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It's making us look disgusting...and it makes me feel like a mink...it makes me feel depressed!: using photovoice to help 'see' and understand the perspectives of disadvantaged young people about the neighbourhood determinants of their mental well-being.

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*It's making us look disgusting... and it makes me feel like a mink
... it makes me feel depressed!': using photovoice to help 'see' and
understand the perspectives of disadvantaged young people about
the neighbourhood determinants of their mental well-being.*

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There is growing recognition that poor adolescent mental well-being is a serious global health issue. Research exploring adult mental well-being issues has shown positive and negative associations with environmental factors such as quality of the neighbourhoods and social support. However, little is known about young people's notions of mental well-being, or factors they associate with generating, sustaining or eroding it. A qualitative community-based participatory research study was conducted using photovoice (PV), with young people attending a youth project based in a deprived inner-city neighbourhood in Scotland. The research enabled participants to identify and explore aspects of their neighbourhood they experienced as having a direct impact on their mental well-being. The following themes emerged as those most important to participants' mental well-being: (1) perceived levels of local neighbourhood investment and care; (2) access to various forms of capital (including social, economic and natural capital) and (3) fears about personal safety. Concerns about being perceived as poor by others and feeling neglected by city officials and councillors also pervaded participants' accounts. Young people actively engaged in this research and helped generate rich, contextualised data about their lives and neighbourhoods. Moreover, they identified feasible, locally based remedies to perceived problems. PV is a powerful tool for engaging disadvantaged adolescents in research about their health. This study revealed that there are several important and modifiable aspects of the neighbourhood environment that if remedial actions were taken, it could have a beneficial effect on young people's mental well-being.

Keywords: photovoice; adolescent; youth; mental well-being; neighbourhood; community-based participatory research

Introduction and background

Adolescent mental health is a global health issue, accounting for a significant disease burden in many countries (Patel *et al.* 2007). In the UK, it is estimated that 1 in 10 children between the ages of 1 and 16 years suffer a mental health disorder (Green *et al.* 2005). Research with adult populations suggests that wider social and environmental factors play a major role in one's mental well-being (Meltzer *et al.* 2000). For example, it has been found that aspects of local neighbourhoods have both positive and negative effects on mental health (Latkin and Curry 2003). Factors such as socio-economic deprivation (Kalff *et al.* 2001), exposure to community violence (Osofsky 1995) and levels of social capital (Kawachi *et al.* 1999) have also been found to affect adult mental well-being.

It is widely recognised that children living in disadvantaged circumstances are more likely to suffer from mental health problems (Stafford and Marmot 2003). Children living with a mental disorder are more likely to be living in single-parent families who are unemployed and have low formal educational attainment (Meltzer *et al.* 2000, Parry- Langdon *et al.* 2008), and less likely to have friends, participate in clubs or believe their local communities are safe (Parry-Langdon *et al.* 2008, Shucksmith *et al.* 2009). However, relatively little is known about young people's views and experiences of factors they perceive as enhancing or eroding their mental well-being. A recent study in Scotland has highlighted the lack of indicators to assess and monitor child and adolescent mental health (Shucksmith

et al. 2009, NHS Health Scotland 2011).

Photography is increasingly being used to investigate the social and economic worlds of young people (Wilson *et al.* 2007, Flicker *et al.* 2008). Photovoice (PV) is a community-based participatory research method which incorporates photography in the research process. It has been used to conduct research with vulnerable young people (i.e. marginalised and socially excluded) in North America (Wilson *et al.* 2007, Wang 2001, Strack *et al.* 2004, Grant *et al.* 2009), and has been popularised in recent years by Wang and Burris (1994, 1997). PV has also been used to explore a range of health issues involving vulnerable adult groups (Baker and Wang 2006, Grosselink and Myllykangas 2007, Duffy 2010, Haines *et al.* 2010). Researchers have reported great success in engaging such groups in research intended to benefit them using this methodology, where other methods have failed (Carlson *et al.* 2006).

PV is grounded in feminist and empowerment social theory (Freire 1970, 1973, Wang and Burris 1997) and encourages research participants to take and use photographs to identify issues that are important to them. These photographs become the basis of further discussion with the researcher, allowing participants, not the researcher, to frame the discussion and suggest ideas for change. Indeed, it has been argued that PV-based research has helped policy makers and health professionals: (a) develop more culturally sensitive solutions to health problems (Downey *et al.* 2009) and (b) become sensitised to socially excluded young people, as having potential capabilities – rather than as ‘problems waiting to be solved’ (Amsden and Vanwynsberghe 2005).

To the best of our knowledge, no UK-based, published research has been conducted to date, which investigates young people’s perspectives of factors that enhance or erode their mental well-being using PV. This paper reports on the results of a study that used this theoretical approach and methodology to investigate how young people living in socially and economically disadvantaged circumstances in Aberdeen viewed and experienced their local neighbourhood and its impact on their mental well-being. The study also explored young participants’ ideas about changes they believed could and should be made to ameliorate the problems they identified.

Methodology

Our research stance was that we wished to enable potential participants to play an active role in identifying issues of interest and importance to them, as co-researchers, rather than having their frame of reference defined by us, PV seemed most suitable for this purpose. The study group were adolescent users of a youth project (henceforth termed the Project), which was situated in a particularly disadvantaged area of Aberdeen, a city located in north-east Scotland (henceforth termed the Area). To take part in the study, participants had to be users of the Project, and aged between 12 and 19 years. Those over 19 years were not invited to take part in the study. The Area is one of Aberdeen’s six regeneration areas, it is Aberdeen’s second most deprived area according to employment and health statistics (The Aberdeen City Alliance 2007) and is within the bottom 10% of the most deprived postcode areas of Scotland (The Scottish Government 2010).

The study protocol was reviewed and endorsed by the University of Aberdeen College Ethics Review Board.

As our target group were considered ‘hard-to-reach’, convenience and snowballing sampling strategies (Barbour 2008) were used to recruit participants to the study by Project staff and one of the researchers (MW). Interested volunteers were given consent forms and information sheets for their, and in some cases, their parents use. The research proceeded in two stages.

During stage 1, eligible participants were given disposable cameras and were asked to take photographs of things in their neighbourhood that made them feel happy and healthy, and those that made them unhappy or unhealthy. A decision

was taken *not to* make suggestions about what they could or should photograph in order to gain young people's 'uninfluenced' view of their lived world. However, participants were advised not to put themselves in any danger to take photographs, and that if they photographed illegal activity we would be required to inform the police. The cameras were returned to one of the researchers (MW) once the film was completed (39 exposures).

The second stage involved conducting in-depth individual interviews with participants who returned their cameras. Each participant was asked to pick 10 pictures from their personal stack, and a topic guide, based on the ShowED process (Flicker *et al.* 2008), was used to aid reflection on those selected, and the meanings they represented to the participant. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

Data analysis commenced at the start of the research project, and continued throughout with both researchers (FD and MW) sharing ideas, hunches and reflections on events and emerging issues throughout (Bowling 1997, Morse and Richards 2002, Ritchie and Lewis 2003, Richards 2005).

The interview data were analysed thematically using aspects of grounded theory including constant comparison method and deviant case analysis (Bowling 1997, Morse and Richards 2002, Ritchie and Lewis 2003, Richards 2005). Both researchers read the interview transcripts and independently developed an initial coding framework. They met on a number of occasions to discuss the coding frame, and a small number of coded transcripts. Common and exceptional themes were identified, and areas of disagreement were highlighted and resolved. A final coding frame was agreed and used to code the entire data-set. It was decided to conduct the analysis as a paper-based exercise using colour coding to aid visualisation of patterns and emergent themes. Anonymised quotes and photographs were used to illustrate the main findings.

Results

Participants

From around 20 young people who expressed interest in the research, 13 cameras were distributed. Eleven were returned, and nine interviews were subsequently held with two girls and seven boys. Two girls returned cameras but were not interviewed, and four interviews could not take place because participants were unable to retrieve their cameras due to domestic circumstances beyond their control. The average age of those interviewed was 14.5 years, and the average number of years of residence in the Area was 10 years, ranging from 3 to 17. Seven of the nine interviewed were Aberdonian, one was Latvian and one was Lithuanian. Only one participant lived with both parents, seven lived with one parent and one lived with another family member.

Interview findings

Analysis revealed four broad emergent thematic categories within participants' narratives about their photographs: (1) the importance of perceived investments in the local area, (2) notions individual and collective access to various forms of capital, (3) safety fears and (4) suggestions to improve their local area.

Table 1 presents the findings for the *perceived investment* category, along with representative comments from the participants. An overview of all the thematic categories can be found in Table 2. This presentation format has been adapted from that used by Hennessy *et al.* (2010). Depending on the individual participant, some factors were reported as having both positive and negative effects on mental

well-being. Indicators are used in each table to illustrate where the topic was discussed as having a positive effect (+), a negative effect (-) or both (±) depending on the context and the individuals' viewpoint.

Levels of local investment

Perceptions of different types of local investments were by far and away the most commonly discussed issue throughout. Participants described four types of investments as impacting their lives and the way they felt about themselves (see Table 1). Perceptions of *visible investment* in the local area were largely discussed in positive terms. In this category, participants highlighted a range of images that represented actions or situations concerned with caring for, or improving their community. These ranged from obvious efforts to clean up litter, images of on-going repair to damaged buildings, playgrounds and other aspects of the local infrastructure. Council workers working in the Area were commonly photographed and associated with caring for the neighbourhood and its residents (see Table 1 and Figure 1).

Investment in housing was mentioned in both positive and negative terms. A few viewed housing improvements as obvious efforts to improve their Area, encouraging more people to live there, illustrated in Figure 2.

One participant expressed concern that by bringing more people into an area, existing residents would miss out and suffer neglect.

This links to the other, negatively experienced sub-themes within this category that included perceptions of a *lack of investment* in the local area, *uneven investment*, and obvious *disinvestment* in the Area. *Lack of investment* was expressed in terms of perceptions of neglect and constrained spending in the local area by the city council. A sentiment expressed within all interviews was that their area was being neglected and ignored by the council and the police. Some participants felt that the council failed to consult or communicate with them and this, coupled with a lack of investment, was presented as an explanation (for participants) for why they felt there were few local recreational areas and facilities. *Uneven investment* was identified where other parts of the city were perceived as having received more money than their own community; areas of the city they believed tourists or shoppers would use. The desire for a more visible police presence emerges later during participants' accounts of actions they think should be taken to remedy their situation.

Table 1. Category: perceived investment – themes, sub-themes and participant comments.

| Categories | Themes | Sub-themes | Representative sample comment from adolescent |
|----------------------|------------------------|--|---|
| Perceived investment | Visible investment (±) | Attempts to keep the community clean (+) | “Because I can see it’s, they’re tidying up and I won’t need to go through that mess and maybe hurt myself and at least I know it’s, it will be great, it will look nice, it will be nice and somebody’s doing something in the Area! Woohoo!” P1 |
| | | Housing (±) | “I know that down near the shops they are like making new building and everything, OK it’s nice, but why they are doing that I actually don’t even know ... ok they are making flats and everything but if they are thinking that the Area is one of the worst parts in Aberdeen – why then they are making new flats in there?!” P1 “new houses getting built ... they’re actually taking into consideration that more people want to stay in the Area, n they want, they need to build new houses for people to move into the Area because it’s a nice place to stay!” P2 |
| | | Residents (+) | “Eh, this is a photograph of the Rowland’s pharmacy owl eh it makes you happy because it’s an old folks’ home it was outside and it makes you happy because em, you know there’s someone there that can help.” P5 |
| | Lack of investment (-) | Neglect of housing (-) | “pieces of the building, like falling down ... I look down and I saw like all this mess, It’s just unsafe! ... now here the roof of the building aren’t the best ones ... there was leak from the roof, so all landing everywhere was in the water ... I think the people who are building should think even more about the situation and about how safe is that.” P1 |
| | | Neglect of aesthetics (-) | “Basically just the mess of some people’s gardens and houses ... it makes the Area look really untidy and kinda disgusting.” P6 |
| | | Neglect by council (-) | “cause like the government don’t do anything about it, they’re hopeless really.” P7 |
| | | Neglect by residents (-) | “it makes me feel rubbish, because it’s just that people just don’t care about which place they stay at.” P9 |
| | | Lack of local resources (-) | “all the parks in the Area are old, nothing’s been done with them, when they get broken they don’t fix them and then people just break them all the time ... when I was younger I had nothing to do cause of it.” P6 “a worn down shopping centre ... I used to go here all the time with my family, just going around and having a little local shopping, then just when I got older it started shutting down ... I would re-open the shop ... because some people end up walking a bit too far ... people think ever since the shopping centre closed down, think it’s OK to just splash all their money up in town.” P3 |
| | | Feeling ignored (-) | “we’ve all been ignored all the time by the police and the government.” P4 |

| | | |
|-----------------------|--|---|
| Uneven investment (-) | Within the Area (-) | “It all depends where you are in the Area ... around the Don, that’s where they’re doing it most ... I’d rather they just spread it around the Area.” P3 |
| | Between the Area and the city centre (-) | “they turned around and no because they didn’t have the funding for it (a skate park) but they forked out over millions for the new building renovation, new offices, but they’re chucking out all the furniture which they don’t need to do cause it’s all pretty neat and nice but they’re spending 14 million on new furniture which could help the community really.” P5 |
| Disinvestment (-) | Vandalism (-) | “it’s like vandalism and I don’t like vandalism and I just took a picture of it ... it’s just wrecking other folks property and it’s just pointless ... it’s getting a lot, lot worse.” P7 |
| | Littering (-) | “it’s disgusting and there’s bins going about but people never use them and it’s just left lying about and it’s harmful to nature and animals and stuff and it’s dangerous!” P2 |
| | Graffiti (-) | “Graffiti under a bridge which is bang out of order! ... Somebody with their very disrespectful, trying to make something look nice, which already looked nice before, but just making a mess if it ... because people don’t care about the community ... it makes me feel like a mink ... it makes me feel depressed.” P2 |
| | Lack of respect (-) | “they just didn’t care about it anymore ... just that, because of like some people taking it for granted, now it’s closed and now they won’t probably think of reopening it.” P3 |
| | Aesthetics (-) | “Eh, sad, unhappy because em, you know that if you get well if you get tourists in the Area they’ll kinda look at the tress and kinda look at them and walk away cause they’ve been vandalised and they think of it as a nasty place. Like people from other parts of Scotland that come up to Aberdeen and visit here like the river and that, all the trees have been scribbled on n like all that so, it’s not really nice to see.” P5 “it’s actually just inappropriate and it’s making us look disgusting n like a minky place.” P2 |

Note: The data collection period for this study was February- June 2011. The themes that emerged in the interviews under the Perceived Investment category are discussed here with representative comments from participants. An overview of all the categories and themes is provided in Table 2. (+), positive aspect; (-), negative aspect; (±) conflicting.

Table 2. Overview of findings identified in interviews.

| Category | Theme | Sub-themes |
|-----------------------------|---|--|
| Perceived investment | Visible investment (±) | Attempts to keep the community clean (+) Housing (±) Residents (+) |
| | Lack of investment (-) | Neglect of Housing (-) Neglect of Aesthetics (-) Neglect by council (-) Neglect by residents (-) Lack of local resources (-) Feeling ignored (-) |
| | Uneven investment (-) | Within the Area (-) Between the Area and the city centre (-) |
| | Disinvestment (-) | Vandalism (-) Littering (-) Graffiti (-) Lack of respect (-) Aesthetics (-) |
| Access to capital | Social capital (+) | Friends (+) The Project (+) |
| | Economic capital (-) | Personal money worries (-) Awareness of other people in the Area struggling (-) Gambling (-) |
| | Natural capital (±) | Relaxation (+) Aesthetics (±) Need for care (±) |
| | Personal human capital (+) | Interests/hobbies (+) Building self-confidence (+) |
| Fears about safety | Fear of people (-) | Groups (-) Individuals (-) Violence and crime (-) |
| | Fear of Areas and buildings (-) | 'Muggers bridge' (-) Unsafe buildings (-) |
| | Animals (-) | Fear of aggressive animals (-) Fear for the safety of animals due to pollution (-) |
| | Drugs, alcohol and smoking (-) | Effects of alcohol (-) Fellow young people turning to alcohol or drugs (-) Awareness of addicts in the Area (-) Awareness of dealers in the Area (-) Health effects of smoking and passive smoking (-) |
| | Police (±) | Aesthetic effects of smoking (-) Reassuring presence (+) Not enough action (±) |
| Notions of remedial actions | Crime prevention | Security cameras Police Improving safety Displacement activities |
| | Council communication and action Respect Investment | |

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(+), positive aspect; (-), negative aspect; (±), conflicting.



Figure 1. ‘Because I can see it’s, they’re tidying up and I won’t need to go through that mess and maybe hurt myself and at least I know it’s great, it will look nice, it will be nice and somebody’s doing something in the area! Woohoo!’ Notes: Photograph and quote – Participant 1, Category – Perceived investment, Theme – Visible investment.

Obvious *disinvestment* was described in terms of other local residents’ acts of vandalism and littering in the local area. This was perceived as disrespectful of their own area and the people living within it. Figure 3 illustrates this issue.

A striking feature within this theme was the degree to which young participants were sensitive about how they as individuals, and as a community were perceived by those living in other areas of the city. Terms such as ‘*minging*’¹, ‘*minky*’¹ and ‘*disgusting*’ were used to describe the aesthetics of the Area and how this made them feel. For example, one young person identified a lack of investment in the Area as making them look poor and boring, while graffiti was described as making them feel depressed (see Figure 4).

Access to capital

Access to capital was the second most common theme, and emerged as four distinct sub- themes: *personal*, *social*, *economic* and *natural*. Opportunities to develop *personal capital* and to enjoy one’s *social capital* were discussed exclusively in highly positive terms. Having the opportunity to pursue personal interests and build self-confidence was important, and the Project was the primary means by which participants were able to pursue personal interests such as music and sporting activities. Table 2 illustrates the central importance of friends (*social capital*) in participants’ lives. It was evident, from the interviews and informal discussions with participants during site visits, that the Project was hugely important to them, and instrumental in enabling them to access and enjoy both aspects (Figure 5).



Figure 2. 'new houses getting built ... they're actually taking into consideration that more people want to stay in the Area, n they want, they need to build new houses for people to move into the Area because it's a nice place to stay!' Notes: Photograph and Quote – Participant 2, Category – Perceived investment, Theme – Visible investment.



Figure 3. 'they just don't care about it anymore ... just that, because of like some people taking it for granted, now it's closed and now they won't probably think of reopening it.' Notes: Photograph and Quote – Participant 3, Category – Perceived investment, Theme – Disinvestment.



Figure 4. 'Graffiti under a bridge which is bang out of order ... look it's just disgusting, look at that - it's actually just inappropriate and it's making us look disgusting n like a minky place. and it makes me feel like a mink ... it makes me feel depressed because it's actually bang out of order.' Notes: Photograph and quote - Participant 2, Category - Perceived investment, Theme - Disinvestment.



Figure 5. 'I live at the Project because it's my second home, an I'm like here every day! ... if it wasn't here then I'd be bored, I wouldn't have nothing to do ... it makes me feel at home and special.' Notes: Photograph - Participant 1, quote - Participant 2, Category - Access to capital, Theme - Social capital.



Figure 6. 'the sad thing is people don't, doesn't have money to buy anything so that's why we can, that's why we starve sometimes.' Notes: Photograph and quote – Participant 4, Category – Access to capital, Theme – Economic capital.

Lack of access to *economic capital* was discussed in negative terms. Figure 6 illustrates the finding that many participants seemed to be highly aware of their families and other people's money worries, and that this caused them considerable anxiety. Concern for others in financial difficulties was visible throughout the interviews.

Enjoyment of *natural capital* was more nuanced. It had different and at times apparently contradictory effects on participants, depending on the circumstances and the individual. Overall, the presence of nature was experienced and viewed as positive and relaxing. However, there was a fine line between notions of beauty and of neglect. Many talked about the need for vegetation to be cared for and controlled, otherwise it could appear overgrown and neglected – and be experienced in a negative way (Figure 7).

Safety fears

Participants identified three types of threats to personal and neighbourhood safety that related to *people, places* and *animals*. *People*, commonly described as 'NEDS'² throughout, were considered responsible for much local violence and crime. Some talked in detail about specific individuals (i.e. loan sharks), and the threat they posed to their community. Fears about drug or alcohol addicts were also featured here. They were perceived to pose a direct risk to others while under the influence of their addictions, but also indirectly, due to the perceived risk they posed to vulnerable young people (like themselves); by encouraging them into drug addiction in an area where there was nothing else to do (see Table 2 and Figure 8).

Neglected buildings featured in discussions about specific *places* within the Area, which were considered unsafe either because of the structural integrity of the buildings or due to their notoriety as areas for crime and violence, are illustrated in Figure 9.



Figure 7. 'Eh, sad, unhappy because em, you know that if you get well, if you get tourists in the Area they'll kinda look at the trees and kinda look at them and walk away cause they've been vandalised they think of it as a nasty place. Like people from other parts of Scotland that come to Aberdeen and visit here like the river and that, all the trees have been scribbled on n like all that so, it's not really nice to see.' Notes: Photograph and quote – Participant 5, Category – Access to capital, Theme – Natural capital.

Fear was also associated with *animals*. As shown in Table 2, this related to fear of aggressive animals, perceived as commonplace in the Area, and fear for animals (pets and wildlife) being at risk from (the aforementioned) littering.

Remedial solutions

Participants offered a range of community-level solutions for the problems they identified, and suggested ways of implementing those. Table 2 shows these ranged from low- to high- cost suggestions. For example, one participant recommended using coloured rubbish bins to encourage proper litter disposal. Increasing community policing (as a more costly suggestion) was mentioned several times in the interviews. For example, Figure 8 illustrates one young participants' image of a negative local issue that in their opinion could have been ameliorated by a greater police presence.

Discussion

Experiences of under- or disinvestment in the local area, causing it to look neglected and poor, caused many participants considerable anxiety, and how others viewed their neighbourhood was important to them. It seemed that the Area's aesthetics, which many photographs clearly depicted as suffering neglect, were linked both directly and indirectly with participants' feelings of self-worth. This relates to place identity, a term used in environmental psychology to discuss the effect places can have on one's sense of self (Twigger-Ross *et al.* 2003), and supports existing research which suggests that aesthetics



Figure 8. 'I think that's a pair of boxers on the street ... Well I think a person had a bit too much alcohol to drink, stripped down naked and just ran about ... Well I've seen it happen before in here ... Pretty scared and weird ... Well I think it happens when people ingest too much alcohol or they've been using drugs ... Cause there's so many drug users around in around the Area, there's a lot of drug dealers'. Notes: Photograph and quote – Participant 3, Category – Fears about personal safety, Theme – Drugs, alcohol and smoking.

may be particularly important in impacting residents' mental health (Leslie and Cerin 2008, Mair *et al.* 2009).

Throughout the interviews, participants demonstrated that they were politically aware, i.e. about who was making decisions about the distribution of resources within the city (Bambra *et al.* 2005). They seemed knowledgeable about investment projects within the larger city, and within their own area, and believed some areas received more resources than others. Consequently, they seemed sensitive about their social status, and believed themselves low down the 'pecking order' within the city. There was obvious sense throughout the interviews of participants not wanting to appear poor to others. Although there is a great deal of existing research on the effects of poverty and low socio-economic status on mental health (Sooman and MacIntyre 1995, Dalgard and Tambs 1997, Stafford and Marmot 2003, Ziersch *et al.* 2005, Wilkinson and Pickett 2009), there is very little about the effect being visibly poor to others can have, especially in adolescence, when 'appearances' is an important issue (Jones *et al.* 2004).

However, our findings revealed some apparent contradictions as some viewed aspects of their neighbourhood positively while others viewed it more negatively. This was most evident within the access to natural capital and investment themes, where some viewed the presence of nature as a nurturing factor, while others reported the opposite. The latter view might be explained by unkempt, natural areas, perhaps being symbolic of neglect or disinvestment. This phenomenon was also present in a recent study exploring the relationship between peri-urban woodlands and health and well-being. It found that people



Figure 9. 'The 'Muggers Bridge'. well you can tell by its name it's nae a very good place and it's very unsafe and every time I walk under it I get my, I phone my Dad to meet me before I walk under it so he can meet me cause I'm scared to go under it.' Notes: Photograph and quote – Participant 2, Category – Fears about Safety, Theme – Fears of places.

viewed and experienced nature in different ways, and consequently, were differentially impacted by it (O'Brien *et al.* 2012).

The central importance of the youth Project in the participants' lives was evident throughout this research. It was highlighted by all as providing the time and space to develop their social and personal skills, and, somewhere where they can feel safe, relaxed and independent. Young people in this study were politically aware, and this awareness extended to knowledge about national and local council budget cuts, and they were fearful about the withdrawal the council services they used, including the potential loss of the Project. These fears are well founded, as local government budget cuts are predicted by some to hit youth services and low-income groups the hardest over the coming years (Cassidy 2012).

A range of low- and high-tech remedies were identified by participants to address negative issues. Patel *et al.* (2007) and Anderson *et al.* (2010) argued that young people should be involved in the development of interventions intended to improve their mental health and that this might be achieved by encouraging them to engage in their community's development. Interestingly, within the most recent local authority community plan for the Area, of the 35 neighbourhood priorities identified for action (The Aberdeen City Alliance 2010), the themes identified in this study matched 17. For example, the third neighbourhood priority – to improve community facilities in the Area (The Aberdeen City Alliance 2010) – was commonly discussed throughout these interviews. Furthermore, a recently published report proposing new mental health indicators for children and young people in Scotland (NHS Health Scotland 2011) has included several of the themes identified in this study including, but not limited to, participation in a club or group, neighbourhood trust, community cohesion, poverty, greenspace and neighbourhood violence and crime.

These findings indicate that young people are capable (Fraser *et al.* 2004) and will engage with research intended to inform local policy, if an acceptable and accessible means of doing so is offered. All reported enjoying the PV methodology, feeling empowered by the process, enabled to express their views and wanted to do so again. Furthermore, the photographs helped stimulate rich discussions, and provided additional visual material which contextualised this narrative. Given growing concerns about the increasing social distance between low socio-economic groups (who suffer the burden of ill health) and the predominately middle-class professionals and policy makers charged with developing solutions to improve their health and well-being (Frohlich *et al.* 2010, Haines *et al.* 2010), we believe PV can help bridge that gap.

However, as with any study there are some limitations to consider. It was conceivable that potential participants might not take part if they did not feel able to capture images which represented how they felt about an issue (Palibroda *et al.* 2009). Given the extent to which young people use digital technologies to communicate with each other and to record aspects of their lives, we believed that these issues would not be a significant problem for this group. However, we chose to use disposable cameras as some young people attending the Project were so poor that they did not have regular access to digital technology, and did not feel comfortable using it.

The study was time and resource intensive. The researcher attended the Project during the drop-in sessions before the research started to build relationships with staff and young people (Leyshon 2001), and continued attending those sessions throughout the process.

This was a small study, with nine participants completing the whole research process, and this must be taken into account when considering the findings. However, we believe that the themes revealed in this work are a valuable contribution to this under-researched area. Clearly, further study is required in this area.

Conclusions

Young people living in a disadvantaged area of a wealthy city found that several lived aspects of their neighbourhood impacted their mental well-being. Perceptions of local area under- or disinvestment, and lack of access to economic and good quality, natural capital dominated their accounts. Concerns about being perceived as poor by others were evident throughout and this is an area that requires further investigation. Feeling neglected by city officials and councillors, and fears about personal safety were also prevalent. Having access to social capital and opportunities for self-development was positively associated with their mental well-being – and for this group, being supported to achieve those opportunities through their youth project was key. PV is a successful and rewarding way of engaging young people in research about health and well-being.

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Notes

1. Both terms are used locally and in other parts of Scotland as adjectives with similar connotations as disgusting or unsavoury.
2. Non-Educated Delinquents – term used in Scotland to describe a group of individuals, usually associated with anti-social behaviour.

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