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Occupational engagement in a woodland

An exploration of belonging to a natural and
social place for mental health recovery

Fiona Cole & Mark Christie

Context

- A community interest group within a privately owned woodland and garden
- People recovering from mental health issues volunteered once or twice / week



'We find a job that everybody likes, but we actually find a use for the stuff rather than move it all away. Nothing goes off site here, everything is recycled and anything that we bring on site is found a use for. You've just seen a bath turned into a pond and that's what we do.'

Geoff – the owner



'Well, it is no nonsense set up, that is how I describe it. It is quirky as well, it's quirky! It is not overly organised and it's not driven by monetary values. It is driven by personal satisfaction and their values, so that is important, that is why I feel that it needs support, yeah.'

George



Study Aims

To explore participants' engagement in nature-based activities, and the impact of a distinct socio-cultural and physical place on occupational engagement



Existing Knowledge – background literature

- **Green Care, horticulture, therapeutic landscapes** (Bragg & Atkins 2016; Fieldhouse & Sempik 2014; Whatley et al 2015)
- **Occupational Science – including health geography** (Duff 2012; Hasselkus 2011; Whalley Hammell 2014; Wilcock & Hocking 2015)
- **Recovery approaches** (COT 2010; Shepherd et al 2010)
- **Place** (Hasselkus 2011)

Space and Place

- People create 'places' out of 'spaces' – they are not separate from place but attribute meanings and values to environments.
- A natural environment is a physical, natural *space* but when it has meaning for the people who interact with it, then it may be regarded as a *place*
- Places are where occupational engagement is experienced

Hasselkus 2011; Townsend et al 2009

Research Approach - Ethnography

Qualitative research

Observation,
participation, immersion
over 3 months

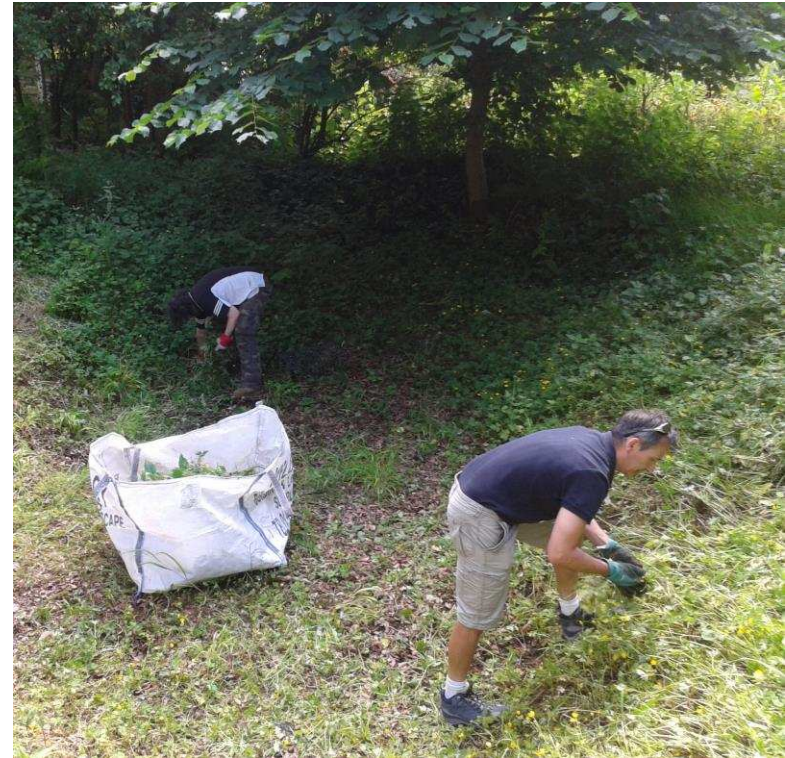
Live conversations &
Interviews (11
participants)

Photographs

Reflections / field notes

Ethics

Thematic Analysis



Hammersley & Atkinson 2007;
O'Reilly 2009)

Findings

Statements about wellbeing:

- *'I get a great sense of wellbeing from coming here'. Dan*
- *'this has done more for me mental health than any talking therapies or anything like that that I have done in the past'. Bob*

Provisional themes



- The natural / outdoor place
- Structure / informality
- Belonging and connectedness in the social place
- Collaboration
- Values / being valued
- Achievement



The natural place

- *The physical environment, the limestone, the trees, the animal life, sometimes deer go past or you have got different trees and stuff like that Alan*



Structure / Informality

- *I am able to open up a lot more here because I think it is so much more relaxed. There isn't any kind of pressure put upon us Dan*
- *structure without too much pressure Gareth*



Achievement

- *The positivity of that sense of achievement, of things made or rectified*
- *All me life I've been a hands on person, doing something...it gives me satisfaction, I want to give something back doing this Griff*



Belonging and connectedness in the social place

- *It's just the spirit of being together, there's a degree of camaraderie...it's sort of like nice to have a good bond with people of different ages and to listen to what they are about as well. George*
- *Now they know each other, that is one of the wonderful things, just so friendly. They all sit down and eat together Jane*



Collaboration

- *You are working alongside people. myself and Griff, we rebuilt it [dry stone wall] I've never done anything like that before and it's really satisfying, because we actually did a good job of it. Bob*
- *Everybody helps somebody and we work out what people are needing Geoff*



Values / being valued

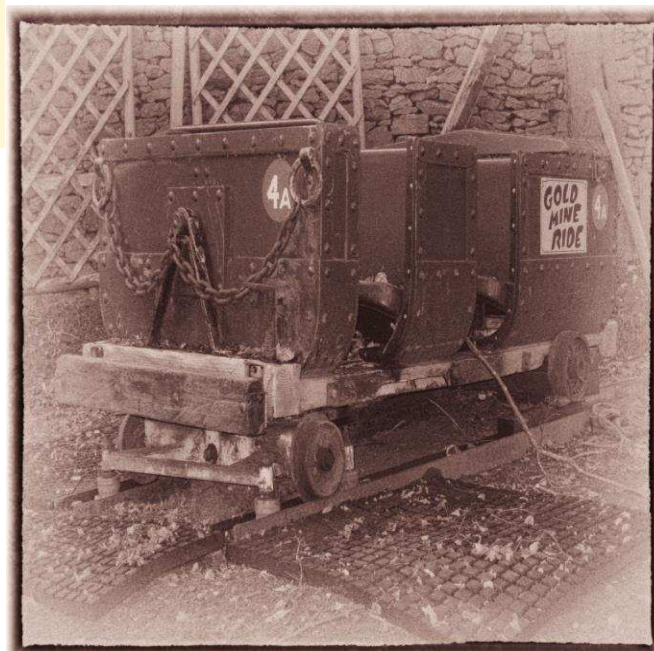
- *I come because I feel valued ...it is very much a case of "thank you for coming and whatever you would like to do..." It is appreciated Dan*
- *When we give our time here we are giving it to people who firstly value us, and that coming here we won't be subject to any discrimination or stigma or prejudice Alan*



'Out of place, and out of time. The fact that it doesn't quite belong there makes it belong there all the more. I'm sure there's a fascinating story behind it, but I prefer not to know, since it would lose some of its mystery... I have tried to give it the full "Victorian" representation'



'the plant looks like it would be more at home beneath the ocean'



'While less mysterious than the wagon, the mine car is also out of place.'

Research Rigour

- Journal writing and reflection
- Co-researcher coding
- Triangulation
- Participants' validation of provisional findings
- Reflexivity

Hammersley & Atkinson 2007

What does it mean?

- Being occupationally engaged may be more than doing. The importance of belonging and connectedness – to nature, to others (Whalley Hammell 2014)
- Mental health recovery - democratisation / reduced power differentials and acknowledgement of expertise (Shepherd et al 2010)

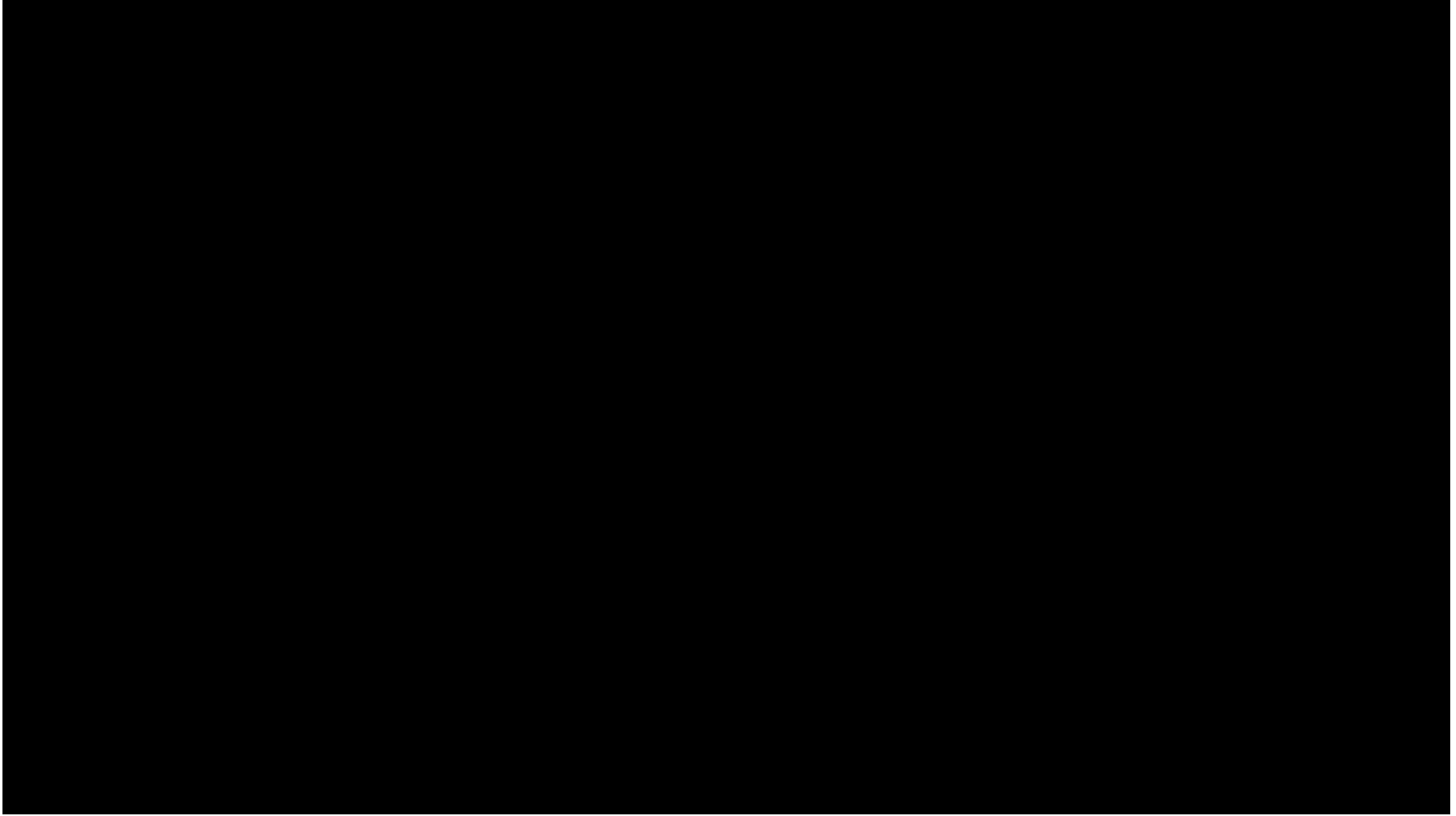
- Occupation need not be goal directed doing but engagement valued for the experience and feelings (Hasselkus 2011)
- Importance of a safe place to belong for people with mental ill-health (Rebeiro 2001)
- Legitimises 'being' in natural environments, (Whalley Hammell 2014)
- Contrasts with 'green care' – active participation in the occupation (Fieldhouse & Sempik 2014)



Implications

- A community development approach to practice. Rather than focusing on individual OT 'intervention' to address occupational performance deficits (eg Whatley et al 2015)
- A 'hands off' approach to empower people to develop connected and occupationally engaged in natural places
- Collaboration between occupational therapists and community organisations

Reflections





- Thank you for listening
- Comments or Questions?

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