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Exploring constraints to leisure participation within the countryside

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ABSTRACT

The health and well-being benefits of accessing occupations in natural outdoor environments are well evidenced. However, not everyone has access to these spaces and constraints to leisure participation within rural spaces have been relatively unexplored. This study explored the everyday lives of participants of the Mass Observation Project archive to identify constraints to occupational participation within the countryside in the United Kingdom. Thematic analysis was used to interpret data from two collections; one that focused on 'The Countryside' (Winter 2013) and another on 'Identity and Environment' within 'Loneliness and Belonging' (Spring 2019). The study found that social norms, infrastructure, health issues, personal preferences, and a lack of shared experiences all affected participation in occupations. These constraints often corresponded with a disengagement from desired occupational participation. Findings have implications for occupational science in relation to understanding constraints to meaningful participation. There is need for further research around the impact of belonging and meaning on occupational participation and engagement within rural spaces within diverse population groups, particularly in terms of age, socioeconomic resources, and ethnicity.

There is a considerable body of evidence which supports the positive impact of nature on health and well-being. For instance, the beneficial physical aspects of walking and general positive health outcomes from the activity are well documented (Ungvari et al., 2023) and the combination of walking in nature has been shown to be more beneficial than exercise or views of nature alone (Olafsdottir et al., 2020). Recreational walking is associated with social connectedness, a general sense of well-being (Finnie et al., 2017; Wensley & Slade, 2012), and a feeling of alignment with nature (Wylie, 2005). Furthermore, the benefits of leisure-focused group interventions such as walking groups (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence [NICE], 2015), outdoor physical pursuits (Coventry et al., 2021; Leavell et al., 2019; NICE, 2018a, 2018b, 2019), and outdoor play (Fahy et al., 2021) are important. The current focus on respite from distressing lives offered by nature-based occupations (Ekstam et al., 2021) is timely, and is undoubtedly an important area for occupational scientists to explore.

Comparative research on the health benefits of spending time in green, as opposed to urban, environments has provided substantial evidence in favour of green space (Barton

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et al., 2016; Wicks et al., 2022). However, navigating the countryside is not always easy and not everyone has equal access to these benefits (Finnie et al., 2017). Having sufficient access to culturally meaningful occupations that support health and well-being has been framed as a fundamental occupational right (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). It is, therefore, important to examine health-threatening risks and barriers to participation. The concept of occupational injustice (Stadnyk et al., 2013; Townsend, 2012) is useful as it provides a framework for understanding underlying structural determinants and contextual factors that constrain leisure participation. Understanding these constraints will help to challenge injustices, encourage meaningful occupational participation, and support the application of occupational science to overcome actual and potential barriers to engagement in nature-based occupations.

The aim of this study was to identify and examine constraints to leisure participation in the United Kingdom (UK) countryside, experienced by participants of the Mass Observation Project (hereon referred to as the MOP). The MOP is a social research project which aims to document the lives and opinions of people living in Great Britain. It is performed by an ongoing panel of volunteer participants who write and respond to questionnaires, known as 'directives'. The goal was to generate insights into the familiar, and more nuanced and complex, obstacles faced when attempting to navigate rural spaces and how these relate to broader occupational science understandings, particularly the concept of occupational participation (Stadnyk et al., 2013).

Constraints to Occupational Participation in Rural UK

Academic databases, including JSTOR, PubMed, and ProQuest, were searched for current literature related to constraints in accessing the UK countryside. Within leisure studies, a hierarchical model of leisure constraints (Crawford et al., 1991) is often used to categorise barriers to leisure participation as interpersonal, intrapersonal, or structural (Currie et al., 2021; Dorwart et al., 2019; Ghimere et al., 2014; Kyle & Jun, 2015). While somewhat helpful, this categorisation allows for little acknowledgement of the intersectional relationship between

constraints (Wiseman, 2021). Hence, Godbey et al. (2010) advised researchers to look beyond rigid classification and investigate underlying causes. Occupational scientists have also tended to neglect societal and environmental constraints to occupational participation (Smith, 2023). The Framework of Occupational Justice (FOJ) (Stadnyk et al., 2013; Townsend, 2012), however, can assist in understanding the interaction between broad structural and intrinsic contextual factors which could lead to occupational injustice. Nonetheless, the FOJ is susceptible to the same risks as the leisure constraints model. Benjamin-Thomas and Laliberte Rudman (2018) noted that it is common for studies using the FOJ to over-individualise experiences, leading to a lack of understanding of the systemic forces which drive them. Responding to this critique, while the current study focused on individual narratives and experiences, it included a wider appreciation of the social mechanisms which perpetuate them, recognising that many constraints cannot be categorised definitively within the subsections of a framework.

Beyond these theoretical approaches, there is a scarcity of empirical studies about everyday occupations in outdoor spaces. Within the available literature, there is a focus upon populations involved in specified organised sports, gardening, or holidays (Wiseman, 2021). One of the key themes within research on leisure constraints is the importance of belonging; an occupational right within the FOJ (Stadnyk et al., 2013; Townsend, 2012). Belonging helps to construct the relational and collective self (Nerlich et al., 2019), without which participation lacks motivation and meaning. Absence of belonging can prevent participation and promote exclusion. For example, Caudwell (2011) found that a culture of exclusive masculinity and homophobia within men's football prevented many from participating meaningfully or authentically for fear of judgement. Belonging and representation of diversity within rural spaces is crucial to participation, especially so in communities where the countryside is considered a monocultural white space (Askins, 2009). DEFRA's (2019) 'Landscapes Review' report acknowledged that those who miss out on rural visiting are "the older, the young … those from lower socio-economic groups and black, Asian and minority

ethnic communities" (p. 68). White British people are most represented within rural areas, accounting for 96.8% of the total national rural population (DEFRA, 2021).

The feeling of otherness within typically white, middle-class spaces can be a barrier for non-white or working-class individuals to participate in occupation in the countryside (Askins, 2009; Schwartz & Roberton-Corkery, 2011). Public Health England's (2020) 'Improving access to green space' review acknowledged that the poorest areas have the least available green space. It also suggested 'green gentrification' to be a potential risk of improvement to green space in these areas, changing the social environment and displacing long-term residents. In England, there is a clear infrastructural separation between private and public countryside access. While rural areas cover around 90% of English soil (Scott, 2020), the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (2000) only allows the general public the right to roam around 8% of these areas.

Familiarity is also influential. While individuals who grew up in the countryside are encouraged to engage with nature from an early age (Izenstark & Middaugh, 2022), many people feel more at home in urban environments. Outdoor spaces can represent risk, fear, and exclusion (Bustam et al., 2011; Dorwart et al., 2019; Schwartz & Roberton-Corkery, 2011). Additionally, there are existing concerns about the urbanisation and virtualisation of society and how this might impact upon the psycho-emotional wellbeing, health, and socialisation of the population (Algado, 2023). Poor health can be a significant barrier to participation (Curtin et al., 2016). Indeed, pain, fatigue, and reduced ability are very real constraints for many people. However, poor health is often considered an individual impairment rather than a societal issue, wherein institutions have the power to enable access (Oliver, 2013). In addition, rural sites are often only accessible via car (Dahan-Oliel et al., 2010), with older adults and people with disabilities most likely to be affected by the increasing lack of public transport (Lucas et al., 2019).

Methodology

This research employed an interpretivist epistemology which acknowledges that qualitative research can never completely eradicate subjective positionality. Recognition of the researchers' own social markers is an important part of declaring subjective positionality and bias (Rose & Johnson, 2020). The first author, a young white British woman from rural West Midlands, has a personal interest in this subject. Having access to the countryside from a young age emboldened them to navigate risk independently, giving them a foundation of eco-literacy. They have also directly experienced 'otherness'. Speaking, acting, or dressing differently to others has, at times, prevented them from accessing certain spaces. It is also important to acknowledge the positionality of the co-authors, both of whom are white, securely employed, and with certain socio-economic privileges. Many of the study participants mirrored the characteristics of the research team, particularly in terms of ethnicity, but there was variation in terms of socio-economic status and employment.

Method
Design

The data in this research were selected from the MOP and explore lived experience of barriers to engaging in leisure occupations in the UK countryside. The archive is based at The Keep in East Sussex and has a panel of around 500 participants, responding at any time. Three times a year a questionnaire, known as a 'directive', is posted to the participants asking for their opinions and experiences based on 2 to 4 different themes. These themes are diverse in nature and can be based on current events, emotive themes, or seemingly random areas of specific interest. Topics, therefore, range vastly in content from 'The death of Diana' to 'Milk usage' to 'Violence in the home' (Mass Observation, 2022a), and questions asked of the participants vary accordingly. The database is accessible to the public after creating an account with The Keep. Two of the authors have previous experience using the archive for research purposes. Responses are sent to the archivists in the form of printed emails or handwritten letters. The original responses are then stored for researchers to access and read, adding a layer of tangibility to the research experience.

The data reviewed in this study were generated by two directives: 'The Countryside (Winter 2013)' and the subsection 'Identity and Environment' within 'Loneliness and Belonging (Spring 2019)' (Mass Observation, 2022a). These two directives avoided the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, when engagement with nature became policed in the UK, with surveillance adding a further complication to an already complex occupation.

MOP questions tend to be open and invite participants to respond in a personal way. In 'The Countryside (Winter 2013)' participants were asked a range of open questions about their interactions with the countryside such as: What does the term 'countryside' mean to you?, Do you think the countryside has changed since your earliest memory?, How often do you visit the countryside or other rural areas?, and If you don't enjoy visiting rural areas, please write about why you feel this way.

In relation to the impact of identity on social experiences, the 'Identity and environment' subsection of the Spring 2019 directive asked participants: Do you feel like any specific aspects of your identity and experience (e.g., gender, age, sexuality, class, race, disability, or history) play a role in how you have connected with others and how comfortable you feel socially?, and How about your circumstances – the city, town, village, area, or type of housing you live in, your access to council services and 'natural spaces' – such as woods, fields, parks, beaches?

Data collection

The first author visited the archive to review participant responses to each of the directives. Responses were read through carefully to ensure that participants had answered the correct directive questions. An incomplete or insufficient response was the only exclusion criteria. All ages, regions of residence, and genders were included to avoid ageism, gendered, or regional interpretation of the data.

All MOP participants have consented to their responses being within the public domain, but the researcher still has an ethical responsibility to accurately represent and interpret these narratives (McKee & Porter, 2012). Participants are asked to respond under their assigned MOP code. Responses are then screened by archivists for identifying details to ensure anonymity; however, due to the sheer mass of MOP data, and allowing for human error, these can be missed. It is the researcher's responsibility to protect confidentiality and screen for identifiable data. Study approval was obtained from the University of Brighton ethics panel (ref: 2022-11298-Harris), after which the participant directive responses were scanned page-by-page and stored onto a secure OneDrive account.

Combined, the two directives resulted in a total data set of 66 responses and 123 pages of transcribed data. Thirty-three participants were identified. The data from four participants were excluded from the final data analysis due to a lack of relevant content.

Data analysis

A risk of archival research is envelopment within the sensory experience of its materiality and the potential for deviating from objective analysis (Moor & Uprichard, 2014; Wiseman, 2021). Moor and Uprichard (2014) noted that researchers cannot fully separate themselves from the materiality of archival research. Elements like handwriting and paper choice are humanising. They can give the researcher an idea of the participant beyond their choice of words, slightly shifting the degree of separation between the two. What is important is that this materiality is not used to infer responses which are not stated by the participants themselves or used to make a moral judgement on their character. One particular response, for example, as noted within the first author's reflective diary entry (21.12.22), was 'written over pieces of paper of different sizes with hard to decipher handwriting and cryptic sketches'. A quirk of personality was identified, which made the participant more personally relatable to the researcher. They were, therefore, careful not to make inferences or value judgements about the participant or their responses.

Critical reflexivity was important throughout the research process to monitor, explore, and recognise researcher bias or preconceived judgements (Bolton, 2014). The first author kept a reflective journal and utilised regular supervision with the co-authors to recognise bias,

privilege, and how personal factors could impact research. Opinions on polarising topics, such as badger culling, did not necessarily align with those of the authors. These incidences were noted in the primary author's reflexive diary in order avoid judgements or assumptions based on differing values: "It's very hard to stay unbiased when social issues or political opinions are expressed in these responses … I don't agree with her but that is her opinion and I have to avoid my own views seeping in" (Reflective diary entry, 28.12.22).

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six step process of thematic analysis was used as a framework for analysis of the data.

1. Familiarisation with the data: Responses were read through at the archive and after the data were scanned and ready for transcription.
2. Initial coding: Interesting ideas were coded while transcribing the participants' responses onto a unified formatted document. Sections of data relevant to leisure constraints were highlighted and added to a separate coded document.
3. Themes are sought: Codes were collated into potential themes using NVivo software. A long list of potential themes resulted, with the corresponding data collated underneath.
4. Themes are reviewed/refined: The potential themes were refined and collated using a visual map to view the themes in relation to each other. Theme titles were drafted.
5. Themes are named: Ongoing analysis and refinement of the themes was performed before and during the writing of the final presentation of the findings and participant quotations were added.
6. The data are reported upon: Final analysis and presentation of findings included identification of key extracts to represent the themes, along with relevant quotations presented within the findings of the study.

Due to the anonymity of MOP participants, returning a provisional analysis to them was not an option. Upon publication, the study will become publicly available and, given that each participant has a unique number, known only to themselves and the archive, it will be possible for them to access anything written about them. This is one mechanism for increasing the rigour and accountability of the current study.

Participants

Table 1 introduces the participants, using pseudonyms generated by the first author, followed by their basic demographic information including occupation, in the participants' own words, to give them agency over their identity (Wiseman, 2021). Any omitted information was obtained from the MOP database and is presented within brackets. Of the 29 participants, 22 were female. The youngest was Will, a 23-year-old male and the oldest age given was Judith, at 87 years old. Most had semi-professional jobs.

Findings

The five themes generated during analysis were: 1. Relationship with the outdoors; 2. Lack of belonging; 3. Prevention of access to the countryside; 4. Urbanisation of the countryside; 5. "For the tired and retired". These are presented in Table 2, alongside their sub-themes.

Relationship with the outdoors

Preference is highly subjective and dependent on social, cultural, environmental, and personal factors. Some participants disliked the rain and mud, while others found the countryside boring and unstimulating. In other instances, a general lethargy and indifference was identified as the constraint to engaging with the countryside.

City mouse/country mouse

I don't like being cold or covered in mud and I don't see the point of going to beautiful areas and never seeing the scenery because you're looking at your feet all the time to avoid rocks, mud, or dog droppings. (Wendy)

As in Wendy's experience, a lack of interest in the outdoors is often due to a dislike of being "*cold, wet, uncomfortable, dirty*" (Dawn). Winifred associated the countryside with "*muddy fields, rough tracks, brambles and blackberry picking views of green hills and valleys, slow*

Table 1. Participant Demographics (n = 29)

Pseudonym	MOP Code	Gender	Age	Region	Occupation
Betty	B1180	Female	(born 1930s)	South Coast	Retired clerk
Barbara	B1771	Female	83	Surrey	Retired secretary
Brian	B3227	Male	52	Birmingham	Administrator for religious studies centre
Brenda	B4290	Female	48	West Suffolk	Education and administration
Dorothy	D2485	Female	76	Bristol	Retired secretary of 40 years
Dawn	D5380	Female	49	(Yorkshire)	Civil servant
Frances	F218	Female	72	Suffolk	Mum to two sons
Freda	F3409	Female	71	East Midlands	Civil servant & deputy registrar of births, deaths, and marriages. Now retired
Frank	F4873	Male	(born 1960s)	(Southwest)	IT consultant
Helen	H1705	Female	65	Jersey	Amateur artist
Holly	H1745	Female	68	London	Researcher/writer/editor
Hazel	H2637	Female	79	London	Retired librarian
Judith	J1809	Female	87	(Yorkshire)	News agency assistant
Janet	J2891	Female	54	(Wales)	Caseworker & county councillor
Keith	K5262	Male	50	(Cheshire)	Railway signalling designer
Mark	M5015	Male	63	Cambridgeshire	Retired property landlord
Mary	M5113	Female	(born 1970s)	Pennines	(unknown)
Patricia	P1796	Female	72	Dorset	Retired administrator
Rose	R860	Female	71	(Cheshire)	Retired hairdressing lecturer
Ruth	R1025	Female	76	(Buckinghamshire)	Formerly book-keeper
Sharon	S1399	Female	70	(Southeast)	No job
Teresa	T534	Female	67	Kent	Carer for late mother & family
Tom	T5025	Male	33	Oxfordshire	Copywriting
Vernon	V3767	Male	81	Cambridgeshire	Retired from managing my own company
Valerie	V3773	Female	56	(West Midlands)	NHS clinical coder, ex-book seller, psychology graduate
Wendy	W1813	Female	68	Staffordshire	Retired teacher
Wilma	W2338	Female	86	York	Retired teacher
Will	W5345	Male	23	West Midlands	Archivist
Winifred	W632	Female	77	West Sussex	Retired business analyst

tractors. I hate it". Holly was also "*worried about getting muddy*".

For Brian, his dislike of the countryside stemmed from "*family walks on Sunday afternoons*" across muddy fields. His "*chief memory of these is boredom*". Teresa described a similar childhood experience, being on a family

Table 2. Themes and Sub-themes

Themes	Sub-themes
Relationship with the outdoors	City mouse/country mouse
	Indifference towards the countryside
Lack of belonging	The countryside code
	Lack of shared common experience
Prevention of access to the countryside	Lack of access to and maintenance of public rights of way
	Lack of public transport
Urbanisation of the countryside	Building on rural space
	Overcrowding of public spaces
"For the tired and retired"	

member's farm as a teenager, "*All I remember is lots of mud + muck everywhere. It wasn't very nice. It smelt awful + I fell over + got covered in mud. For that reason I don't like it*".

Some participants preferred the safety and comfort of an urban environment, such as a family friend of Betty who "*cried + clung to me until we reached the safety of roads + houses*". In Brenda's opinion, it is natural to have a difference in preference. "*There are those suited to urban life and those suited to country life: the old City Mouse / Country Mouse phenomenon*". Dawn described herself as a "*natural born town dweller*" and Freda can "*sometimes hanker after something a bit livelier*" – both seemingly agreeing with Brenda's theory that one is naturally more suited towards either rural or urban life.

Indifference towards the countryside

A feeling of "*lethargy*" (Valerie) captured participants' indifference towards the outdoors,

with Dawn commenting, "*I just don't get it*". For Winifred, the countryside was "*mainly something to get through to get to somewhere else*". Similarly, Vernon described his encounters with rural spaces as "*mainly incidental to our everyday activities*". The countryside held no personally significant frame of reference; hence, participants were not motivated to spend time there. Holly described no particular reason why her and partner did not spend time in the countryside: "*For all our talk of getting out more, somehow we don't do it often enough … I don't really understand why, because we both love getting out and walking!*".

It can be challenging to identify our own constraints. It is even more difficult to admit that it could simply be a lack of drive that limits us from participating in occupations that, theoretically, we would like to engage in. It appears in Holly's case that it could be this absence of motivation which limits her engagement with the countryside.

Lack of belonging

Shared experiences, social support, and community can build the confidence, safety, and motivation needed to meaningfully participate in occupations. The two sub-themes demonstrate how a lack of companionship, shared behaviours, and social connection can be obstacles to accessing the countryside.

The countryside code

I hate the 'countryside code' that you have to say hello to other walkers … Well it's excruciating for someone like me. But you have to do it don't you? (Dawn)

The countryside code is a set of government statutory guidelines which aim to encourage environmental protection and respect for others in the countryside (Natural England, 2014). However, to some, it can feel more like unspoken etiquette that favours moral superiority over function. Dawn's 'countryside code' refers to a set of rules by which one must abide when visiting the countryside. "*But you have to do it*" implies that Dawn feels as though this code is not functional. She described hiking with her partner for the first time where she felt "*woefully*

unprepared" and judged for not descending a hill in the "*correct*" way.

For Holly and Brian, the discomfort of adhering to the code appeared to come from a polarisation between those who grew up in the countryside and those from a city, or "*townies*", as Holly referred to herself. Brian described how his father saw himself and his friends as "*townies who don't know how to behave in the countryside*". The responses do not suggest that this polarisation is rooted in class but in expectations of knowledge brought about by rural versus urban upbringings. Mary, who moved to a village after living in a town, stated she would "*never learn the rules of this place, that 'they' don't want people like me here*"; 'they' being the people from her village whom she feels judged by, stopping her from going to certain events. These responses echo the city mouse/country mouse polarisation. However, in these cases, the constraint is rooted in expectations of behaviour rather than a 'natural' inclination towards either a rural or urban environment.

Lack of shared common experience

I don't visit the countryside now because I have no reason to go out there + no one to go with. (Teresa)

Sharing experiences with others is an important part of belonging in the world. Without companionship, occupations can lack meaning. As Tom indicated, not having a friendship group who shared his interests prevented him from moving to the countryside: "*I wouldn't live in a city if I had my choice – only I have never been able to persuade any friends to move to the countryside*". For Teresa, not having anyone to go with is strong enough to override her desire to visit the countryside.

Freda and Valerie's partners do not enjoy rural space, which prevents them from going and shows the impact that a lack of company and shared experience can have, even when individual desire is strong.

My husband prefers a fast walk, too fast for me … I don't like going for a walk alone. (Freda)

Nowadays I don't visit the countryside as often as I'd like – in fact I hardly ever

visit it, even though it's just around the corner … my partner isn't a very keen walker. (Valerie)

For Helen, Hazel, and Judith, lack of connection took on a new meaning after losing their partners and they no longer felt able to visit the countryside as a result.

My husband and I used to walk quite a bit in the country. Consequently, I haven't done so much since he died. (Helen)

When my husband was alive we often went into Kent by car and had a walk. (Hazel)

When my husband started with cancer, we still carried on walking in the countryside … Now I have lost all that … it wouldn't be the same without him. (Judith)

The meaning of these spaces was transformed from companionship and shared experience to loss and grief. They lost the desire and motivation that once drove them to participate. With the loss of their partners came a transformation of their sense of belonging and meaning, resulting in alienation from those spaces.

Prevention of access to the countryside

This theme describes participants being physically prevented from accessing the countryside by a lack of accessible footpaths or public transport. The debate around who has the right to access parts of the countryside is clear within participant responses and continues the previous theme of belonging.

Lack of access to and maintenance of public rights of way

The Countryside and Right of Way (CRoW) Act (2000) gives the public the right to use a specified right of way and 'right to roam' on open access land without having to use rights of way. It is the local authority's responsibility, rather than the farmer's, to maintain rights of way. Confusion around legal responsibilities can lead to paths not being maintained, which physically restricts participation. In Wilma's experience, it is farmers who restrict this access, "*Footpaths are not being maintained. Farmers plough over the path and do not leave the*

route". Brenda has also "*come across landlords who have blocked off paths and access when there is no agricultural necessity*".

For Keith, farmland used to be more accessible in his childhood and there is now greater wariness around where he is allowed to go: "*I believe that there is a greater awareness of keeping people away from farms. Whereupon you might have crossed fields or called in at farmhouses, that sort of behaviour seems to be frowned upon now*". The phrase 'frowned upon' suggests that, for Keith, it is not just a physical restriction but another example of the countryside code encouraging etiquette over function. Ruth, however, believed that there should be a clear distinction between public and private land: "*I'm also not keen on 'the right to roam' … I don't see why it should be considered okay for everyone to wander over any piece of land that they feel like exploring*".

Lack of public transport

How can a small island such as Great Britain have not devised an appropriate mode of travel from Lands End to John 'O' Groats for the Great British public? (Barbara)

Areas where public transport is lacking are inaccessible for non-drivers like Hazel who "*can only get away from built-up areas when I go out with a friend who has a car*". Janet liked "*living near things we need*" and Valerie "*might consider moving to a large village*" if she had a car. Not having accessible transport forced them to move out of rural into urban areas with better infrastructure.

Wendy told the story of an older couple living in her village who had to move to a nearby city as they "*could no longer cope with village life as driving became an issue*". Helen was worried about the same situation happening to her: "*As I get older I would want to be on a bus route*". For participants who did not have access to a car, many rural spaces were too remote to access; preventing them from visiting, despite having a desire to do so.

Urbanisation of the countryside

While the previous theme reported a lack of infrastructure as a barrier, participant responses

highlighted an excessive increase in urbanisation and the resulting influx in population as the main issue preventing access to rural spaces.

Building on rural space

> Gone are the railway embankments filled with wild flowers … Gone too is the canal, swallowed up by a vast roundabout and the M4 route … Some of the woodland along with the field where my family sat on summer days making bows and arrows and then holding archery contests was destroyed to site a hotel and I curse it every time I pass. (Wendy).

The transformation of Wendy's childhood woodlands comes with a loss of meaning for what it once represented. Her descriptive account of the destruction of a childhood space echoed not just a loss of the environment but the meaning, memories, and nostalgia that came with it. Rose described a similar experience: "*I remember the tartan rug to sit on – and climbing over the gate, the heat and dry smell of the corn and earth, buzzing of bees and the butterflies. [This same field now has luxury houses on it]*".

A semantic theme of urban landscapes "*gradually encroaching*" (Valerie) on previously unspoilt rural areas is clear amongst responses, with visceral descriptions of the countryside echoing similar transformations in the meaning of space; familiar rural environments being "*built over*" (Hazel), "*swallowed up for development*" (Patricia) and "*infilling*" (Sharon), and "*covered in houses*" (Vernon). The personal becoming impersonal.

Other participants' responses on the change in environment were less emotional in tone and featured more objective observations on their changing surroundings. Keith mentioned fields near his home which "*were developed into the local industrial park*" and Mark referred to where the "*countryside has got smaller*". Similarly, Ruth noted: "*I don't think the countryside itself is changing, there is just less of it than there used to be*" and Teresa wrote: "*Our natural spaces are being built on a lot + so are green spaces for houses + flats + even the pubs that's closed down are made into flats. There's flats + housing everywhere even our woods fields*".

These participants' experiences of transformed rural spaces brings about a form of occupational deprivation due to the literal destruction of a previously accessed occupational spaces.

Overcrowding of public spaces

> I feel that they're ruining the only good thing about living here by showing my private walks and my little beach by the reservoir to hordes of interlopers! (Mary)

For many people, the countryside represents solitude and opportunity for reflection, and, like Mary, they are used to these spaces being private and secluded. An increase in infrastructure in rural areas can make places more much accessible for some; yet it can also restrict others who prefer peace, quiet, and privacy. Mary once felt ownership over these spaces but now felt alienated from them. This is a very literal change in belonging, whereby belonging now means possession.

For Janet, there had been an increase in people who have "*decided to get into sports in the countryside like climbing, walking, mountain biking, endurance running. There are now paying car parks which use to be free*", influencing where she went for walks. Frank chose to "*spend those weekends in my garden instead*" when nearby green space was too busy in the summer. An increase in population, coupled with a lack of public transport, had led to "*a colossal increase in traffic*" (Keith) and "*cars rushing through the narrow lanes*" had stopped Dorothy from walking near roads. Vernon commented, "*The CAR has taken over*". A combination of a fear for personal safety alongside sensory disturbance limited participants from accessing spaces they would otherwise have enjoyed.

"For the tired and retired"

The following theme features participants' assumptions about ageing in relation to health and well-being and how it can limit their participation in outdoor occupations. It highlights how participation is affected by functional ability and by societal and personal expectations of how they should be behaving according to their age.

Teresa described how she would like to try out pursuits like bird watching "*if my eyes were*

alright". Holly had "*severe low back pain which makes it very difficult for me to sit*". As a result, she needed to spend a large proportion of the day lying down.

For Will, it was both his mental and physical health that affected participation, commenting "*As someone who suffers with anxiety and some mobility issues, I find it challenging to go out as much as I would like to*".

Illness altered the way that these participants interacted with the outside world, despite a clear desire to do so. While health can of course impact engagement in leisure occupations, Hazel talked of wanting to buy a National Trust membership but felt "*at my age [74] I think it is now too late*". Her self-limiting conception of ageing was powerful enough for Hazel to relinquish an occupation she would have liked to participate in. Preconceptions around ageing are held by people of all ages. For Betty, aged in her 80s, and Brenda, aged 48 years, some rural spaces were automatically associated with older populations, "*for the 'tired and retired'*" (Betty) and containing "*some very old people*" (Brenda). These assumptions stopped both from visiting certain areas.

The above opinions identify two, somewhat opposing, constraints to participation based on internalised concepts of age. In this case, people were perceived as either 'too old' or 'not old enough' to enjoy the countryside. In both instances, neither generation, young or old, want to be associated with being an 'older person'. This display of ageism from two separate cohorts demonstrates the nuance of how perceived or real constraints can impact leisure participation, despite a desire to interact with the countryside.

Discussion

In line with previous research, this study found that constraints to navigating the UK countryside can come from a wide variety of internal, contextual, and structural factors (Stadnyk et al., 2013; Townsend, 2012). The participants' responses are consistent with the established occupational science understandings that participation is altered by one's belonging within a space (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). Social expectations, insufficient infrastructure, urbanisation, and personal perceptions and preferences were

found to represent significant constraints to occupational participation in the countryside. They also highlighted the subjectivity of these constraints based on differences in human experience; and while factors limited occupational participation for some, they promoted engagement for others.

A diminished sense of belonging emerged as a key theme within the data. The countryside code appeared to sustain social norms which were upheld by some and not by others, creating imbalance in terms of who felt able to access rural areas. Participants felt marginalised and alienated from visiting the countryside because of not knowing how to behave or knowing where they were allowed to go. This lack of belonging exemplifies existing arguments that social inclusion is vital to feeling comfortable, safe, and confident to fully participate in desired occupations (Hammell, 2014; Wilcock & Hocking, 2015).

Occupational deprivation was also experienced by participants in relation to the urbanisation of rural spaces. Some were prevented from accessing previously green space, due to its destruction; and others felt alienated from those environments as their transformation had led to a subsequent loss of meaning. The emerging discipline of occupational ecology has indicated that occupational scientists should look beyond the received wisdom that occupational dysfunction is caused by physical, psychological, or cognitive deficits and towards ecological degradation as a significant factor (Algado, 2023).

While some participants felt alienated, others found that urbanisation was necessary for them to be able to live in and visit rural areas. This leads to the third key finding: that engagement with the countryside is highly dependent on personal context. Factors that encouraged participation for some, alienated others. The countryside code fostered both belonging and marginalisation. Urbanisation benefited those who needed increased public transport links and infrastructure but was a constraint for those who felt they were losing their previously protected environments. The variation in outcomes supports Benjamin-Thomas and Laliberte Rudman's (2018) conclusion that an understanding of how individuals experience various underlying social determinants is vital

for researchers. It also further validates criticisms of the leisure constraints model, which does not allow for an understanding of the subjectivity of or intersection between constraints.

An increase in visitors to the countryside represents a positive change in many respects, as more people can experience benefits to their health and well-being; however, it can result in some rural residents feeling alienated from their surroundings. This finding echoes wider societal debates around balancing a need for equitable access for all people alongside the protection of natural environments.

Despite a degree of socio-cultural homogony, a range of different voices and perspectives were represented by the data, and it was possible to explore the nuances of different human experiences. Unlike previous studies, which used the leisure constraints model to structure their findings in a categorical manner (Currie et al., 2021; Dorwart et al., 2019; Ghimere et al., 2014; Kyle & Jun, 2015), this study navigated the different themes highlighted by the data and identified the relationships and contradictions between them. This allowed the nuance of individual experiences to be explored more holistically and highlighted some intersection between the themes. Throughout the data analysis, it became apparent that the findings did not map conveniently onto the leisure constraints model. In most cases, external and internal factors clearly intersected and demonstrate unique constraints for everyone. For instance, when Keith talked about his sense of disconnection from the countryside, compared to when he was a boy, it was possible to see how a structural constraint met with an internal sense of alienation. These factors have a symbiotic relationship and cannot be seen in isolation from each other.

Without the ability to ask for clarification or further probe comments, it is not possible to elaborate with certainty upon what was written by the contributors. However, it is reasonable to suppose that some reasons given for non-participation might be more palatable versions of a greater truth. In many cases, some of the initial and more obvious constraints mentioned by the contributors could arguably be seen to replace more subtle concerns that do not allow the same level of personal power or agency to be expressed. For example, it is perhaps preferable to consider oneself a rebel and place an emphasis upon external constraints, such as lack of transport links, than to admit to being scared, intimidated, or even bored of outdoor spaces.

Some participants appeared to have some insight into the reasons why they were unable or unwilling to access outdoor spaces but others, such as Holly, were not able to articulate their reasons. Those who were able to provide some insight might still choose to give stronger more agentic reasons for non-participation. For instance, Dawn's comments about certain people being more suited to urban or country life may contain some truth, but this is based upon one unsuccessful visit to a rural space where she was "*woefully unprepared*". The external factors take precedence over personal responsibility in this case. Similarly, the seemingly contradictory comments within the 'tired and retired' theme perhaps indicate that age is being used as a reason for non-participation. On one hand, old age appeared to be a limiting factor; on the other hand, a lack of maturity presented as a constraint. Again, both might have some legitimacy, but personal agency is sidelined in favour of external constraints.

Finally, given what is known about the countryside code, fear of transgression, and the physical constraints to rural spaces, it could be assumed that navigating the countryside is less anxiety provoking when accompanied by another person. Another key aspect evident across the themes is the importance of social interactions and shared experience when accessing outdoor spaces. The meaning of participation is often appreciated in relationship to another person, perhaps a spouse or friend. The need or desire for company was particularly evidenced within the 'lack of belonging' and 'relationship to the outdoors' themes. If the subtlety and complexity of constraints to participation were better understood, there may be opportunities to manage them and enable engagement in richer occupational lives.

Strengths and limitations

This study highlighted the importance that meaning and belonging have on people's

motivation to participate in occupations within the countryside. The combination of an occupational lens with an interpretivist ontology means that the study focused on individual perspectives and person-centeredness, as opposed to seeking generalisation. A large data set allowed for a rich analysis and discussion. However, it also meant that opportunities to expand on individual narratives were potentially missed.

Findings have presented a range of experiences not usually reported in research about outdoor leisure, because that kind of research usually attracts people who are enthusiasts on the subject. It was helpful to hear from those who were ambivalent or indifferent to the countryside, a benefit of using MOP data rather than purposively sampled participants, which brought an additional dimension to the findings and allowed for a broad scope of experiences to be expressed.

Using archival data meant the study lacked first-hand interaction between researcher and participant, and opportunities to clarify and expand on certain points were missed as a result. However, it also represents a strength as a degree of separation between writer and reader/researcher arguably emboldens participants to be truthful about their opinions in a way that they might not if the researcher was present.

Lastly, it is a commonly raised critique that MOP participants are not representative of the general population (Edwards, 2019; May, 2016; Sheridan, 2009). National origin data are included within the MOP database; however, racial and ethnic biographical data are not. Unless directly stated by the participants, any inferences made about race or ethnicity could not be made.

Implications for occupational science

Occupations hold different meanings and significance for individuals and their subjective experiences. This research supports, and has developed, existing links between meaning and belonging and the impact on meaningful occupational participation within the context of the UK countryside. The findings highlight complexities of meaning and its impact on occupational participation as well as the nuanced relationship between people and the countryside. Understanding broader systemic constraints can inform and support understanding of occupational deprivation or marginalisation and help to advocate for both occupational justice and spatial equality.

While it was not possible to address the different constraints of particular social groups, particularly those from ethnically diverse groups and different social backgrounds (DEFRA, 2019, 2021), it was possible to begin a discussion about how the environment and societal attitudes can influence access to outdoor spaces, which has been absent from previous occupational science studies (Smith, 2023). However, a need for further targeted research around how belonging within communities can impact occupational participation within green space, particularly those from an older or more ethnically diverse population groups, is needed. Research in this field may enable shared understanding of how well-intentioned changes may enhance engagement for some while limiting engagement of others.

Conclusion

Through the exploration and interpretation of lived experiences from the MOP archive, this study has highlighted some of the constraints people can face in accessing the countryside for occupational participation, including common experience, companionship, infrastructure, health, personal preference, and social norms. Some of these may be experienced as constraints, but personal preference to not participate may be viewed as agentic. Findings have strengthened understandings of how the construction of individual and relational identity and belonging is essential for effective participation. The findings have highlighted examples of individually experienced constraints, perpetuated by underlying social determinants, leading to instances of occupational marginalisation, deprivation, and alienation. The study was limited to the pre-existing data available from the archive and has highlighted a need for further research around the impact of belonging and meaning on occupational participation and engagement in the countryside.

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Disclosure Statement

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data used in this study can be accessed on request from the Mass Observation Project, The Keep, Brighton. http://www.massobs.org.uk/about/mass-observation-project

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