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"The Play's the Thing": A creative collaboration to investigate lived experiences in an urban community garden

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Abstract:	Presenting the backstage story of a non-traditional qualitative research project, I illustrate how a creative approach can stimulate participant dialogue and encourage researcher reflexivity. Working with an award-winning playwright and the staff and volunteers at a community garden, I explored the meanings of connections between people and nature, and how these connections impact on wellbeing, through a collaborative performance ethnography. The aim of the study is to stimulate discourse around the role of community gardens in enacting social and environmental change for wellbeing. This paper is an exploration of how the creative approach we adopted, incorporating arts-based inquiry and performance as method, contributed to every aspect of the research process. Firstly, it facilitated relaxed communications with the members of the community organisation who participated. Their interest was immediately piqued by the idea of being involved in the development of a play, which led to relaxed, playful discussion. Secondly, the creative approach provided new perspectives on the collection and analysis of data. It expanded my thinking, in developing my methodological approach to the research and in working towards a radical reflexivity. I suggest that creative approaches are applicable to many areas of organisational research.

"The Play's the Thing":

A creative collaboration to investigate lived experiences in an urban community garden

"Springtime is me favourite time. It's the light. Way it runs through the estate, racing down the streets, excited as it hits the houses an' shops. Even the chippy with its dodgy batter looks better at this time of year. That light bounces from tarmac to brick until eventually it hits here, hits the green and that's when you realise what light really is when it meets a plant. That's when you realise what "green" really is when it gratefully pulls that shine in. When spring light hits the plants that's when the Compost Gets Real. It means the year is on. New shoots pushing through, the world waking up. Bits of colour peeking out all tentative like….Trying to come out at the right time. Too eager, then you may not have what it takes to go the distance, used up all that energy, Jack Frost rotting your leaves, your stems. Too late, too late, too lazy then you can't get your house in order to bloom. Timing, timing is the King, Queen, Princess and Prince of the garden. Don't worry, they [the plants] they all know. Been doing it for well, a long time, but even they had to learn it, and there's many that have fallen. Spring is my favourite time."

Reproduced from a draft of an opening section of a play by Jimmy Osborne

Activities which take place in urban natural environments, such as community gardens, can provide sources of social support with the potential to improve wellbeing (Polley et al., 2017). In order to develop an understanding of the pathways along which these improvements may occur, I collaborated with an award-winning playwright, Jimmy Osborne, on an exploratory study of a community garden in the city of Kingston-Upon-Hull, UK. We

set out to collect stories told about the garden by the people who spend time there and develop from them a performance piece which would resonate with diverse audiences, stimulating discourse on communal gardening and wellbeing.

We are interested in evoking reactions in our audiences as we continue this inquiry, allowing these reactions to inform further discourse and discovery. In this I draw a comparison with Shakespeare's Hamlet as he solves the murder of his father. Hamlet plans to observe King Claudius while telling scenes are performed in a play, considering that his reaction may confirm his guilt. He states:

"*I'll have grounds*

More relative than this—the play's the thing

Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King." (Shakespeare, 2017, Act 2, scene 2)

Like Hamlet, we wish to draw out audience reactions and make them available for interpretation.

In this paper, I narrate the backstage story of our collaborative research project. The story illustrates how a creative approach can stimulate participant dialogue and encourage researcher reflexivity. Using dramaturgical principles to describe the study of social life from the perspective of a theatrical performance, Goffman (1959) suggests that backstage is where illusions and impressions are knowingly constructed for a front stage performance. In the backstage region of our data collection process, I found that my research methods continually evolved as I engaged with the research participants and with Jimmy, in constructing the impressions which were to form the basis of a performance.

I begin the narration by setting the scene with an exploration of literature relevant to community gardening organisations and wellbeing. I then explain our rationale for choosing to approach the study through a collaborative performance ethnography. Next, I provide an overview of the methods we used before presenting some of our initial research findings.

Finally, I discuss the implications of a creative approach or "play factor" for stimulating participative dialogue and encouraging researcher reflexivity.

Setting the scene

Founded by a group of residents, who secured a lease of a piece of state-owned scrap land in an urban residential area for a nominal fee, this community garden has been developed over two decades. Now a registered charity run by a small group of trustees, two paid members of staff, and an informal group of volunteers, it is a site for growing food, a space for recreation, and a wildlife habitat. I first explain why the garden may be defined as a community organisation, then go on to explore how impacts on wellbeing are conceptualised in this context.

The community garden as a community organisation

At the commencement of the study, I conceptualised the garden as a social-ecological system (Ostrom, 2009). Within it, organisational components interact: its people, its physical and organic non-human elements (plants, animals, earth, air), and the governance systems (natural and cultural) which influence its management. Social, economic, and political contexts influence, and are influenced by, each of these components.

As research progressed, I came to identify the garden more specifically as an example of a bottom-up community organisation (Zoller, 2005). This informal network of volunteers, staff and trustees, working in partnership with other organisations such as schools and local government authorities, is forming a community hub. By organising to empower individuals and build relations; the community impacts wellbeing on a wide scale by enacting social and environmental change. Actions to bring about environmental enhancement by providing wildlife habitat and promoting environmentally responsible behaviour can influence social and environmental determinants of health (Marmot & Bell, 2012).

Frameworks for understanding the impacts of gardening on wellbeing

Frameworks used to describe the process of "green care" may be useful in the pursuit of an understanding of the mechanisms by which direct impacts of gardening on wellbeing occur. Green care is defined by Cutcliffe and Travale (2016) as using nature in "targeted processes that are designed to have a positive effect on the holistic health and wellbeing of an individual" (p.138). Although community gardening is not necessarily a targeted process, and does not therefore meet criteria for green care, it does involve working with nature and may impact wellbeing, even if it does so incidentally.

Two frameworks have been published recently, which outline the pathways along which wellbeing is influenced through green care. Cutcliffe and Travale (2016) propose that its underpinning elements are contact with nature, occupation/work as a therapeutic activity, connectedness, and the benefits of exercise. Similarly, Bragg and Atkins (2016) provide an overview of green care as the convergence of natural surroundings, meaningful activities, and social context.

The frameworks differ in their treatment of "connectedness". Although Bragg and Atkins (2016) include "sense of belonging" in a social context, the theory proposed by Cutcliffe and Travale includes "connectedness" with non-human components of the environment. This proposal is related to the concept of biophilia, put forward by Wilson (1984), as a human affinity with life and lifelike processes. This idea of connectedness to natural environments is further explored by Cleary et al. (2017), through the application of Self Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Cleary et al (2017) suggest that connection with nature fosters intrinsic value orientations, as well as fulfilling the basic psychological need of relatedness, through non-human relatedness.

My aim in this study then, was to understand the ways in which connections between people and the natural environment of the garden interact to influence wellbeing. These connections may influence individual wellbeing along pathways similar to those described in

green care frameworks. They may also influence wellbeing on a wider scale, through community actions to promote social and environmental change.

Methodology

I sought to develop an understanding of connections within this community, and their impacts on wellbeing, through discourse regarding the experiences and stories of those who use the garden. I approached the study through a collaborative performance ethnography (Denzin, 2003), working with garden users and the playwright, Jimmy Osborne. The following sections explain my rationale for using an arts-based inquiry incorporating performance. I then go on to discuss the importance of reflexivity and the significance of different ways of knowing in this research.

Arts-based inquiry

The involvement of a playwright was a rather novel step in researching links between wellbeing and the environment, although visual and performing arts are utilised extensively in healthcare settings. For example, they are used to enhance recovery environments (Staricoff et al., 2001) and also play a role in many rehabilitative care plans (Symons et al., 2011). Creative approaches have also been highly effective in organisational research praxis. For example, Bramming et al. (2012) used "snaplogs" (snapshots and logbooks), composed by research participants, to create platforms for focus group discussions.

Nair et al. (2018) argue that in addition to playing a role in research methodology, creative mediums can be valuable in showcasing the products of inquiry and increasing their reach. This was our primary driver for developing a performance piece. We hoped it would increase the reach of this research, beyond traditional means of dissemination, so that it might inspire people from diverse audiences to take part in similar activities, as well as inform health and social care providers and urban planners about the potential for urban nature to promote wellbeing.

As we discovered, artists bring unique ways of examining and communicating experience to the research process (McNiff, 2013). Artistic freedom and a lack of fixed methods can facilitate the resistance of norms, which is both a challenge and an opportunity in the context of research. Research has its own norms in the prescriptive forms of theory, data, and method (Ganesh, 2014). Attempts to resist these norms can result in criticism of qualitative researchers as lacking in methodological rigour (Najda-Janoszka & Daba-Buzoianu, 2018). However, with transparency in research design, analytic approach, and theoretical contribution, the richness of inquiry facilitated by artistic processes may be embraced and rendered credible (Ashworth et al., 2019).

Performance as method

We chose to develop a performance because this medium involves a combination of visual and auditory stimuli which can provide depth and context for the language used, "merging the text with the world" (Madison, 2005, p.172) and has the potential to be widely accessible. Further, research-based drama is an approach with a history of influencing health policy (e.g. Nisker, 2012). Having no theatrical training and as a result, little faith in my personal ability to develop a compelling performance piece, I chose to enlist a playwright in the project.

As Goffman (1959) demonstrated, dramaturgy offers an effective means of exploring the social, as well as the formally staged, performance. He explained that each of us performs when we enter the presence of others. We know that the others will seek to acquire information about us or apply to us information they already possess, concerning us directly or people or groups with whom they associate us. We may consciously attempt to create an impression which either reinforces or refutes expectations through our words and actions. For this reason, social interactions are highly complex. Although we rely on inference and

interpretation in our dealings with both the physical and the social world, in the social world our interpretations are open to attempts by others to lead or mislead us in our inferences.

I also recognise the importance of being reflexive about my own research and writing process. The choices I make in researching the garden and in writing about it are influenced by my own conscious or unconscious attempts to create an impression. Resulting research outputs can have consequences, due to their potential to influence actions. Most importantly, these research outputs are not all the product of my own work, but contain the personal narratives of research participants, albeit anonymised.

Madison (2003) advocates discharging the responsibility this engenders through an attempt to inhabit the "creative, complex, slippery terrain" (p.471) between cynicism and zeal, in a performance of possibilities. The cynicism to which Madison refers is the assumption that the attainment of self-critical performance is impossible, while the zeal is the (mistaken) belief of a researcher that they are representing the other exactly as the other would wish. To inhabit this terrain, we must engage in discourse, opening up new perspectives for our audiences. In doing so, we must critically examine our own purposes and assumptions.

Reflexivity

I aim to meet my responsibilities as a researcher by striving to achieve "radical reflexivity" (Cunliffe, 2003). In this I aim to be transparent about the ways in which the knowledge I present is built up, and from who and where it may originate (Cunliffe, 2018). Cunliffe (2003) further requires that the fallibility of the researcher is surfaced, through the provision of explicit indications of the ways in which the values of the researcher(s) may have influenced a piece of research and the communication of that research to others. This is no attempt to justify an objective stance on an external reality, but rather to recognise the normative and performative nature of the creation of research outputs (Ganesh, 2014).

Ganesh (2014) recommends that qualitative researchers move away from prescriptive formulas of theory, data, and method which may be more applicable to positivist and post-positivist work. Attempts to comply with these formulas in qualitative inquiry may result in the production of dualist accounts alternating between the confessional and the realist. He suggests that this may be avoided by using vignettes of experience, which present, "frank accounts that always and already situate knowledge as a product of the sometimes-incompetent researcher" (Ganesh, 2014: 455). By presenting vignettes as creative works, we invite the audience to view them in their context.

In this paper, I make use of vignettes and extracts from the draft play script, along with quotes from interviews, conversations and written contributions to the research. I invite you, as the reader, to view these extracts in their context. I endeavour to follow the framework of crystallisation, which Ellingson (2009) defines as combining "multiple genres of representation into a coherent text or series of related texts, building a rich and openly partial account of a phenomenon that problematizes its own construction, highlights researchers' vulnerabilities and positionality, makes claims about socially constructed meanings, and reveals the indeterminacy of knowledge claims even as it makes them." Ellingson (2009: 4)

I include script and interview extracts and creative vignettes within the written format of this paper with the aim of presenting a rich, openly partial account of my research. Further, this paper is one of several planned outputs of the research, along with the play currently under development and my PhD thesis. Together, these and any other future outputs will combine multiple genres of representation.

Ways of knowing

Mounier (1952) describes the "person" as "a fount of experience, springing into the world, it expresses itself by an incessant creation of situations, life-patterns and institutions"

(p. vi). In this study, I tried to elucidate the meanings of activities carried out in the garden, and their impacts on wellbeing, through the expressions of the founts of experience of the staff and volunteers at the garden. Mounier (1952) states that the central affirmation of personalism is the "existence of free and creative persons" (p. iii). By engaging with creativity, we attempt to tap the fount of experience which springs from free and creative persons.

In tapping this fount of experience, we are exploring phronesis, translated by Cassell et al. (2009) as "practical wisdom". This type of knowledge entails acting from what one knows to "make things happen" (Zackariasson, 2006, p.421). Phronesis encompasses tacit, informal knowledge, not just explicit knowledge. It is often tacit knowledge which permits us to act within our individual and shared circumstances. Informal ways of sense-making are often taken for granted, but by critiquing them we may undermine dominating structures and practices, opening up new ways of thinking and acting (Cunliffe, 2002).

This tacit knowledge was what I wanted to uncover and critically examine. What knowing-in-action is possessed by the staff and volunteers in a long-standing community garden, about the way in which the organisation works and how positive impacts on wellbeing are realised? Could explication of this knowledge help others to achieve similar results in different settings and circumstances? Could it provide guidelines for those who might seek to support this particular garden, or gardens like it? An artistic approach to a collaborative ethnography allowed me to work with participants to surface this tacit knowledge, by providing a platform for open, creative discussion.

My background is rooted in health and environmental sciences. I have an undergraduate degree in veterinary medicine and worked as a veterinary practitioner for fifteen years before returning to academia. Prior to the commencement of this research, I was already convinced that community gardening could have significant benefits to wellbeing,

having witnessed the impacts of bonds between people and nonhuman organisms in my years spent working with pets and their owners. I also wished to provide evidence of these benefits, believing that such evidence might help to protect urban green spaces, which my understanding of environmental science and ecology leads me to consider to be important wildlife habitats.

By undertaking this study in a collaborative manner, I hoped to bring together diverse viewpoints, reducing the risk of my projecting my own prior thoughts and experiences onto others. The results of our research still present a rather one-sided view, with everyone involved having only positive things to say about their time spent in the garden. This is hardly surprising, as everyone involved had chosen to be there. However, our results are not intended to represent either the natural reality of the garden or the cultural reality of its staff and volunteers. Rather, they are presented as an invitation to join an ongoing dialogue about the complex relationships which form between people and other living organisms.

Performance is an especially appropriate medium for presenting these results. As Shotter & Tsoukas (2014: 387) suggest, "when we take a *practical* attitude to the world, we seek to go out towards a concrete situation in all its richness and particularities" (emphasis in original). In an evocative physical space such as a garden we may experience a situation through all of our senses: sight, sound, touch, scent and even taste. A performance can help to communicate this rich, sensory knowledge about a 'concrete' situation (Shotter & Tsoukas, 2014), combining as it does a range of sensory stimuli (Madison, 2005).

Methods

I originally planned to utilise workshops in the collection of data, based on Soft Systems Methodology (SSM; Checkland, 1993). However, I met with staff and volunteers at the garden during the planning stage of the study, and we decided together that workshops were not the best method of inquiry for three reasons. Firstly, although the best location in

which to carry out the inquiry was undoubtedly in the natural surroundings of the garden itself, there was limited space there for people to gather. Secondly, volunteers came to the garden at various times, on different days. As it was unusual for everyone to be together in the same location at the same time, people would have to change their routines to attend group workshops. Thirdly, conversations flowed more easily when I worked alongside staff and volunteers in the garden, than when we sat down with the expressed intention of talking.

Instead, we opted for a combination of ethnographic participant observation and one-to-one interviews. We were able to retain one valuable feature of SSM, however. Checkland (1993) suggests that "rich pictures", composed of free-form diagrams, drawings and text, are better media than linear prose for expressing a complexity of multiple interacting relationships. We included a variety of media in the data we collected, including pictures drawn in our sketchbook (figures 1 &2). In the following sections I detail our data collection process, my entry into the field and some of the ways in which our methods evolved during the research process.

Data collection

Having received ethical approval from the Faculty of Business, Law and Politics Research Ethics Committee at University of Hull, I visited the garden, sometimes alone and sometimes in company with Jimmy, on an approximately weekly basis during the summer and autumn of 2017. Written information about the study was kept on display at the garden throughout this period. In it, Jimmy's role in the study was made clear, including his intention to develop a fictionalised performance piece through the research.

Jimmy and I worked in the garden and I recorded observations of actions and interactions as fieldnotes. I also conducted interviews or recorded conversations with three volunteers, two members of staff and a trustee of the garden. Jimmy and I discussed our observations and impressions in person, after each visit to the garden in which he

participated. Acting as an interpretive ethnographer, I also shared my field notes, interview transcripts and analysis and autoethnographic observations with Jimmy. He used my notes, in combination with his own first-hand impressions of the garden, to begin development of a text which will be performed. In turn, my own impressions were influenced by his comments during our discussions.

Entering the field: Researcher reflections

At the inception of this project, I requested information from the City Council regarding communal open spaces, and an environment officer agreed to meet with me. Based on the information she provided, I identified the garden as a potential site for the study. It is well-established, open to all, and hosts a variety of activities, including food-growing and the enhancement of wildlife habitats. These features render it a likely source of insight into the impacts of nature-based activities on individuals and their communities.

My first entrance into the garden was an emotionally 'striking' moment (Corlett, 2013; Cunliffe, 2002), which I illustrate below in a narrative vignette of the occasion.

"*So, what is the Rainbow Garden, exactly?" I asked the council officer who was advising me on communally accessible open spaces in the City of Hull.*

"It's just a nice garden. You should go and take a look: it's not far from the university." she replied.

We'd talked about several spaces during our meeting, but the Rainbow Garden sounded intriguing. Situated in a "deprived" area, the simple fact that it was still thriving after 20 years made it worthy of further investigation. I drove there when I left the council offices.

I'd dressed unusually smartly that morning, in preparation for my meeting. As I got out of my car in a North Hull housing estate, I realised that I stood out in these surroundings like a middle-class sore thumb. I'm not naturally very confident about novel social situations,

so this realisation made me want to jump back into the car and head for the familiar environment of the university. Instead, I took a deep breath and I forced myself to walk towards the iron gates which marked the entrance to the garden.

The area seemed deserted, but as I peered through the gate, I spotted a young woman wearing work boots and a sweatshirt, walking through the garden. She looked up at the sound of my shiny office shoes clacking on the pavement, and favoured me with an open, welcoming grin. Greeting me without any fuss, the young woman listened while I explained that I was a student at the university, planning a research project on the organisation of communal open spaces which aim to promote wellbeing. She told me that I should really speak to the garden's founder, who wasn't there that morning, but offered to show me around.

I felt profound relief, on meeting this friendly, down-to-earth character. Still slightly ill-at-ease in my unfamiliar "office meeting" attire, I did wonder what she thought of me. Did she think I fancied myself an expert in gardening (I'm not) or wellbeing (I'm not)? Did she expect me to be worried about getting earth on my posh coat (I wasn't - at least, not much)? If she did think those things, she kept them to herself, while I marvelled at this beautiful little haven of growing things in the middle of a housing estate. From the centre of the garden, the surrounding houses can be seen, achingly familiar to me, because their design was exactly like that of the house I grew up in. I'd been told that the garden had been built on a bit of waste ground. I remembered patches of waste ground in the area where I grew up and couldn't imagine anyone taking the time and care to turn them into a wonderland. Yet, it had happened here. Why? How? And could I help to nurture it, and make it happen elsewhere?

I returned to the garden when the founder was present and found her eager to take part in a study which might demonstrate the value of the garden to its staff and volunteers, and to wider communities. Staff at the garden described all the people who spent time there, unpaid,

as, "volunteers", regardless of whether they had been referred to the garden by health or social care practitioners or had come of their own volition. This prevents people from being labelled as either "healthy" or "unwell", but rather means that all visitors who work in the garden have the potential to be treated equally. I follow this convention in using the term, "volunteers" to describe all those who are not paid staff but who work in the garden.

As the vignette demonstrates, I was influenced in my choice of the study setting by the feeling of familiarity with the environment. This "deprived" area looked very much like the place where I grew up. Once I returned in my normal, everyday clothes, I felt profoundly at ease in the garden, and with the staff and volunteers there. I then contacted Jimmy, a friend and local playwright whom I knew to have an interest in gardening and sustainability. I found him similarly interested in becoming involved in the project.

The Evolution of Methods in the Research Process

Our methods of data collection continued to evolve throughout the research, in response to the apparent needs or wishes of the research participants. Fundamental to our ethical approach then, was the recognition that as forms of participation evolved, it could become necessary to renegotiate the terms of informed consent. We endeavoured to keep channels of communication as freely open as possible. Staff at the garden helped to explain the project to the volunteers and were instrumental in directing Jimmy and I to those who were willing to talk to us. They also steered us away from those who were less keen on being directly involved in the project. This helped to safeguard against the possibility of our presence detracting from any wellbeing benefits derived by volunteers from their gardening activities. Participants were of course made aware that they had the option to withdraw completely from the research process, at any stage.

The process of data collection involved us in a social performance; we took part in ordinary, day-to-day interactions, based upon a cultural script (Madison, 2005). Jimmy and I

became a part of the established community of the garden as we assumed our roles within it. By working together with that community on a project of which everyone feels they have ownership, Jimmy and I took on the roles of colleagues in a shared project, rather than of incoming "experts". While our position remained outside the core community of the everyday life of the garden, the shared development of a performance piece created a parallel community.

It became evident, within this community, that some of the gardeners were uncomfortable with a formal interview approach. One member of staff was particularly reluctant to be interviewed, although she readily gave consent for informal conversations to be recorded. She didn't like the idea of being in the spotlight and mentioned that she also disliked having her photograph taken. In common with several other participants, she seemed keen to discuss the garden, but did not want to talk directly about herself. The concept of developing a play was useful here, as we were able to decentre individual experiences and perhaps previously imposed health diagnoses and labels, in favour of a more abstract discourse on the nature of garden and its associated community. Rather than pressing participants to take part in interviews, I adapted my approach to make greater use of ethnographic methods of observation.

Later in the study, we also decided to provide gardeners with the opportunity to contribute their thoughts and stories in written form. We provided a sketchbook to be kept in the garden, and I wrote a note inside which read, "Please feel free to write stories, messages, or draw pictures on any of these pages. You can add your name, so I know who you are, or don't, if you don't wish to." This decision resulted from a conversation I had with Jimmy on our drive home from the garden one day. Jimmy had walked with Carol (a member of staff) to the local shop at lunchtime and they had passed a man, who had nodded to them. Carol explained that he was someone who occasionally volunteered in the garden, then she began

talking about volunteers who had come and gone in the past. This was a significant juncture in the development of our research, and I present this story as I heard it on the car journey from Jimmy:

One volunteer who used to come to the garden was a man who enjoyed betting on horse racing. He often had short blue pens in his pocket, which bookies' (bookmakers') shops provide for their patrons to fill out betting slips with. This volunteer was not given to chatting over a cup of tea, but rather came to work in the garden at quiet times. Carol said that sometimes the only sign that he had been in the garden was a freshly turned patch of earth, with one or two bookies' pens left on it. It seemed that the pens dropped out of the volunteer's pocket as he worked.

Carol's story struck me particularly because I had vivid memories of those same pens scattered around my childhood home. My dad, who died shortly before I began this project, was an avid gambler.

The story struck Jimmy for a different reason. He was intrigued by the possibilities it entailed. What if the volunteer left those pens deliberately, wishing to signal to the other volunteers and staff that he'd been present? What if he didn't? What were the reasons for his apparent avoidance of direct contact with the others? Jimmy wanted to explore these possibilities in his drama, while I was moved to consider how I might alter my research design so that different modes of communication were made available to our research participants.

I decided to alter my research design by providing the sketchbook in which participants were invited to write comments or draw pictures. To stimulate discourse around life in the garden, amongst contributors to the sketchbook, I attached a poster to its front cover (Figure 1). The poster displayed themes I had identified by carrying out some initial

open coding (Birks and Mills, 2015) of three interview transcripts and three sets of field notes relating to conversations with individual members of staff and volunteers.

By identifying important groups of words across the interview transcripts and conversation notes, I had developed eight themes which staff and volunteers talked about in relation to the ways in which working in the garden impacted their wellbeing. I created a poster displaying the three most frequently identified of these themes (*talking, sense of purpose* and *sense of achievement*) as text and images and the other five themes (*learning, relaxing, feeling safe, being outside* and *eating fresh*) as text only.

[Insert Figure 1]

Eight volunteers and staff in the garden made entries in the sketchbook. Some of these may have been the same people who had given interviews or had conversations recorded, as entries were able to be made anonymously. We were, in essence, creating a "rich picture", but asynchronously rather than in a face-to-face workshop environment. The sketchbook formed a collaboratively developed collection of text and images, describing lived experiences of the community garden (Figure 2).

[Insert Figure 2]

The decision to introduce the sketchbook as an opportunity for research participants to communicate indirectly and non-verbally was prompted by the story told to me by Jimmy on our journey home from the garden. As such, it is an example of one of the ways in which our creative collaboration shaped the research process. I was struck by Jimmy's retelling of the story and by his response to it, moving me to change my way of acting through "an embodied rather than purely cognitive understanding" (Cunliffe, 2002: 42).

Initial research findings

The most unexpected outcomes of the study arose not from the initial thematic analysis, which closely echoed the mechanisms of green care outlined by Cutcliffe and Travale (2016) and Bragg and Atkins (2016), but in the narratives related by staff and

volunteers at the garden, regarding the circumstances leading to their participation in gardening and their experiences and interactions there. These narratives allow us to explore the ways in which relationships between people, activities and the environment play out in the garden, influenced by and influencing culture. Presented here are some fragments of narratives constructed through the study. They are divided into three categories.

Firstly, "purpose of the garden" contains stories which relate to the needs the garden fulfils for the people who use it. Secondly, "people-people connections" are the social interactions which took place in the garden, relative to the wellbeing of those involved. Finally, "people-nature connections" refers to the relationships formed between people and nonhuman elements of the garden.

Purpose of the garden

Some of the participants were partly drawn to the garden because it resonated with childhood experiences of being in natural surroundings. Barbara described her memories of playing in wild spaces within the city:

> *"I was brought up in a house where there was no gardens, so our play area was the drain side…I suppose it was a health hazard really, but to us it wasn't. But there was loads of frogs. Also, our parents took us to the local park…to see all the little – I think it was sticklebacks, they called them."*

Barbara remembers being drawn to natural spaces and wild creatures as a child, although she had no garden of her own at that time. She acknowledges that to adults her choice of play area might have seemed unsafe but points out that for her and for other children it was a place of fascination.

Angela, a volunteer at the garden, told me that her grandparents had had an orchard, where she spent half of her summer holidays from school, as a child. They grew apples, pears, plums, and all kinds of soft fruit, from which they used to make jam. Her grandmother

also let her pick the fallen apples, which weren't sent off in big trucks with the other fruit for selling. She and some other children would check that the fruit was still good, put it in paper bags, and pack it into a pram. They earned their pocket money by wheeling the pram along the road and selling the fruit, door-to-door.

People also referred to negative circumstances in their lives outside of the garden, which had led them to come there. The garden was referred to as a "haven", a "natural, safe" and "calming, peaceful" environment with a "nice atmosphere". Two interviewees and one anonymous commenter who wrote in the sketchbook said that their symptoms of depression or anxiety were eased when they spent time there. One volunteer, who did not contribute to interviews or recorded conversations, and who had begun coming to the garden following a brain injury, wrote a comment in the sketchbook about how he is able to lose himself in the garden, and enjoy what he is doing "without having to concentrate on lots of different things".

Negative circumstances impacting on the lives of members of the community may have their sources in larger societal and political issues. Carol, a member of staff at the garden, told me a story about a past volunteer who had been having a difficult time. She said it was clear that the volunteer wasn't getting enough to eat, so she made sure he took vegetables home, and shared her lunch with him when he was at the garden. She told me that the garden was a place where people helped each other, although she clearly felt upset that such help was necessary, because people had been failed by the welfare and social care systems which should have protected them.

Others seemed to discover the garden almost by chance, with no particular urge to either return to a childhood experience or to escape from a negative aspect of their lives. For example, some volunteers came to the garden initially through work, and then continued to attend. One comment in the sketchbook read,

"The garden helped me to bring some of the Travellers' children, who were close to being excluded. This was a great place for them to come and be themselves. I also enjoy coming to see the gang and get on their nerves with all my talking." Anonymous

People-people connections

Laughter appeared to connect people in the garden above all else. An anonymous carer, who brings an adult client with learning difficulties to the garden, wrote in the sketchbook that he had, "*done some painting and planting with my client, who is very funny*". Barbara told a story, during her interview, about something which happened in the garden to make her and others who were with her laugh. She went on to say,

"All them little things what stay in there are what I think does make you mentally well. We're not just living on memories. We've also got the added pleasure of something different happening each day. We're like, discovering all the time."

A separate comment in the sketchbook also described how the setting of the garden fostered unique connections between people,

"I love to see how people change and open up, laugh and joke and how satisfying it is when people make connections that they might never make in other situations."

Jimmy made sure to include some down-to-earth humour in his script, as demonstrated by the following excerpt from a draft of a scene in which two characters argue over whose turn it is to empty the composting toilet.

MARCH The rota works

TOBY Then why is the toilet full?

MARCH Your turn last to swap the bins on it.

TOBY Was not.

MARCH Check the rota.

TOBY What you saying?

MARCH Check the rota, Toby. That's what I'm saying.

TOBY You saying I don't pull my weight?

MARCH The R-O-T-A.

TOBY I've emptied that toilet many, many times, I won't have anyone say I haven't.

MARCH Whose turn was it last then?

TOBY Not mine.

MARCH You sure?

TOBY Yeah.

Pause.

TOBY sticks his head in the shed, comes out.

Drains his tea and put the mug down.

TOBY Somebody changed rota?

In this excerpt, the fictional character, Toby, is righteously indignant about having to undertake an unfairly high proportion of an unpleasant chore. He appears to be wrong in his perception, according to the rota in the shed suggests otherwise. Jimmy was keen to include humour in his script, both to entertain an audience and to reflect the particularly down-to-earth brand of humour we encountered in the garden. This underscores the character of the space as being far from a romanticised utopia.

The practical, unromantic character of interactions in the garden was something Jimmy and I both noted. Rather than a utopian space, this garden could be described as a heterotopia, in that it represents something other than the dominant social norms, where alterity and difference may be embraced. Steyaert (2010) notes that Derek Jarman's garden

was such a space, providing a setting where dominant norms may be resisted and new forms of, in this case sexual, identity generated and practiced. In our garden, forms of identity imposed by socio-economic class distinctions and medical diagnoses are resisted. Jacques (2002: 29) states, *"If we retain the cynicism of the dystopia, but remove the weight of despair, we create the context from which heterotopia emerges"*. Perhaps laughter helps us to retain cynicism while casting off the weight of despair.

In combination with laughter, the presence of children in the garden was talked about often. Family days are run during the school holidays, when children come with their families to take part in creative and in gardening activities. The garden is sometimes used for school visits too. As one comment in the sketchbook read, the garden is,

> *"a place to be creative, make friends, have fun and breathe. A chance for the children to run free in a natural, safe environment." Anonymous*

Staff and volunteers gained pleasure from watching children playing in the garden, benefitting from its characteristics as a haven and a place of escape. The presence of children in the garden was generally welcomed by volunteers and staff, as an added source of enjoyment and entertainment, although the garden was also referred to at times as a desirably quiet and peaceful place. Children were generally not present during school hours, so the garden was peaceful at some times and joyful at others. There is also a quiet area of the garden, not open to children. It is primarily kept quiet as it is very close to private residences, but it may provide a refuge for those who need it.

People-nature connections

The dynamic nature of life in the garden, the growth of plants and the changing of the seasons influenced the experienced of its users. Angela commented that working in the garden was different from doing housework, because, "*you can do housework and sometimes it don't look no different*". She points out the difference between working in a non-living

environment, where the effects of your actions may be eroded over time, and working *with* a living environment, where your agency combines with nonhuman agency to influence ongoing processes, such as the growth of vegetation from seeds you have planted.

People discussed the satisfaction they gained from watching seeds they had planted grow into food-bearing plants. Food grown in the garden is shared among those who work there. Harry, a volunteer, told me that he was growing peas, and courgettes in the garden. He said he wanted to practise healthy eating, so he would be eating the things he grows. He said he had taken home potatoes and other vegetables from the garden in the past.

Connections between nature and people are also evident in the way in which the garden is managed. Most of the management decisions are made by the three members of staff in the garden, all of whom display a degree of ecological embeddedness (Whiteman & Cooper, 2000). Hence, weed killers are not used in the garden, while careful attention is paid to composting, recycling and reusing of materials. The garden is managed with an awareness of the ecological effects of decisions.

Implications of the "Play Factor"

This research builds on the work of others, who have also used creative and participatory approaches to research in organisations. Brown et al. (2017) has pointed out how participatory approaches can contribute to understanding and bring new perspectives to an area of inquiry, and are particularly valuable in stimulating action, producing solutions-orientated work. Kaptani (2008) highlighted the richness of embodied, illustrative data which can be delivered through creative approaches and Tofteng (2011) brought attention to the value of performance in disseminating knowledge and experiences which may otherwise go unheard. Our research study in the community garden illustrates how a creative approach can stimulate research participant dialogue around wellbeing, social and environmental change, and how it can encourage reflexivity in the researcher and in participants.

As the backstage story of this research reveals, engaging with the development of a performance piece has contributed to every part of the process. From the outset, a playful element was introduced to the research environment, as I introduced Jimmy to staff and volunteers at the garden and explained our purpose. The novelty of this piqued the interest of our participants and led to relaxed discussions. Huizinga (1950) contended that, as a voluntary activity, play has a unique quality of freedom. It is this quality of freedom which was perhaps invoked when we introduced this project as part of the development of a play. People contributed because the project captured their interest and appeared likely to be fun. They felt an intrinsic desire to take part, as well as a perhaps more commonly experienced moral obligation to contribute to research.

Participants were encouraged to be reflexive as they related their narratives through interviews, conversations and entries in the sketchbook. As Page et al. (2014) have demonstrated, arts-based approaches can create liminal spaces where emotional experiences can be accessed and communicated. The sketchbook offered an arts-based opportunity to engage creatively in the research. It also facilitated collaboration, as it was available in the garden for participants to see and reflect on each other's entries. Additionally, as the research took place in the site under investigation, sensory-emotional aspects of experience were always at the fore. These factors, combined with the quality of freedom generated by the concept of the play, created an 'aesthetic workspace' (Sutherland, 2013). In this space, participants engage in 'aesthetic reflexivity' (Sutherland, 2013) in which "aesthetic products and activities have emergent properties that arise through interactions between people/groups and artistic products/events"(p.27).

The complex, situated narratives emerging from 'aesthetic reflexivity' (Sutherland, 2013) helped to express the connections formed in the garden, both interpersonally and between people and other living things. This theme of connectedness, arising from 'concrete'

situations (Shotter & Tsoukas (2014) was much more revealing than the general themes arising from my initial analysis of the interview transcripts. Although the idea of connectedness features in each of two frameworks used to explain the mechanisms of green care (Bragg and Atkins, 2016; Cutcliffe & Travale, 2016), only one of these (Cutcliffe and Travale, 2016) includes "connectedness" with non-human elements of the environment. Narratives explored in this study illustrate the role of connectedness, both with other people *and* with different living organisms, in community gardening's impacts on wellbeing.

As the inquiry progressed and I interacted and connected with Jimmy, with the research participants and with the garden, my role as a researcher evolved. During discussions with Jimmy about the themes which may run through the play, I became aware of the multiple ways in which I related personally to the research participants, as I voiced strong, personal opinions about avoiding clichéd stereotypes. As the vignette describing my first encounter demonstrates, my initial decision to work in this particular garden was very much influenced by a feeling of familiarity with the environment surrounding the garden. I grew up in a similarly "deprived" area to this one. I identify as having come from a "working class" background." I've also lived with someone who suffered from severe mental illness and have had, in common with many other people, mild concerns about my own mental health.

These personal experiences informed my interactions with research participants, as I was able to understand references they made to their own experiences, and display affinity and empathy. For example, when a participant spoke of her relationship with natural spaces, she mentioned the places where she played in her youth, and I shared with her my own, similar experience of playing in areas of scrap ground around my childhood home. On another occasion, when a participant described the garden as a haven where relationship difficulties related to mental health issues could be escaped, I think it was clear from my

expression and body language that I had first-hand knowledge of similar situations. These similarities between myself and my research participants made it possible for us to relate to each other. As frank communication developed and progressed, I moved towards a position as an insider in the garden, from that of relative outsider. The notion of 'hyphen-spaces' is described by Cunliffe and Karunanayake (2013) as spaces in which researcher identity shifts in relationships with others. I navigated the 'hyphen space' (Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013) between insiderness and outsiderness as I became increasingly engaged with the participants and lost some of the distance from them which my position as a researcher initially imposed.

As well as sharing similarities with my research participants, I had a clear understanding of the ways in which we were different. During our conversations about the development of a play, Jimmy and I agreed on the importance of creating characters who are unique individuals, and not stereotypes signifying categories of difference, such as "working class", "deprived", or "suffering from mental illness". The importance of thinking of people in this way was highlighted by the process of considering how to create authentic fictionalised characters. It also influenced the way I carried out my interviews and interactions with participants, and the ways in which I analyse and present results.

As McDonald (2013) states, the "fluid, shifting nature of identities" (p. 127) highlighted by queer theory is such that labels denoting categories of difference may mask important differences and similarities. I was able to identify with some aspects of my research participants' identities, but I was not "the same" as them, any more than they were "the same" as each other. As I progressed through the inquiry then, I constantly negotiated the 'hyphen space' (Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013) between sameness and difference. The experiences of the research participants were not my experiences, although many of them resonated with me. There is a risk that I could project my own experiences onto theirs, conflating them and losing the unique aspects of tacit knowledge which I was aiming to

surface. Working in collaboration with Jimmy and with the staff and volunteers at the garden, as co-researchers offered some safeguards against this risk. We were conducting the inquiry from a variety of perspectives and I was also able to compare the opening section of Jimmy's script with my own impressions of the garden.

Nevertheless, it was vital that I engage with self-reflexivity, constantly examining my reactions to and interpretation of narratives and events. This was facilitated when I examined and retold moments in which I was emotionally 'struck' (Cunliffe, 2002), such as on my first entrance into the garden. As I narrated this experience as a vignette, I evoked emotions related to it (Corlett, 2013). By returning to this moment, I was able to engage in critical self-reflexivity, examining my emotional responses, my ways of making meaning and how I related to the situation and to a research participant (Carol). These cycles of reflexivity were carried out throughout the research process.

The process culminated in Jimmy's creation of a script for the opening section of a play, which received a favourable response from staff and volunteers at the garden. We hope the play will be performed when completed, in the community garden and other venues. Participants' voices will thereby be amplified and communicated (Brown et al., 2017).to people who could benefit from taking part in similar activities, as well as to health and social care providers and urban planners, who may be able to further harness the benefits of urban nature in promoting wellbeing. As Sutherland (2013) suggests, reflexive work can create "memories with future resonance and momentum" (pg.37). If we can create such memories in our audience, we may raise awareness of community gardening and spark future actions to promote it.

I began this research believing that community gardening was likely to be a valuable resource in the promotion of wellbeing. The experience of carrying out the research has strengthened this belief. As a result, I have travelled some way across the 'hyphen space'

(Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013) between political activism and active neutrality, in the direction of political activism. I wish to generate interest and action around community gardens and green care, so that benefits can be realized by more people. In this endeavor, arts-based methods have added value over more traditional methods, both in fostering the emergence of 'memories with momentum' (Sutherland, 2013) and in communicating widely with diverse audiences (Nair et al., 2018).

Adaptive, creative approaches to doing and disseminating research can facilitate discourse which embraces the dynamic complexity of living organisations (Brown et al., 2017). There are, of course, other areas of management and organisation research to which these approaches could apply. For example, in the field of human resource management, a creative approach may enhance the exploration of employee wellbeing programmes or attempts to make working environments family friendly. They could also be valuable in researching the effectiveness of policies on equality and inclusion in the workplace.

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Figure 1: Poster attached to the front cover of a sketchbook in which participants were encouraged to enter comments

275x190mm (300 x 300 DPI)

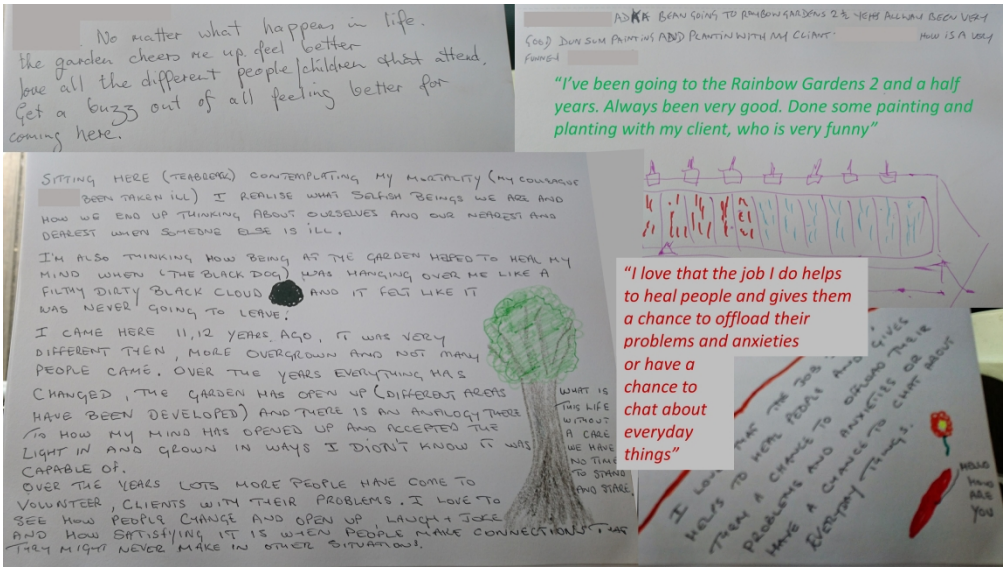

Figure 2: Compiled photographs of some of the comments made in the sketchbook. Text has been added to clarify some entries, where writing is smudged or unclear in the image. Names have been redacted.

338x190mm (300 x 300 DPI)