Heritage and Community Wellbeing

The Capacity of Participation to Benefit Communities and its Significance for Civil Society

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Dieser Beitrag gibt einen Überblick über Forschungsarbeiten zu den Auswirkungen der Teilhabe und des *Wellbeings* im Kontext lokaler Kulturerbediskurse. Nach einer kurzen Kontextualisierung des Fokus auf soziale Werte in Diskursen zu kulturellem Erbe, wie sie in der Faro-Konvention von 2005 befürwortet werden folgt ein Abriss des Konzepts des *Wellbeings*. Im Anschluss werden zwei neuere interdisziplinäre Forschungsarbeiten unter der Leitung der Universität Lincoln besprochen, um deren Erkenntnisse über die Auswirkungen der Teilhabe am Kulturerbe auf das *Wellbeing* der lokalen Community zu beleuchten. In der ersten Studie wurde festgestellt, dass Partizipation in direktem Zusammenhang mit den identifizierten Bedingungen für das *Wellbeing* der Gemeinschaft steht. Die zweite Studie zeigt, dass die Bedingungen, die in einer quantitativen experimentellen Psychologiestudie in den Niederlanden und im Vereinigten Königreich für einen kausalen Zusammenhang zwischen der Beteiligung am kulturellen Erbe und dem *Wellbeing* nachgewiesen wurden, auch eng mit den Bedingungen für das *Wellbeing* der Gesamtgesellschaft zusammenhängen.

Der Beitrag schließt mit der These, dass die Politik den Fokus auf die für lokalen Gemeinschaften relevanten Themen stärken muss, da hier bisher ein Mangel besteht, insbesondere angesichts rechtspopulistischer Bestrebungen Kulturerbe emotional zu adressieren und damit zu einer Spaltung beizutragen. Es wird vorgeschlagen, Partizipation zu stärken und Programme zu fördern, die hierfür sensibilisieren.

ABSTRACT

This paper reviews recent research into the impact of participation in place-based heritage activities on community wellbeing, an aspect of wellbeing that has, in the context of heritage, been less closely studied than personal wellbeing. Brief contextualisation of the present focus on the social value of heritage, as advocated by the 2005 Faro Convention, and an outline of the concept of community wellbeing are followed by reviews of two pieces of recent interdisciplinary research led by the University of Lincoln, considering the insights they offer into the impact of heritage participation on community wellbeing. In the first, nearly half the 19 categories identified as associating UK heritage participation with wellbeing are seen to relate directly to identified conditions for community wellbeing. In the second, the conditions shown by a quantitative experimental psychology study testing for (and finding) a causal relationship between heritage participation and wellbeing in the Netherlands and UK are also seen to relate closely to the conditions for community wellbeing; while later post-participation interviews showed that many of the emotional impacts also related closely to these underpinning conditions. Finally, we note the lack of substantive political interest in evidence demonstrating the capacity of heritage to support major agendas such as health and communities, and the contrastingly energetic use made of the emotional appeal of heritage by right-wing populists, which often seek to divide communities rather than bring them together. We identify four priorities for the future, including further advancing understanding of the impact of heritage participation on different communities, raising awareness of its positive impact, and a achieving step change in the numbers of programmes delivering this impact.

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Introduction

Heritage is a crucial part of human collective memory and experience and an important resource for historical and scientific study. The objects, places and practices of heritage are often seen as entities that make demands on society today through their need for protection. Certainly, they are often at risk, as recognised in the *European Convention on the Protection of the Archaeological Heritage* signed in Valletta in 1992,[1] which aimed to protect Europe's archaeological heritage from threats such as construction, natural disasters and illicit excavation. Forty-six European countries have ratified this treaty,[2] making it almost universally recognised in heritage protection legislation across Europe. But in 2004, a focus on the value of heritage, foregrounding its importance for people, including in relation to human rights and democracy, lay at the heart of the *Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society* signed in Faro.[3] This included four key principles: everyone has the right to benefit from cultural heritage and contribute to its enrichment; communities should actively participate in heritage preservation and management; heritage should be sustainably integrated into everyday life; digital technology should enhance access to and preservation of cultural heritage.

The Faro Convention has been signed by 30 European countries, and while it remains (to date) less widely adopted than the Valletta Treaty, much progress has been made since 2005 in connecting people in Europe more closely with heritage, including through large numbers of initiatives in the UK.[4] This activity has delivered a considerable volume of evidence for the social benefits of heritage, although its value remains most easily (and therefore most often) measured in financial terms, such as through the stimulus heritage gives to tourism. But not all trends in the perceptions and use of heritage have been positive: as "heritage practices intersect with political-economic networks and ideology",[5] the emotional power of heritage has been exploited for negative purposes,[6] including in support of extremist populist, nationalist and racist ideologies.[7]

Overall, the notion of heritage as something that confers a positive, social benefit beyond the purely financial remains less widely recognised than it should be. This paper presents recent research into the relationship between heritage participation and wellbeing, focussing on community wellbeing. Picking up on Georgina Holmes-Skelton's 2019 discussion of the need for clearer definitions and roles for heritage in public policy,[8] the insights from recent research discussed in this paper invite consideration of how wider recognition of the positive impacts of heritage participation on communities could increase the capacity of heritage to deliver such benefits, and reduce its capacity to harm.

Defining Personal and Community Wellbeing

Personal wellbeing is an elusive concept with more than 180 measures identified, but broadly concerns how good we feel about our lives. Ten broad dimensions of wellbeing include the natural environment, personal wellbeing, relationships, health, what we do, where we live, our financial situation, the economy, education/skills and governance.[9] A considerable amount of work has been carried out around the impact of heritage (including heritage participation) on personal wellbeing;[10] this will not be reviewed in any more detail in this short paper focused on community wellbeing, which has hitherto received less attention.

Community wellbeing can refer to "living well together at a community scale" and/or to "the role of community-scale aspects of living on individual wellbeing".[11] It is about how well-connected and well-resourced communities are, with dimensions including interpersonal relationships, social cohesion, social inclusion, social capital and community resilience.[12] Community wellbeing is affected by a "combination of social, economic, environmental, cultural, and political conditions identified by individuals and their communities as essential for them to flourish and fulfil their potential".[13]

In brief summary, five key factors underpin and impact community wellbeing.[14] First, relationships with people, that provide social support – through friends, neighbours, membership of organisations; and formal support through services and facilities.[15] Second, relationships with place, that provide emotional attachments such as belonging, memories, cultural heritage, aesthetics, employment, education, transport, housing, leisure, shops, security and sustainability.[16] Third, relationships with power – relating to political voice and participation, inclusion, inequalities of access to local resources and opportunities, a sense of collective control and influence.[17] Fourth, a balance between hedonic (enjoyment-related) and eudaimonic (purpose-related) wellbeing, both of which are required for an acceptable and adaptive level of wellbeing.[18] Fifth, the capacity for intergenerational transmission of meanings, values

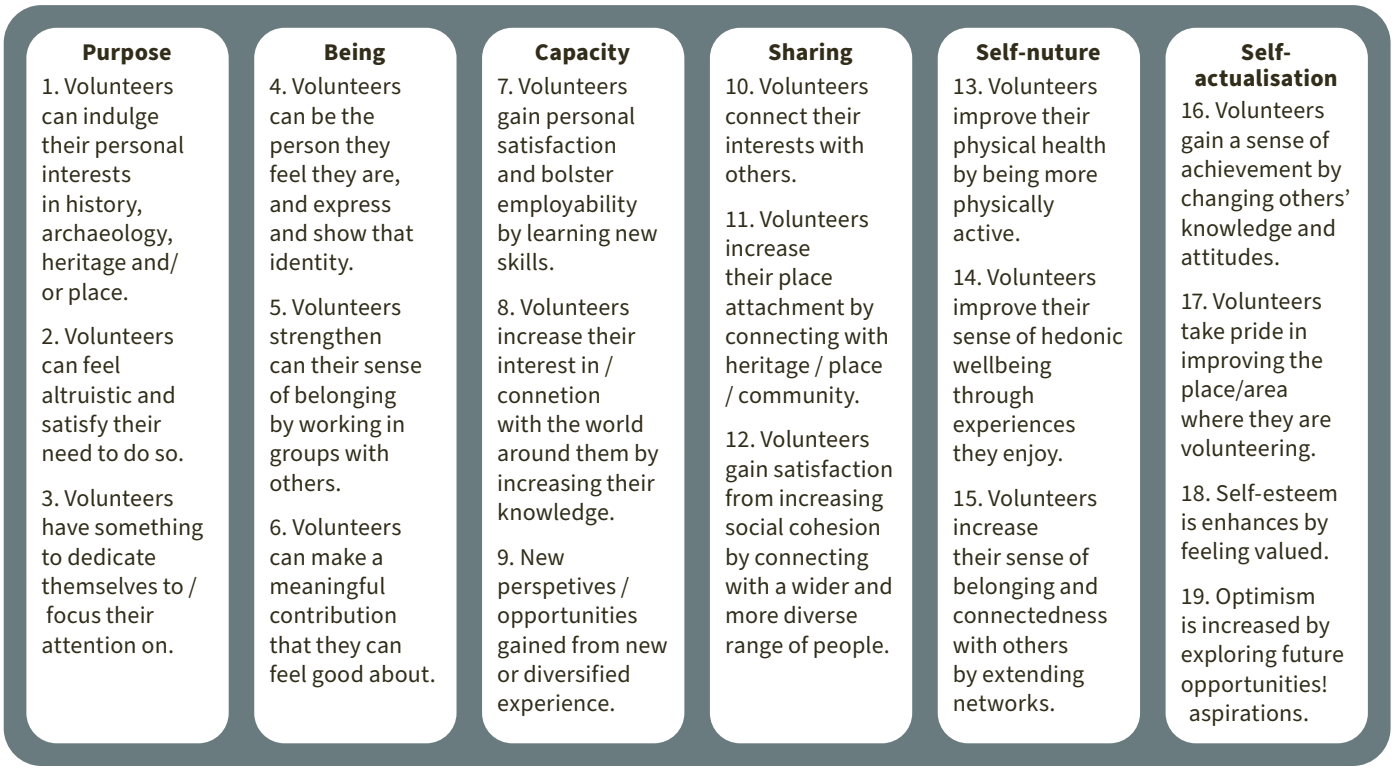


Fig. 1: Visual summary of the 19 categories of comments identified in the 2020–21 HARAW (Heritage at Risk and Wellbeing) analysis, which showed participation in heritage conservation activities to be associated with wellbeing (grouped by the researchers into six overarching themes). Categories highlighted in white are those closely related to conditions underpinning community wellbeing.

and relations, which are part of how communities form their identity.[19]

The following sections review two recent research projects that have shown some of the ways in which heritage can support community wellbeing.

1. *Heritage at Risk and Wellbeing*

In 2020–21 *the Heritage at Risk and Wellbeing* (HARAW) project[20] was funded by *Historic England* (the government agency responsible for heritage policy in England) to investigate the associations between volunteering on heritage sites and wellbeing. The research involved thematic analyses of an 80,000-word transcript of in-depth post-participation interviews with 35 adults who had volunteered on activities funded to support heritage sites previously deemed to be 'at risk'. Importantly, the primary purpose of this funding was to improve the condition of the heritage assets, thus it responded to the 'protection' aims of the Valletta Treaty rather than the 'connection' aims of the Faro Convention.[21]

HARAW analysis clearly showed that participation in these activities also benefitted wellbeing, in a range of ways defined by 19 categories grouped into six themes (Fig. 1). Much of the wellbeing association related to personal wellbeing, but here we can look at the categories for their relevance to community wellbeing. This shows that nine of the 19 categories (highlighted in white in Fig. 1) related to aspects of community wellbeing, include numbers 5 *(Volunteers strengthen their sense of belonging by working in groups with others);* 8 *(Volunteers increase their interest in / connection with the world around them by increasing their knowledge);* 10 *(Volunteers connect their interests with others);* 11 *(Volunteers increase their place attachment by connecting with heritage / place / community);* 12 *(Volunteers gain satisfaction from increasing social cohesion by connecting with a wider and more diverse range of people);* 14 *(Volunteers improve their sense of hedonic wellbeing through experiences they enjoy);* 15 *(Volunteers increase their sense of belonging and connectedness with others by extending networks);* 16 *(Volunteers gain a sense of achievement by changing others' knowledge and attitudes) and* 17 *(Volunteers take pride in improving the place/area where they are volunteering).* We see a clear link between these and the relationships with people, place and power that have been identified as vital factors in community wellbeing, as well as their capacity to support intergenerational transmission of meanings, values and relations.

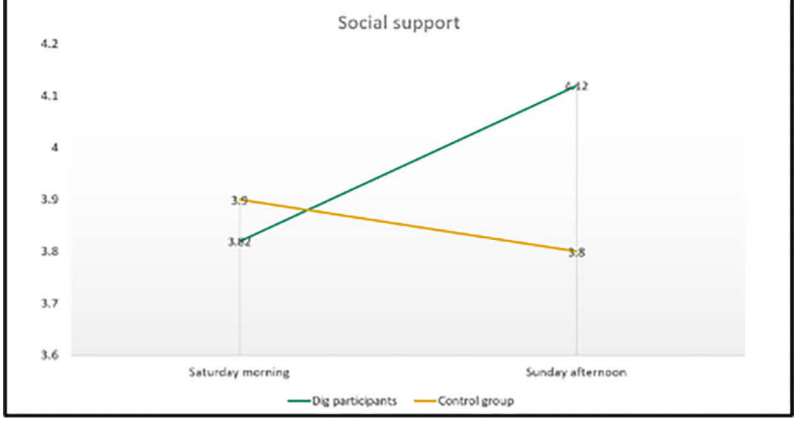
The HARAW research also explored whether – and if so, how – heritage volunteering benefits wellbeing in ways that other forms of volunteering may not.[22] This showed the 'special' power of *heritage* activities for wellbeing lies in the force-multiplying interaction of eight cross-cutting characteristics (Temporality, Discovery, Authenticity, Continuity, Rescue, Nostalgia, Transformation and Legacy), many or all of which are typically offered together in heritage activities. In considering here their likely impact on community wellbeing, we see that Authenticity, Continuity, Rescuing, Nostalgia, Transformation and Legacy relate closely to conditions for community wellbeing. Under Authenticity, for example, the positive impact on empathy and attachment from feeling connected to irreplaceable tangible remains from the past can strengthen relationships between people and place.[23] Under Rescuing and Transformation, relationships with power (that includes political voice and a sense of collective control and influence) are offered by opportunities to experience success over adversity, reassurance that change over time is possible and satisfaction in helping achieve change.[24] Under Nostalgia, connecting with lost pasts increases connectedness, continuity, belonging and empathy (supporting social cohesion, social inclusion and intergenerational transmission).[25] In seeing close links between these affects and conditions underpinning community wellbeing, we can note that characteristics such as Nostalgia and Authenticity are among those most often manipulated when the power of heritage is instrumentalised for malign purposes.

2. *Community Archaeology in Rural Environments Meeting Societal Challenges* (2019–22)

Community Archaeology in Rural Environments Meeting Societal Challenges (CARE) was funded by the EU's Horizon 2020 programme to investigate the benefits of community archaeology in four different European communities with very different political histories (Czech Republic, Netherlands, Poland and UK). Two strands of this research are particularly relevant to the discussion of how heritage participation affects community wellbeing.

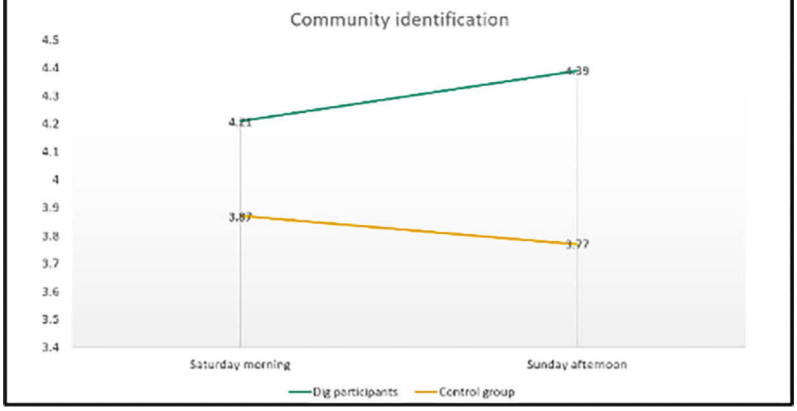
The first was a quantitative study conducted in 2019 in the Netherlands and UK (unfortunately prevented from being extended to the Czech Republic and Poland by the COVID-19 pandemic). This used methods from psychology to conduct an experimental study of the impact on rural residents of participation in archaeological excavations within their own villages.[26] Surveys were completed by excavation participants at two time points, and also by control groups (of local residents *not* participating in the excavations, matched for geographical area, demographic composition and socio-economic status), who completed the surveys at the same times. The surveys comprised 32 statements (validated by previ-

Excavation participants reported significantly higher **social support** (how supportive people feel their community is) at time 2 than at time 1, while there was no significant change in the control group for this condition.



Excavation participants reported a significant rise in **life satisfaction** (how pleased people feel about their lives) at time 2 compared to time 1, while there was no significant change over time in the control group.

Participants in the excavation group showed an increase in **community identification** (how closely people feel they belong in their community) between time 1 and 2, while there was no significant change in the control group.



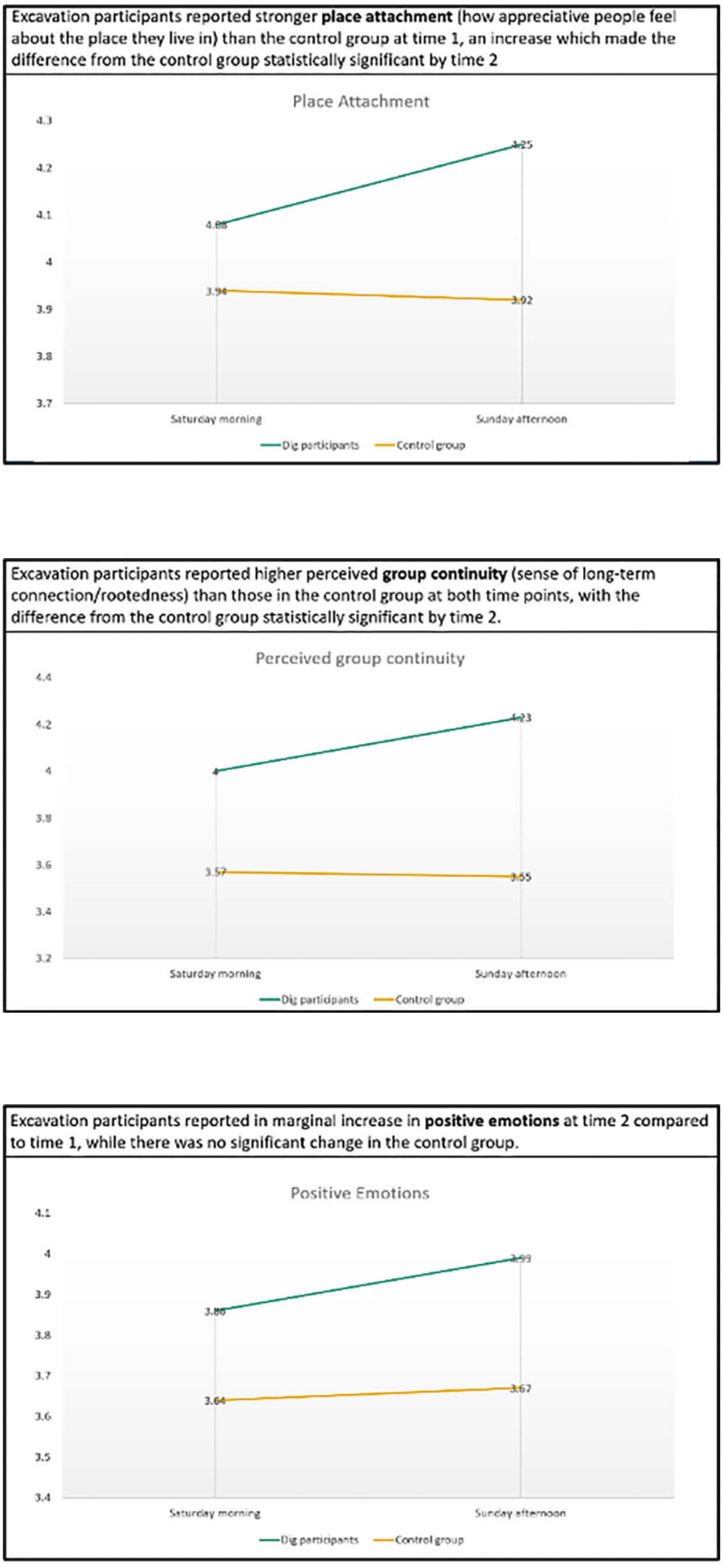


Fig. 2: Graphs showing responses to the 2019 CARE quantitative survey by psychologists before and after archaeological excavations carried out by local residents within their own villages in the Netherlands and UK for six conditions. Graphs show totalled responses for excavation participants (in green) and the non-participant control group (in yellow).

ous studies, mostly in the field of Social Identity Theory) asking for Likert-style responses grading agreement/disagreement on a 5-point scale immediately before and after the excavation activities (morning of day 1 and afternoon of day 2).

Comparing responses before and after participation showed positive changes among participants that were not observed in the control group (Fig. 2); therefore, the changes could be ascribed to the experience of participation in the heritage activity. The psychological conditions where this was evident included social support (how supportive people feel their community is), life satisfaction (how pleased people feel about their lives), community identification (how closely people feel they belong in their community), place attachment (how appreciative people feel about the place they live in), group continuity (sense of long-term connection/rootedness), community esteem and a range of emotions. We can see these conditions relate directly to key factors that underpin community wellbeing relating as they do to interpersonal relationships, social cohesion and social inclusion. These include "relationships with people, that provide social support" and "relationships with place that provide emotional attachments". This link becomes even more apparent when we look at a sample of the statements used in the survey (Fig. 3).[27]

The 2019 study was particularly important as it was the first to use a control group in the context of a heritage study, which enabled it to show a causal link between action and effect. Previously, although studies collecting "quantitative evidence using randomly selected groups and a control group, are often considered the 'gold standard' in the medical and scientific professions […] The cultural sector, however, generally uses smaller sample sizes and qualitative evidence, meaning that credibility and impact can be harder to prove […]".[28]

Having demonstrated the causal link using quantitative methods, in 2022 the CARE team returned to one of the UK communities to conduct in-depth interviews with a new cohort of participants (carrying out the same activity as in 2019), in order to collect qualitative data on participants' experience. Coding the 52,000-word interview transcript, using codes based on the 2019 survey statements, gave a more nuanced insight into how and why the local, place-based heritage activities undertaken by CARE volunteers impact positively on community wellbeing. Coded comments show vividly how the emotional lived experience of heritage participation

Theme	Statement (2019 psychology survey)
Community identification	I see myself as being part of my local community
	I am pleased to be part of my local community
	I feel strong ties with people in my local community
	I can identify with people in my local community.
Social Support	People within my local community really try to help each other out.
	I have friends in my local community who I can share my joys & sorrows with
	If I need help or support with anything, I know I can rely on members of my local community
	There are members of my local community who are a real comfort to me
Continuity past present future	Being a member of my local community gives me a sense of continuity between past, present, future
	Being a member of my local community gives me a feeling of being connected with the past.
	Being a member of my local community gives me the feeling that I am part of a long tradition & history
Community esteem	I feel that my local community is worthy
	My local community does not have much to be proud of
	On the whole I am satisfied with my local community
	I feel that my local community has a number of good qualities
	I take a positive attitude toward my local community
Place attachment	I feel that the place I live in (my village, town or neighbourhood) is a part of me.
	The place I live in is very special to me.
	I identify strongly with the place I live in.
	I am very attached to the place I live in.
	The place I live in means a lot to me

Fig. 3: The statements used in the summary of the 2019 CARE quantitative survey (abbreviated).

related to conditions underpinning community wellbeing, including relationships with people (which includes "social support through friends, neighbours", etc), relationships with place (including emotional attachments such as belonging, memories and cultural heritage) and relationships with power (relating to participation, inclusion, opportunities and also collective control and influence), and offers a combination of hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing alongside opportunities for intergenerational transmission of meanings, values and relations.[29]

Discussion

In the studies discussed here, we see evidence, using qualitative and quantitative methodologies, that heritage participation supports community wellbeing in a range of specific, identifiable ways, whose causal connection has been measured quantitatively and whose emotional impact has been captured qualitatively. In both studies reviewed above, heritage processes operate as bottom-up, participatory activities, delivered in collaboration with local community groups in ways that strengthen communities by bringing people together, strengthening perceptions of trust and belonging, and increasing community esteem and place attachment. We see heritage participation contributing to both aspects of community wellbeing (*"living well together at a community scale"* and *"the role of community-scale aspects of living on individual wellbeing"*[30]) and to nurturing community wellbeing by harnessing the strong emotional appeal of the past in ways that bring people together.

We might expect that evidence of this sort – showing how heritage is able to benefit society in ways that can contribute positively to major policy issues such as mental health and social cohesion – would be of great interest to politicians and policymakers. However, while national heritage agencies in some countries have developed wellbeing strategies,[31] such interest is not yet widely seen. In the 2024 European Parliament elections, for example, the *European Association of Archaeologists* compiled a list of benchmarks for archaeology and heritage protection, comprising the five most pressing topics that fall within the remit of the European Parliament.[32] None of these related to the role of heritage as a social benefit – but in any case, only three of the seven political parties provided any response. Perhaps the heritage sector is not making the case sufficiently effectively – but neither does the political sphere demonstrate great interest in listening.

This lack of political interest and awareness is regrettable, because viewing heritage as a 'public good' that increases community wellbeing and social cohesion offers a potentially valuable counter to the divisive uses of heritage favoured by right-wing populists who, as Laurajane Smith has noted, use "revisionist, mythologized, or overly selective histories that avoid ambiguity and emphasize the positive, heroic, and patriotic or nationalistic pride [...] [to][…] manage present-day emotions or affective states."[33] Smith notes "There are lessons to be learnt by the left in analysing how particular emotions, specifically nostalgia, are used, which can facilitate the development of ways

to challenge right-wing populism".[34] The studies discussed in this paper certainly show that heritage has high 'emotional valence' that can impact strongly on people's feelings. However by showing the positive impacts of place-based heritage participation on communities as well as individuals, the studies discussed here offer one way in which heritage could contribute to such lessons – based not on what society can do for heritage, but on what heritage can do for society.[35]

Conclusion

This review of recent research into heritage participation has considered its impact on community wellbeing and noted the disconnect between emerging evidence and wider political interest. With wider reference to the themes explored in the 2024 AKTLD conference, we can identify some priorities for the future. Firstly, we need to advance understanding of the impact of heritage participation on communities, civil society and citizenship. Secondly, we need to advance transnational understanding of the impact of different social and political histories on the capacity of community groups, charities and governmental authorities at all scales to offer heritage participation as a socially beneficial process. Thirdly, we need to widen awareness of the ways in which heritage participation benefits communities. Fourthly, we need to use this knowledge, understanding and awareness to ensure that, in the future, ever more communities benefit from the impacts of heritage participation.

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