



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



Emma Rose<sup>a,\*</sup>, Stephen Lonsdale<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Lancaster Institute for Contemporary Arts, Lancaster University, Lancaster LA1 4YW, UK

<sup>b</sup> Mersey Care NHS Trust, V7 Building, Kings Business Park, Prescot, Liverpool L34 1PJ, UK

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## ABSTRACT

This study provides insights into how a participatory painting activity impacts older people's subjective wellbeing. The study uses qualitative methods to analyze the findings, and employs qualitative data collection methods to examine how creativity conducted in an environment of relational connectivity is beneficial to wellbeing. The findings demonstrate that processes of re-imagining landscape contribute to participants' retaining significant places in the mind when physical engagement is limited. The study reveals how the activity of re-imagining landscape provokes emotions and memories that help participants connect the past with the present, and to connect their older and younger-age selves, positively to reaffirm their older age identity. The paper reflects on the intervention as a form of encounter with landscape whose benefits are potentially therapeutic for different groups, particularly those for whom engagement with memories may assist with processes of adaptation or transition.

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## 1. Introduction

The underpinning concept of therapeutic landscapes (Gesler, 1993, 2003; Williams, 2007) supports an expanded field of research investigating how encounters with landscapes can benefit perceived health and wellbeing. Gesler's (1993) initial therapeutic landscape concept included physical places with healing associations to which people would travel for treatment or healing, whether physical, psychological or spiritual. Subsequently, the development of an expanded concept includes settings or situations that encompass physical, psychological and social environments associated with healing, providing scholars a breadth of interpretation and application. Currently, the concept encompasses natural and built physical landscapes, social and symbolic environments, and landscapes of the mind as largely or entirely imagined landscapes (Andrews, 2004; Callard, 2003; Philo and Parr, 2003; Rose, 2012; Williams, 2007). Such diverse physical and imaginary locations embody therapeutic qualities for different groups and individuals. The encounter is not always therapeutic, there are places with which people have negative, or distressing associations, or phobic or obsessive relationships (Curtis, 2010). Such experiences involve feelings of risk, fear, or exclusion. Notably, relationships to places, even those of the everyday, can shift

over the life course from positive to negative, from safe to risky (Milligan and Bingley, 2007). This may be as a result of changes to the place through processes of nature, natural disaster, or human intervention, such as urban development, war, unsociable behaviour, or arise from changes to the individual, as with ageing or migration.

This paper contributes to the literature in exploring ways that landscapes evoke emotions and memories to impact older people's subjective wellbeing through engagement in a participatory painting project. We aim better to understand the role of painting in enabling participants to express and to represent feelings associated with a landscape, and to evaluate whether subjective benefits to wellbeing proceed from the participatory engagement. In order to provide a contextual framework for the study we examine the connection between feelings and emotions evoked by place and their relationship to perceptions of wellbeing. Thus, re-imagining place is explored as a potentially therapeutic activity connected to a reflective painting activity.

In the context of therapeutic landscapes the significance of emotions in response to place has been explored within the field of geographic research (Anderson and Smith, 2001; Bondi, 2005; Davidson, Bondi, Smith, 2005; Davidson and Milligan, 2004; Milligan and Bingley, 2007; Urry, 2007). The concern to give positive recognition to the presence of emotions in geographical writing, and to reflect the discipline's emotional involvement in people and places, was relatively new when Davidson et al., (2005) mapped geography's 'emotional turn'. The work generated greater focus on the intersection between geography and gerontology (see for

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [e.rose@lancs.ac.uk](mailto:e.rose@lancs.ac.uk) (E. Rose), [Stephen.Lonsdale@merseycare.nhs.uk](mailto:Stephen.Lonsdale@merseycare.nhs.uk) (S. Lonsdale).

example Andrew et al., 2009), and fields of empirical inquiry into spatial issues and the lives of older people. Drawing from this work we highlight two issues of significance in relation to emotions and place for older people.

First, Rowles (1978) proposes that as people age, and become increasingly frail, they experience progressive disengagement from spaces used by younger age groups. The every-day life spaces occupied by older people progressively reduce until they effectively become 'prisoners of space'. Expanding this theme Milligan et al. (2005) explore 'feeling out of place in public spaces', a study that exposes the negative experiences of older people in public spaces. In particular they identify factors that contribute to reducing older people's life spaces, such as limitations to their mobility caused by feeling unsafe, and specific challenges, such as, overcrowded tubes and buses, heavy traffic, crime in deprived areas, dark nights and poor weather. They found these factors constrain older people's access to places with which they have emotional attachment, in particular the peace and tranquility of the rural landscape where they might participate in activities such as painting, photography, walking or enjoying the scenery. Andrews et al. (2009) find the role of emotional attachments to place for older people is important in the context of supporting and retaining a sense of self-determination and identity. Thus, older people's progressive detachment from places contributes to a decline in their sense of wellbeing. This study responds to this issue in seeking to investigate whether beneficial impacts are generated by re-imagining places with which older people have an emotional attachment. We explore whether the process of re-imagining, or 'holding a place in mind,' might contribute to a perception of 'holding on' to a significant place, conceivably even when that place can no longer be visited. We consider whether the resulting painted landscape, when displayed in the home setting, provides longer lasting benefits to wellbeing.

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

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

therapeutic place, a recent study undertaken by Wood et al. (2015) explores how selected meanings attributed to therapeutic landscapes from one's past can evoke emotions and memories to generate ideas about nostalgia, solastalgia, salvage and abandonment. The study demonstrates how selected meanings produced by remembering reinforce a sense of place involving an individual's 'attachment' and 'identity'. The interaction between selected meanings, emotional attachment to place, and self-identity are important for this study, particularly in considering how emotional attachment and self-identity impinge on perceptions of the self, and how the self is projected to significant others.

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

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

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

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