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REIMAGINING WOODLANDS, A MODEL VILLAGE. A CASE STUDY OF PARTICIPATORY METHODS FOR EXPLORING SUSTAINABLE AND EQUITABLE NEIGHBOURHOODS

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INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses a methods case study involving bottom-up community engagement with the aim to support neighbourhood planning with the local council. It embedded principles of co-production, intergenerational learning and knowledge exchange between local residents, local government and third sector organisation partners and citizens, bringing together arts, inclusion and social innovation research and practice.

The interdisciplinary project was initiated by academics from Sheffield Hallam University within the Gender Design and Creative Practice Network, Lab4Living and The Sheffield Business School, and was funded by Sheffield Hallam University's Levelling Up Innovation Challenge. Levelling up is a contentious, UK conservative government initiative to 'Level up' geographical disparities within the north of England (in comparison to the south/central government) with funding and initiatives.

Based in Woodlands, Doncaster, a city in the north of the UK, we worked with local residents to explore diverse understandings of pride in place within the Woodlands area, with the aim of creating a neighbourhood plan to structure potential Levelling up grant funding. We present and critique litter picking as a method, one of the participatory methods we used (others were participant led walks and talks; a festival and a work in progress exhibition) when engaging with the communities in Woodlands. Through analysis we review our methods and data and present findings that aim to support others in rethinking ideas of user engagement and co-designed research. We end by offering some reflections and recommendations for non-extractive ways of researching.

CONTEXT & SITE

The project is based in, and responds to, the context of Woodlands. Built as Woodlands Model Colliery Village in 1907, a development of tied cottages for miners of the Brodsworth Colliery Company, between 1907 and 1913, it has a wealth of social and industrial heritage. This newly created neighbourhood was influenced by 'Garden City' holistic planning principles: integrating modern and convenient housing with green spaces to address the many critical health and well-being challenges of urban life in industrial Britain. Its design aimed to balance the benefits of urban and rural locations, with planned amenities such as schools, libraries, community halls and parks to enhance well-being and community unity. It was designated a conservation area in 1979.

The principles of the Garden City movement have seen a resurgence of interest in contemporary planning for sustainable and equitable neighbourhoods, with a focus not only on physical aspects of

urban design to support well-being, such as walkable neighbourhoods and green infrastructure networks, but also the organisational and economic principles of land value capture for the benefit of the community, community ownership of land and long-term stewardship of assets, and strong vision, leadership and community engagement¹.

In 1990 the coal mines closed, causing generations of trauma and poverty that is still seen today. Social and economic deprivation across the area is high and exceeds England's average in many areas. 9.5% of households have an annual income of less than £20k. The impact of deprivation can be seen in the significantly higher levels of child poverty (31.5% compared to the England rate of 17.1%) and significantly higher proportions of older people living in poverty (22.8% compared with England's 14.2%).

Within the UK government Levelling up agenda², there were twelve missions to 'work towards ending geographical disparity within the UK. To situate this project within the levelling up agenda to receive the funding we applied for, we aligned with the mission Pride in Place. The mission aim was that by 2030, pride in place, such as people's satisfaction with their town centre and engagement in local culture and community, will have risen in every area of the UK, with the gap between top performing and other areas closing. The logic of place competition, creating pride through aesthetic improvements which will then attract private investment and provide economic salvation, seems to underpin the role of pride in place alluded to in the Government White Paper:

"A beautiful built environment, access to leisure and cultural amenities and safe neighbourhoods can [...] attract businesses to high streets, leading to increased footfall and private sector investment in communities. To make this a reality, communities must have strong civic institutions, assets and relationships that anchor local pride in place."³

Through our work with community groups, civil society and the local state to coproduce situated knowledges and initiatives in and of place, we are cognisant of the discursive and material violence done to people and places by both 'big society' and 'austerity' policies. These have seen the local state starved of resources to the point that each social service is pitted against the others, with no winners, only a landscape of losses.

Woodlands Library, although owned by council, has changed hands to first be managed by local charity 'Woodland Speaks'. This organisation failed to uphold the council's service agreement: the library was only open 6-8 hours per week, while the car parking provided on library grounds was shut off from local use, impacting residents' access to local shops. The library is now run by a team of volunteers, very successfully... but with an awareness of the potential precarity of an arrangement that relies on goodwill and volunteer labour rather than state funded provision of such a necessary service. The library is now run by a team of volunteers, very successfully. We observed an awareness of the potential precarity of an arrangement that relies on goodwill and volunteer labour rather than state funded provision of such a necessary service. Ownership is key but there is also a need to avoid exploitation of people's time and energy. To support relationship building we based our activities in this key site to meet key actors/ stakeholders.

PROJECT APPROACH, PARTNERS & EVIDENCE

¹ "Garden City Principles", *Town and Country Planning Association*, accessed January 7, 2022, <https://www.tcpa.org.uk/garden-city-principles/>

² "Levelling Up the United Kingdom", *HM Government*. Accessed January 7th, 2025. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/levelling-up-the-united-kingdom> (2022)

³ "Levelling Up the United Kingdom", *HM Government*. Accessed January 7th, 2025. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/levelling-up-the-united-kingdom> (2022)

The interdisciplinary project brought together arts, inclusion and social innovation research and practice, with a particular focus on participant's relationships to place, and how this might shape or influence capacities for collective practices of both spatial visioning and climate action. Informed by feminist epistemology the project looked to create knowledge with participants, in place, recognising the different ways of knowing brought by different residents and community groups. These may be shaped by experiences, mediated by gender, race, class and age. Material factors and power dynamics shape who can or will participate in knowledge exchange and co-production activities, who has the time to give, who feels able to participate, who feels able to speak.

We are feminist researchers and as such, our research approach is situated within a feminist epistemology, who clarify this approach not defined by a gender focus as such, but as an epistemological position which amongst other things 'positions feminist research as proceeding from the organizational and intellectual location of the feminist researchers, as the person who makes sense of the 'the world' and produces generalized knowledge-claims on the basis of this;⁴. As a methodology it is well placed to support inquiries such as ours since feminist social epistemologies have a specific commitment to 'to develop rich accounts that tease epistemic normativity out of a power-sensitive social understanding of knowledge production'⁵. Doing epistemology as a feminist involves bringing one's feminist concerns and sensibilities to the epistemological table.

The project approach takes a particular focus on participant's relationships to place, and how this might shape or influence capacities for collective practices of both spatial visioning and climate action. Thus, feminist social epistemologists have a particularly strong motivation to develop rich accounts that tease epistemic normativity out of a power-sensitive social understanding of knowledge production. We see that understandings of place are both personal and social, shaped through shared cultures of understanding and collective practices and patterns of behaviour. In this sense, "Space is more abstract than place. What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as get to know it better and endow it with value"⁶. Thus the values the community members hold is what we intended to capture through creative and participatory methods, working with the local Councillor as a key actor and stakeholder in the project, as well as with the local Brownie pack, the local history group and a community Arts agency.

The project's starting point was at the local level, building on a small number of successful events-based community gatherings which drew together intergenerational members of the community and have already impacted through small-scale direct, participatory and representative democratic actions (painting of the play equipment in the park; development of environmental concerns from youth groups, then voiced by their Council representative in council meetings). Events were designed to engage with existing community and civil society groups such as the local history group and the Brownies girlguiding unit, and to create spaces and activities where they feel able to form and articulate beliefs and emotions about the neighbourhood⁷, in its present, past and imagined future states. Walking and participatory mapping in place have shown to support communities to become stewards of their local environments⁸ and litter-picking walks were a form of stewardship already being practised by the

⁴ Stanley, Liz., Wise, Sue. 1993. *Breaking out again*. London: Routledge.

⁵Grasswick, Heidi. 2018. *Feminist social epistemology*, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminist-social-epistemology/> (Accessed: 02 July 2024).

⁶ Tuan, Yi-Fu. (1977) *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

⁷ Scott-Bottoms, Stephen, and Maggie Roe. "Who is a hydrocitizen? The use of dialogic arts methods as a research tool with water professionals in West Yorkshire, UK." *Local Environment* 25, no. 4 (2020): 273-289.

⁸ Brown, G., Rhodes, J., & Dade, M. (2018). An evaluation of participatory mapping methods to assess urban park benefits. *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 178, 18-31.,

Brownies. This prompted us to build litter-picking into our proposed mapping walks; a material practice of care around which to shape wider conversations of affect and place.

LITTER PICKING AS A METHOD

Litter picking was a pre-existing activity that was introduced to us by the local councillor and was already being utilised by some of the community groups. Used as a tool for bringing together two different community groups, litter picking was used with both an adult and children group. The adult group included initial project stakeholders, including members from the local council, wellbeing services, the local museum and the key art practitioner. The children group were members of the local Brownie troop and completed within one of their evening Brownie meetings.

Litter is one of the largest forms of environmental pollution⁹, also known as garbage and trash, it can be defined as ‘trash, discarded or scattered about in disorder over a socially inappropriate area’¹⁰. In Woodlands, Doncaster, the scattered litter over the shared common spaces was considered by residents and participants who we worked with as an ‘eye sore’.

Litter picking is a act of single (but often groups of) people using a ‘litter picker’ and their own rubbish sack (see fig.1) to pick up and collect bits of rubbish that has been left around and not put into a rubbish bin¹¹.



⁹ Chaudhary, Abdul Haseeb, Michael Jay Polonsky, and Nicholas McClaren. "Littering behaviour: A systematic review." *International Journal of Consumer Studies* 45, no. 4 (2021): 478-510.

¹⁰ Robinson, Stuart "Littering behavior in public places." *Environment and Behavior* 8, no. 3 (1976): 363-384.

¹¹ Welch, Jez, Clive Palmer, Joe Pryle, and Carmen Byrne. "Talking rubbish: instigating a change in behaviour and attitude in primary school children." *Journal of Qualitative Research in Sports Studies* 17, no. 1 (2023): 1-14.

As we worked with the community, we realised there were multiple layers of the community we could access through the act of litter picking with our participants.

1. Litter picking with the stakeholder group to get to know the community spaces (see fig.2),
2. Litter picking with the Brownies (along with a drawing express how they felt about the area they were picking and then at the end of the litter picking an exercise that asked them to reconceptualise a more positive future for the spaces of Woodlands by asking them to imagine what they would do if they were ‘the boss of Woodlands’’).



What we learnt:

- Walk and community matters in place:** Litter picking was a successful way to get people together, out in their environment, and talking and sharing. It allowed the group to stop at particular corners to assess, highlight and discuss issues around a location; we stopped at one point at the corner of the street to discuss housing arrangement in the area. This led to an idea about the possibility to share about local history/ heritage at different points to discuss past, current and future plans.

Researchers were visible to the community: while out and about litter picking, researchers met other members of the community who were not already involved who wanted to become participants in the project.

2. **Comfort in an existing activity:** Brownies had done litter-picking before and having a previously established task helped as the Brownies seemed confident to get involved and then share what they saw and felt through drawing in the follow up task.

Engaging young people in caring for community: Engaging young people in caring community activities reinforces healthy and positive behaviour and benefits the individual as well as the collective. Doing a pre-existing activity as part of data collection also reinforces the value and importance of that activity and may mean young people engage in more litter picking activity outside Brownies.

Creative activities: Art-based data alongside litter picking helped the participants feel comfortable to verbally talk about their drawing and reflections. It helped having very relaxed, excellent and well-established Brownie leaders.

REFLECTIONS AND LEARNING

Establishing relationships and connecting with what was important to community members was important. Walking, talking and caring for the local environment with the participants had a ‘grounding’ effect on the participants and for the research team, enabling meaningful and authentic discussions to take place. Participants and researchers felt connected to the project aims and each other through the shared activity, purpose and outcome of litter picking (e.g. doing good, making a collective difference). Litter picking was an act of ‘care’ and stewardship and in this way was part of our aim to have authentic purpose, process and experience

This ‘grounding’ as we put it is important in participatory methods, not only to create the best conditions for rich and authentic data but also to be able to work towards rebalancing power, avoid ‘extraction’ and move away from assumptions about who owns the ‘expertise’ in a given group or space. Another way to provide a sense of ownership by the participants and reduce power imbalances was to carry out data collection within familiar participant environments (e.g. library, local spaces) and during familiar activities (e.g. litter picking), allowing for relationships to be built with mutual respect and reciprocity and to embed in participants place-making rituals.

However, the more time you have with people and within a place the better and the stronger and more authentic these relationships and goals can be achieved. ‘Time’ in research is often expensive and thus minimised. Time to develop relationships and understanding within and between participant groups is essential to build into the fabric of the research as this is often the best way to be non-extractive in the research if one is also taking account of the participatory principles and actions. Time creates greater depth, sensitivity and breadth whilst also providing opportunities, with the well-considered place/context-based strategies, to access ‘hard to reach’ and potential ostracised groups within the community.

Power within communities, e.g. local/public vs council power, is therefore also important to consider, rather than just between researcher and participant¹². We do not feel we fully reduced power imbalances or extractive ways of researching due to the lack of time which was frustrating and disheartening to all. Funders need to empower us with enough resources to allow for time and for this to be fully realised,

¹² McDonald, Bernadette. (2021). Professional Power Struggles in Participatory Research. Journal of Participatory Research Methods, 2(1). <https://doi.org/10.35844/001c.18692>

and should be seen as an ethical obligation, along with ‘giving back to the community’ (e.g. time, resources, motivation, vision etc.) particularly within participatory community approaches to research.

With a deeper more authentic relationship with communities we may also have been more successful with the future facing work which was difficult to engage participants in. Creating clear ‘take-away messages’ from the research for participants and stakeholders is key in achieving long-lasting generative relationships and the goals of the research, especially enabling participants to see the product of their efforts and inputs and encourage them to continue to engage with research as well as promoting wider participation.

CONCLUSION

Through our discussion in this paper, we begin to understand litter picking as a method, the shared community stewardship activity we were invited to participate in. This was one of the participatory methods we used when engaging with the communities in Woodlands and should be read within the context of the other participatory methods we used (participant led walks and talks, a festival and an exhibition) when rethinking ideas of user engagement and co-designed research. Litter picking, in this setting, offered us a way to connect with residents and community members and stakeholders in a way that was situated in the local environment, meaning that we understood, in some small way, the everyday challenges of living in Woodlands. The act of litter picking with participants builds on our project ethos of using the project grant to resource the community, being mindful of giving, not extracting: A co-production approach that put our knowledge and skills at the disposal of our research partners however they choose to use it¹³, rather than one’s predefined methods. In this way we act as research stewards - a form of research stewardship materialised through the careful and responsible management of the research project.

When considering using litter picking as a research method we recommend it is not used as a single tokenistic activity but to consider ways to build a culture with participants around the activity in place. Time is a key component of this activity, and it needs to be carefully supported by resources.

NOTES

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¹³ Runswick-Cole, Katherine, Martina Smith, Sara Ryan, and Christopher Hatton. "Should we even have questions?" From survey to exhibition—co-producing research about ‘mental health’ with carers and adults with learning disabilities." *International Journal of Care and Caring* (2024): 1-16.

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