the sample and methods employed in this study concerns the status of participants as current members of community history groups, which gives the findings an unsurprisingly positive focus (Fischer and Schaffer, 1993). It is important to acknowledge that people who came forward for interview may represent a particularly positive, motivated, articulate and assertive group. The data may not reflect the views and experiences of others who preferred not to be interviewed. Research with those who discontinue their involvement would provide additional insight into barriers and demotivating factors.

That our interview sample was all White British, and as such is largely representative of people who engage nationally in community history and heritage projects (Waterton and Smith, 2010), highlights the need to explore the potentially exclusionary work of community history. As argued by Waterton and Smith, '[t]his exclusion or marginalization is not trivial, and speaks of the extent to which a nation values or recognizes the diversity of social and cultural experiences and expressions.' Drawing on the work of Nancy Fraser (2000), they argue that the 'failure to recognize, or indeed the *misrecognition* of, populations can have significant and material consequences for the political and historical legitimacy afforded them, which, in turn, will have consequences for the degree to which they may access certain resources and rights' (2012, p.159). Any remedial approach should be framed not by a deficit model (welcoming people into groups whose activities are framed by uncritical British history) but through a progressive practice which reveals heritage not as an 'immutable entity' but a discursive practice, created through 'histories, interests, patterns, collisions and politics' (Hall, in Littler and Naidoo, p.1). The history produced by community (or any other) research activity is never the only possible history of a locality; whether using historical documents or making use of memory, the historian is always selective. An inclusive approach involves making that selectivity transparent through producing 'interrogative, hybrid forms of heritage that are open to discussing the flows of power that constitute them' (Littler, 2008, pp.99-100).

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