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Nature, Nurture, (Neo-)Nostalgia? Back-casting for a more socially and environmentally sustainable post-COVID future

Abstract

Commentaries on lived experiences of COVID-19-induced 'lockdown' have simultaneously directed public imaginations backwards to draw inspiration and fortitude from historical periods of national and global challenge, and forwards into futures characterised by greater environmental sensitivity and community resilience. In this article we argue that individuals' and households' practical coping strategies from different phases of lockdown within the UK offer clues as to how adaptive embodiments of close connection – to nature and community – both inform contemporary practices of everyday resilience and signpost towards enablers of a more socially compassionate and environmentally sustainable future. Our novel approach to conceptualising post-COVID recovery draws on 'back-casting' – an approach which envisages pathways towards alternative, 'better' futures – to work back from the notion of sustainable lifestyles, through participants' narratives of coping in/with lockdown, to the forms of adaptation that provided solace and encouragement. We highlight how these embodied and emotional adaptations constitute a form of nascent 'neo-nostalgia' capable of reaching beyond the enabling of coping mechanisms in the present to inform long-lasting capacity for individual and community resilience in the face of future socio-environmental crises.

Key words: nature, sustainability, household, lifestyles, nostalgia, futures

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has emphasised the urgency with which humans' relationship with nature must change in order to enable an equitable, just and sustainable existence. In navigating the challenges COVID-19 has wrought, some 'green shoots' of cautious optimism have emerged, specifically around how the societal behavioural 'reset' the pandemic has demanded (Schwab and Malleret, 2020) might catalyse the long-awaited shift towards more resilient and sustainable lifestyles (Collins and Welsh, 2022). Indeed, the pandemic has created societal responses at a scale of which environmentalists have, for decades, been dreaming - even if any intentional or accidental environmental gains are contested, patchy, variable over time and space, and hard to quantify. Despite this, phases of lockdown and other restricted activity (from 23rd March 2020 in the UK and in other phases elsewhere) have presented a unique opportunity to examine how a sudden and dramatic curtailment of some forms of consumption might build social adaptability to future environmental crises.

Framing our arguments is a particular understanding of 'sustainable lifestyles' which recognises: i) that 'lifestyle' as a concept infers the situatedness of 'ways of living' within culturally accepted 'styles', themselves a product of wider socio-structural systems and norms; and ii) that 'sustainable lifestyles' are more than the intentional adoption of new 'greener' practices (cf. Middlemiss, 2011). The term also pertains to existing practices characterised by low/reduced environmental impact, even if those practices have been adopted for 'other than environmental' reasons (Hitchings et al. 2015). Underpinning this is an approach to engagement premised on working *with* individuals' heterogenous values, identities and everyday lived realities in order to make visible relatable and achievable low carbon behavioural norms (CAST, 2019). There is an important temporal dimension to this process, too. Recent research has

highlighted the benefits of making use of moments when habits are disrupted (e.g. during a pandemic) to embed new 'ways of doing' which are 'forced' by a changing social or structural context (CAST, 2019; Burningham and Venn, 2020; Verplanken et al., 2018).

Here we outline how we might chart a pragmatic pathway towards more sustainable lifestyles by working *backwards,* from imaginations of desirable futures consistent with a just and sustainable existence, via the practices that have enabled practical and emotional coping during the uncertainties of the pandemic. Our aim is to connect the lived realities of what people demonstrably *can do* with what they imagine, in future, they may *need to do* to live well in a climate-changed world. We articulate how emerging social and cultural shifts, catalysed by COVID-19 restrictions, might be amplified and sustained through recourse to what we describe as *neo-nostalgia* - where 'can do' sentiments associated with historic events echo into the present and become layered with the contemporary experience of new 'can do' responses. In this way, the present is characterised by embodied echoes of the past and generates the nostalgia of the future (cf. Blunt, 2003 on 'productive nostalgia'). This is nostalgia built from recent lived experience – memorable moments of peace, fun, or perseverance experienced within the challenges and tensions of lockdown, rather than distant (or imagined) historic events, even when history informs those present-day responses, such as through references to 'wartime spirit' (McLaine, 2021). We emphasise this distinction as a means of distinguishing between romanticised, imagined historical nostalgias – which are often held to be problematic in their lack of engagement with lived historical truths (Boym 2001) – and those which recognise the tensions, contradictions and messiness of spatially, socially, culturally and temporally situated human lives, or what Boym (2001) describes as 'reflective nostalgia'.

We frame neo-nostalgia with the explicit intention of emphasising its reflective and agentic capacity as "an adaptive impulse" (Kennedy-Karpat, 2020, p.283) capable of moving past dissatisfaction with the present and/or fears about an uncertain future (Jarratt, 2020; Gammon and Ramshaw, 2020) towards inducing new 'ways of doing' by helping to frame "an alternative world" (Brembeck and Sorum, 2017, p.10). In some respects, this aligns with Battaglia's (1995, p.78) "active nostalgia" - memories characterised simultaneously by a sense of private indulgence and the capacity to drive transformative action. Our concept of neo-nostalgia, however, is less about cultivating a sense of indulgence than a sense of resilience underpinned by the familiarity of first-hand embodied experience. We therefore frame these 'lockdown echoes' as enabling generative reminders of the habit 'recalibrations' caused by the lockdowns themselves, such that further shifts towards more sustainable everyday practices might emerge. This adaptive orientation, underpinned by a three-stage temporal structure (past-present-future), also differentiates neo-nostalgia from Gammon and Ramshaw's (2020) recent articulation of (two-stage) 'nowstalgia', where present experiences are 'captured' (e.g. through photographs) in the expectation that they might provoke nostalgia in the future.

The importance of the three-stage structure hinges on the role played during UK experiences of the pandemic by 'nostalgised' imaginations of community connection and a historicised 'can do' culture of resilience in order to encourage social compliance with restrictions on mobility, consumption and public life (Holden, 2020). This mobilisation of imagined history represents an ironic inversion of common critiques of nostalgia's social effects (Boym 2001), yet equally demonstrates nostalgia's value – whether based on experiential or imagined pasts – in mobilising action. In the absence of social lives beyond the home, for instance, Britain saw a conspicuous (re)turn towards domestic practices (such as baking, sewing, growing vegetables) often

associated with historicised imaginations of resilience during times of crisis, specifically in the UK with reference to World War II (Martin, 2021), but equally tied to imaginations of sustainable lifestyles concerned with (re)localised and thrift-oriented modes of consumption (Evans, 2011). Notwithstanding the simultaneous historicised and 'futurised' associations with resilience-building, both anecdotal and emerging empirical evidence suggests these activities were profoundly valued during lockdowns, whether to fill time vacated by the loss of work or social life, or as a means of coping with the uncertainties and anxieties of the pandemic (Martin, 2021; Wood, 2020). Underlying this seem to have been two key experiences that we describe as 'adaptive embodiments': i) a simultaneous feeling of solace in, and desire to care for or feel more connected to, the natural world; and ii) the intensification of localised social connections. We argue that the value placed on these adaptive embodiments may coalesce as a form of neo-nostalgia, premised on the memory of these activities' potency as coping mechanisms and the recognition that a return to pre-COVID 'ways of doing' may, in some circumstances, be impossible, or at least undesirable (Kennedy-Karpat, 2020).

Following an overview of our empirical work, we articulate the potential of a 'back-casting' approach for joining up the lived realities of the pandemic-shaped present with an aspirational, more sustainable and just future, via our concept of neo-nostalgia. We illuminate these relationships by drawing on data from our ongoing project. These are presented as two kinds of adaptive embodiments, abridged here to themes of 'nature' and 'nurture', both of which we find to be inflected with forms of nostalgia.

Project Design

From the beginning of the Spring 2020 lockdown in the UK, lead investigators in this project identified the potential for these nationwide societal constraints to act as a behavioural change catalyst. The project was thus conceptualised from the outset as a sequential multi-phase mixed-method enquiry in order to be responsive to a rapidly evolving national picture, with each phase designed and timed in response to the specific circumstances of more or less stringent lockdown regulations. Data were gathered that spoke both to the breadth of household experiences around the UK during different phases of lockdown/non-lockdown[i], and to the depth and nuance of individual lived experiences. Project phase 1 (23 April – 18 May 2020) took the form of an online survey (n=367) designed to benchmark how everyday household practices had changed since the commencement of the first national lockdown. Phase 2 (6 July 2020 – 15 January 2021) – the phase on which this paper draws - drew a sub-sample of 50 households from the 125 survey respondents who indicated their willingness to participate in a follow-up interview. Care was taken to maintain a diversity of household type and composition in the interview sample. These ranged from single-person households to households with dependent children/teens, to retired couples, and were located across the UK, with some clustering in the North-West of England, where the research team is based. All interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams and audio recorded for later transcription. Interviews ranged in length from 45 minutes to two hours. Following transcription, interviews were coded in NVivo by two members of the research team using an open coding approach. We draw solely from the detailed interview analysis in the arguments presented here. All participants have been attributed pseudonyms.

We acknowledge that the perspectives presented here are inevitably a partial insight into *some* lockdown experiences. Our participants themselves noted that the

experiences they related were very different – generally more positive, they felt – than what they imagined the experience must have been like for others. Our respondents were people with the time, energy and resources to talk to us during a difficult time. This inevitably means that those who were inaccessible to us may have very different narratives – and very different perspectives on what constitutes an aspirational, sustainable and just future. This by no means negates the value of what our participants told us; indeed, there was widespread consensus around key themes despite the variation within our sample, which constitutes a valuable starting point for identifying modest 'green shoots' for post-COVID sustainable lifestyles.

Back-casting to the (Sustainable) Future

The notion of historical-critical junctures – moments of significant socio-cultural upheaval - as catalysts for change has fuelled experimentation across a number of scholarly fields, from geography (e.g. Davies et al., 2012) to design studies (e.g. Twigger Holroyd, 2019). In such experiments, desirable futures are imagined and pathways charted from either real or imagined presents or pasts. In this way, scholars have explored not just how past or present acts set in motion specific future outcomes, but how aspirational futures might be achieved by articulating the shape of the 'between-space' connecting here (the present) and there (the future). One such form of experimentation which has gained traction in the context of imagining more sustainable futures is 'back-casting'.

Back-casting envisages how everyday life could be *different* and *better* in the future, and how pathways to reach that future/those futures might look. Despite – or because of – its explicit concern with desirability, it recognises the plurality of pasts, presents, futures and connecting pathways (Bendor et al., 2021). Whilst back-casting

has commonly been used in a range of practical (policy or industry) contexts (e.g. Davies et al., 2012; Carlsson-Kanyama et al., 2008), the term can also describe a thinking process which enables sense-making of possible trajectories through which present events and future scenarios might be connected. Because of our interest in how behavioural changes that *already happened* as a result of COVID-19 *could* be sustained to enable transitions to desirable yet diverse future sustainable lifestyle scenarios, we apply the latter approach here.

Candy (2010) has argued that the further an imaginary (future) scenario appears to be from the current realities of everyday life, the harder it is to imagine oneself there. In COVID-19-induced lockdowns, the 'alternative scenario' and the everyday lived experience have been one and the same time and place. In other words, aspects of everyday life that could be articulated as a 'future sustainable lifestyle scenario', such as consuming more local produce, were *necessitated* by the pandemic, closing the gap between the perceived (un)feasibility of a differently organised future and the lived reality of the present. This challenges that facet of back-casting whereby the future from which the back-casting commences can feel too distant. Our participants found themselves in a previously unimagined future-present they had no choice but to navigate, yet in doing so they were afforded the opportunity to reflect on aspirations for a post-COVID future where some of the lockdown-generated practices are worth retaining.

This requirement to navigate an uncharted future-present by reworking everyday practices tackled another challenge associated with back-casting – the integration of contemporary everyday touchstones (familiar places, processes or material things) in order to ensure relatability (Garduño Garcia and Gaziulusoy, 2021). Although many changes were forced and – at the time – felt dramatic, when viewed through the lens of

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back-casting for a sustainable future lifestyle they can instead be framed as relatively modest and incremental, demonstrating the manageability of change towards a more sustainable lifestyle when lived through familiar everyday practices. The distinctive ways in which individuals and individual households have experienced and managed this illustrates the claim by Garduño Garcia and Gaziulusoy (2021) that important knowledge of how to transition towards sustainability exists within lay cultures, and not always under the explicit guise of environmental knowledge (Hitchings et al., 2015).

Our focus on lifestyles (rather than other, linked scales, most especially 'community') responds to the recognised failure of many policy-led attempts to promote everyday sustainability to appreciate the specifically *socio-cultural* complexities of everyday life, and how these ultimately shape people's capacity (and willingness) to live (more) sustainably (Gibson et al., 2011; Lane and Gorman-Murray, 2012). Lynn Jamieson (2016, p.337), for instance, argues that, "[m]ore focused attention is […] needed on how family and intimate practices intersect with how people take up, sustain, rework or challenge environmentally consequential dispositions, actions, discourses and systems", highlighting a timely intersection between our concern with lifestyle change and current debates in social geography around domestic intimacies and expressions of care (e.g. Collins, 2015; Toole et al., 2016). Thus, whilst the shifts that have occurred in our participants' daily lives have been driven by a public health, rather than environmental, agenda, an awareness of those facets of domestic and personal life conducive to maintaining sustainability-aligned lifestyles is important for attempts to cultivate 'green shoots' of post-COVID recovery.

Fundamentally, attempts to create widespread and lasting shifts towards more sustainable lifestyles constitute a disruptive force that may threaten everyday ways of life that many would want preserved (Vallance et al., 2011). Indeed, it is resistance to

the perceived scale of change which has constituted such a formidable and, to date, largely insurmountable barrier for promoters of more sustainable lifestyles. Yet research which has examined the ways in which critical junctures linked to key biographical events (e.g. co-habitation with a partner, the birth of a child, the death of a close relative) precipitate the re-evaluation of lifestyles has demonstrated that the significant emotional and practical challenges wrought by such shifts fulfil a useful function (Burningham and Venn, 2020; Verplanken et al., 2018; Jamieson, 2016). They emphasise what is valued, materially, socially and emotionally, such that change can be embraced to produce a new 'everyday' – a *'new normal'* - in which the most valued practices are maintained (or adjusted) at the same time as new ones are introduced.

Whilst the concept of sustainability itself is premised on the idea of 'meeting needs' in ways that minimise negative impacts (Jackson et al., 2004), COVID-19 has reshaped how we think of our 'needs', showing some of us we need less of things we previously consumed habitually and more of other things previously taken for granted. This is not to be pious or romanticise a focus on the 'simple things' in life; rather, it is to emphasise that the pandemic has constituted an unavoidable critical juncture where change in how we fulfil everyday needs has been non-negotiable. The fact that we actively focus on the positive outcomes that some seek to retain aligns with the inherent normativity of a back-casting approach, in the sense that there is an implicit agreement that there are 'ideals' (even modest or contested ones) to strive for (Neuvonen et al., 2014).

We move now to our empirical discussion which identifies how engagement with the natural world and processes of nurture oriented towards self and close social others were 'nostalgised' through emotional responses that situated these activities in a distinctive moment in time. We articulate how these emergent *neo-nostalgias* represent

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breadcrumb trails connecting environmentally challenged futures to demonstrably adaptable presents.

Nature, Nurture, (Neo-)Nostalgia

Following Bendor et al.'s (2021, p.6) suggestion that, "… in backcasting it is paths towards the future that are pluralized" we organise our discussion around the broad themes of nature and nurture to chart two possible pathways to incrementally more sustainable futures. We begin each section with a sketch of how each theme might manifest in such a future. We then draw on interview data to illustrate how our participants' 'adaptive embodiments' during lockdown, beyond being valuable as coping mechanisms in their own right, might equally be framed as incremental steps towards an imaginable, relatable, and potentially more sustainable lifestyle.

Nature

We employ a framing of 'nature' which foregrounds everyday encounters with flora and fauna via private gardens, public parks and woodlands, on-street urban nature (e.g. trees, 'weeds'[ii]) and countryside access. We acknowledge that the term can be defined and applied more expansively; however, the scope as defined here is appropriate to our concerns in this paper.

A healthy natural world is fundamental to any conceptualisation of a sustainable future. Tappert et al. (2018), in their consideration of space-making for urban nature, point to the centrality of nature to social wellbeing (including through inviting interaction, recreation and physical activity) and economies (through the perceived quality of landscapes or environments), as well as more obviously though ecosystems (including climate regulation and biodiversity). Enabling these requires an orientation

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towards nature characterised by, amongst other things: i) respect, reflected through active care for and cultivation of different forms of nature; ii) sufficient space and visibility be given to nature; iii) time available to spend actively engaging with nature. A wide-ranging literature illustrating how interactions with nature cultivate these sustainabilities has demonstrated how, amongst other things: gardening helps generate interest in local food systems (such as home-grown or community-grown vegetables; e.g. Ghosh, 2014; Turner, 2011), which in turn can nurture wider social and environmental relationships through activities such as produce-sharing (Jamieson, 2016; Pottinger, 2018); private gardens encourage engagement with, and care for, local wildlife (e.g. Diduck et al., 2020), even when this is a secondary result of primary concerns with outdoor aesthetics (e.g. Petersen, 2021); and the importance of intergenerational learning for instilling a sense of environmental care (Martens, 2016). As Vallance et al. (2011) suggest, people can 'find their way' towards new relationships with nature via specific practices, including gardening.

Across our interviews, our participants described either newfound or newly enriched engagements with the natural world on their doorsteps. Whilst all recounted their enjoyment of, and appreciation for, nature during lockdown, for some these interactions had profound impacts. Juliet (in her 40s, medical researcher, lives with partner, West Midlands), for example, said:

> "I put more effort into my garden, oh this is so pathetic, but I feel emotional. For a while we had a really nice patch of flowers with loads of bees, and it was just really nice to sit outside and watch the bees."

Juliet's practical and emotional attentiveness to her garden produced a double dividend of well-being benefits, for herself and her local wildlife. It also produced the kind of vivid, pleasurable memory – *"Do you remember the summer we had* so *many bees in*

the garden?" - we suggest is fundamental to the genesis of neo-nostalgia. Less than six months into the pandemic, Suza (in her 20s, worked from home-full time, lives with partner and one pre-school child, Cheshire) was already experiencing a sense that the connection with nature she had gained was already being lost as the first lockdown eased. She explained:

> "… when I was out for a run I could hear birds singing, and you know, that kind of thing was just something I'd never really noticed, because you know, you've usually got traffic noise and that sort of disturbs that side of things. […] I miss that already because I don't notice it as much, and maybe that's because I'm not sitting outside as frequently, I don't know."

Suza's reference here to missing the birdsong reflects one of the most significant 'neo-nostalgias' that emerged in relation to nature, with birdsong the form of nature most frequently commented on across the interviews as both newly noticed and valued, particularly during Lockdown 1 (March – April 2020), and – as Suza experienced - re-diminished as lockdowns eased. Similarly, Juliet's wistful recollection of sitting watching the bees in her garden suggests a moment in time already consigned to memory. These valued moments of stillness in the company of 'doorstep nature' were contrasted with ambivalence about missing aspects of pre-COVID life, with participants like Suza and Juliet recognising that the 'old life' made it hard to access the stillness for rest and reflection that was subsequently treasured. Their comments highlight the importance of such 'pauses' to notice nature - or allow it to become apparent - since it is in recognising facets of the natural world that an orientation of care towards it develops.

In Figure 1, which illustrates our conceptual approach to back-casting, the top row articulates how we understand experiences like Suza's and Juliet's working as

cultivars of the transposable knowledge required to move towards sustainable future

lifestyles.

	Direction of memory			Back-casting process	
Awareness of nature, local wildlife	... when we could hear the birdsong because there was no traffic	Time to be present at home (e.g. in garden) and locally	**Time-space shift**		**NATURE** - Thriving biodiversity - Space for wildlife within built environments - Knowledge of local wildlife - Active cultivation of nature, especially food
Creation of space for nature (e.g. in garden)	... why we decided to build the pond	Practical skill and knowledge	E.g. re-locating large portions of daily life to home rather than workplace		
Shared learning about nature	... when we went bug-spotting in the field	Potency of intergenerational learning			
Pandemic Present	**Root of Neo-Nostalgia** *"Do you remember...?"*	**Transposable Knowledge**	**Primary Enabler**		**Sustainable Future Lifestyles**
Forging/strengthening of local relationships	... when we had drinks on the driveway with neighbours	Strong local networks + awareness of local needs	**Spatial concentration of daily life**		**NURTURE** - Strong and visible commitment to mutual aid - Strong commitment and attachment to place - Valued local sociality and conviviality - High levels of individual well-being
Moments of humour, joy, silliness	... when we spent an hour trying to catch those chickens	Time for moments of levity	E.g. Reduction in opportunity to travel beyond locality		
Acts of self-care	... how you felt when you made time for morning mindfulness	Giving time to self			

Figure 1. Neo-nostalgia as a transpositional mechanism in a back-casting approach to sustainable lifestyles

We suggest that memories of 'life under lockdown' may be both helpful in

maintaining activity in the present – such as making time to notice nature – and

crystallising memories of those activities that can be drawn on in future times of crisis.

This is represented by the bi-directional arrows at the top of the figure. Working from

right to left across the grid we show how the aspirational characteristics of a sustainable

lifestyle might be 'cast back' through memorable moments to today's practices, via

abstracted – but more broadly generalisable – touchstones of transposable knowledge.

Key to these are the everyday embodied practices – keeping children entertained,

getting exercise, social use of outdoor space - that were necessarily reconfigured during

periods of pandemic lockdown, and which, with those memories of adaptation as a

template, have the potential to drive further adaptations towards more sustainable

futures. In the further empirical examples that follow, we illustrate some of the other

ways in which our participants' experiences informed this conceptual argument.

Simon (in his 60s, local government officer, living with wife, North Wales)

recounted how the intensification of his relationship with his garden during lockdown

meant that he and his wife had not only rethought their decision to sell their house, but that he was instead looking to cultivate their current garden specifically for wildlife:

"Yes, we did things in the garden, we'd planned out, once we decided not to sell, we'd planned out changes to the garden. We've painted, you know, painted our sheds and I found the time to cut the grass and things, but things which were becoming a pain have become a pleasure. […] Oh, in fact, we've made plans now for at the end of the garden, I want, I've got room for a small area of woodland. Not big, but you know, a quarter of an acre, and a pond, and I'm trying to budget for that now to extend the, the biodiversity experience into some other areas."

The proposed augmentations to his garden may not only constitute (bio)physical reminders of how COVID-19 has changed Simon's outlook and catalysed these changes, the physical labour required presents an additional reminder of the ongoing work of ensuring space for nature – but equally the pleasure gained from proximity to it. Here we identify the genesis of neo-nostalgia in this embodied commitment to his garden, as the ongoing work, repeated seasonally year upon year, will re-evoke the context, and associated emotional response, that motivated the change. Figure 1 captures this with reference to the development and appreciation of practical skill and knowledge as a key resource for sustainable future lifestyles.

Jean-Paul (30s, publisher, married with three young children, Cambridgeshire), similarly, had been enjoying closer connections with local nature. Relieved of his 2.5hr daily round trip commute, he had more time to spend with his three children. He said:

"We're lucky with where we live, we're on the edge of town with a path across green fields just kind of on the doorstep and actually we've been out bug spotting, bird spotting and star watching on a couple of occasions and yeah, we

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have kind of had much more connection with kind of natural surroundings than

we probably would have done otherwise."

Spending time with his children learning together about local wildlife proved a

considerable benefit of lockdown for Jean-Paul, as he swapped the confines of his car

for an outdoor physicality comprised of walking, watching, touching and listening to

bugs, birds and more. His and his children's mutual excitement spending this time

together underscores Jamieson's (2016) argument for the importance of family

members learning together about nature, where parents and children seeing each other

appreciate the natural world enhances each other's engagement, sense of stewardship

and willingness to 'defend' nature (also Martens, 2016). Further, the potency of

treasured time spent with young children can have a profound impact on parents'

orientations towards imagined futures, including environmental futures, as they conjoin

nostalgic recollections of their children's younger years with anxieties about their

children's futures. Here, neo-nostalgia takes the form of parental reminiscences of

children's childhoods inflected with a wider contextual awareness of human-nature

mutual impacts. In other words, happy memories of time in nature as a family (whether

during or pre-pandemic) may encourage shared familial commitment to safeguarding

natural environments (locally and beyond), even through small acts such as ensuring

insect habitats in household outdoor spaces. This imprinted knowledge of and care for

nature, amplified for Jean-Paul through the intergenerational learning opportunities

afforded by lockdowns, may then be 're-activated' in future to prompt acts of

environmental care in memory of treasured times with children.

Simon and Jean-Paul's embodied adaptations to their particular circumstances

(not moving house, caring for children rather than commuting) enabled them to evolve

alternative – albeit sometimes only incrementally changed – orientations to the natural

world. These new perspectives (along with those of Juliet and Suza) brought into purview reflections which, we suggest, could usefully inform back-cast pathways between a future more sensitive to the needs of nature and the COVID-shaped present. That Simon found the practical and emotional resources he needed to cope with the pandemic literally in his own back garden highlights the hyper-locality of some of the key tools of resilience. Jean-Paul's narrative underlines the importance of intergenerational engagement for setting up a life course of touchstones to rekindle commitment to environmental care. For Juliet and Suza, committing to moments of just noticing the nature around them was evidently important, as both – only a few months into the pandemic at the time of interview – were already nostalgising connections they felt were already slipping away.

In making these arguments, we acknowledge our participants' differing economic circumstances – Juliet in a dual income household with no dependents, Suza in a dual income household with one dependent, Simon semi-retired with both a current income and good pension, Jean-Paul the sole wage-earner for a family of five – and recognise the role played by these circumstances in each participants' experiences of, and opportunities during, periods of lockdown. We elaborate on the implications of this in the context of back-casting for sustainable futures later in the paper.

Nurture

In imaginations of a sustainable and just future, the 'social' is conceptualised as particularly multi-faceted. It encapsulates matters of equity, diversity, inclusion and access to opportunities for all (e.g. Vallance et al., 2011); the right to be safe, and a shared spirit of mutual support to mitigate risks (Eizenberg and Jabareen, 2017); and the ability to experience a sense of belonging, a 'comfort' in place (Yarker, 2019). Here we

focus on that dimension of social sustainability which has been particularly illuminated by the response to COVID-19 – the spirit of mutual support – whilst also drawing attention to an un(der)acknowledged facet worthy of greater analytical attention – the opportunity for self-actualisation and self-care (although see Corral-Verdugo et al., 2021). These are illustrated in the lower half of Figure 1. The inward-looking orientation of self-actualisation and self-care has perhaps seemed antithetical to typically (and understandably) outward-looking conceptualisations of sustainability. However, as highlighted by Scott (2016) and Lloro-Bidart and Semenko (2017), without the ability to sustain one's own effort, energy and commitment, other forms of change cannot be sustained. In the pandemic context, the ability to sustain individual methods of coping for an indeterminate length of time has been non-negotiable, making our participants' experiences a valuable insight into how self-care constitutes an important part of sustainable lifestyles.

Recent literature concerned with social responses to COVID-19 has illuminated the "… 'quiet' acts of friendship/neighbourliness (Askins, 2015) initiated by ordinary people giving practical and emotional support to those who are self-isolating" (Ho and Maddrell, 2021, p.7). Springer (2020, p.113) has argued that "In this moment of COVID-19, we are seeing how it is in fact reciprocity that is saving us from complete catastrophe, and we are beginning to understand that we have the ability to expand our circle of care beyond family and friends." These points align with Pickerill's (2021, p.1) recent arguments for the power of grassroots community action to "respond to the multiple, intersecting, crises we face…" through understanding what unites people in times of immense challenge.

With the first UK lockdown running from 23 March – June 2020[iii], the timing of the 75th anniversary of VE Day (the end of fighting in Europe during World War Two)

on Friday 8th May 2020 presented an apposite moment to capitalise on "vicarious nostalgia" (Armstead and McKinney, 2019, p.5) – an idealised nostalgia based on images from popular culture rather than lived experience – commonly manifested on such anniversaries. With the Spring weather across Britain sunny and warm, despite the challenges of socialising during social distancing restrictions[iv], VE Day parties took over neighbourhood streets. Clodagh (age not disclosed, unable to work during lockdown, living with partner and two children of primary school age, Merseyside) relayed her experience of this day:

"I think as well it was the VE Day celebrations, me and the girl from next door and the girl from further down the road, we did a street party and we got kind of like, we realised our road is full of retired and older people that we just did not know, and that was really lovely to kind of meet everybody. It was a gorgeous day. Everyone kind of took it in turns to walk up and down and we never would have done that if it hadn't been for lockdown."

Clodagh highlights the connection between the restrictions of lockdown limiting social meeting, the heightened awareness of social responsibility towards vulnerable neighbours who might need support, and the nostalgised collective imagination of a period of celebration marking the end of a (period of) global crisis. However, the impact of VE Day-inspired sociality – and that of other publicly performative expressions of solidarity, specifically the Thursday evening "Clap for Carers"[v] – subsequently appeared to be limited. Edie (40s, worked part-time from home, lives with husband and two teenage children, West Yorkshire), for example, noted that VE Day events and the weekly "Clap for Carers" meant she saw "faces that we hadn't really seen" on their street "and we'd wave at each other and now we don't really see them anymore, everybody's hunkered back down again." Amelia (50s, moved from self-

employed to full-time work for an employer during lockdown, lives with husband, Merseyside) similarly recognised that the "Clap for Carers" was now tantamount to a historical event: "… there was the whole Thursday night clapping, which seems so long ago now, doesn't it?" Already a nationally culturally significant event was forming a shared memory, layered on top of already-existing vicarious nostalgias associated with memorialised forms of mutual support.

Whilst these performative events were clearly time-bounded, more mundane interactions catalysed by the new social requirements of the pandemic seemed to have been longer-lasting. A common theme was our participants' growing awareness of what one called their "wider social context" – people who were not necessarily acquaintances but who were resident in their neighbourhood. Tanya (50s, works part-time, lives with husband and two teenage children, Staffordshire), for example, became attuned to this through the attentiveness shown by her parents' neighbours:

> "They're the oldest, well the oldest sort of, one of the oldest in the cul-de-sac and they've had fantastic support from their neighbours and as a result of that I've spoken to their neighbours, and they've met people that they've never spoken to since they moved in and they've been, the community spirit there has been fantastic."

These emotional investments connecting people to their physical and social neighbourhoods have been argued to allow people to become "active participants in the making of their neighbourhoods" (Mee, 2009, p.855) and, thus, are fundamental to the social sustainability of place (Vallance et al., 2011). In Figure 1 experiences like Tanya, Amelia and Clodagh's produce neo-nostalgias around forms of hyper-local conviviality which themselves recollect historic socialities in multiple ways. For instance, forms of neighbourhood sociality common in the early and mid-twentieth

century[vi] – such as long conversations with neighbours over garden fences or on front doorsteps, and swapping or sharing (food, children's toys, information) to fulfil basic needs – rapidly became a 'new normal' as lockdowns restricted mobility. Local fulfilment of both material and social needs not only therefore provided immediate practical benefits, it also strengthened local networks with knowledge of 'who can help with what'. In Figure 1 we characterise strong local networks as a key form of transposable knowledge connecting everyday socialities with forms of social resilience required for sustainable future lifestyles.

Grace (30s, works full-time in heritage sector, lives with partner, Leeds) found that her shift to working from home – even without a previously arduous commute – had created a significant growth in her sense of neighbourhood connection. She reported getting to know her neighbours by exchanging home-baking, chatting with a new family who moved in down her street, simply because she was at home during the day, and joining in with local 'book swaps'. She said:

> "So my partner works from home normally, so would normally do a lot of the kind of day-to-day kind of, not chores, but things like shopping, because we tend to shop very local, we shop in the local grocers and the local butcher and baker, and so it was much easier for them to do that during a lunchtime or during the working day. Whereas for me, being in town meant that I didn't get the opportunity to do that, so I've been able to share that load a little bit more, but also allowing me to meet more of the community by doing that, so get to know the shop owners so that they kind of recognise you, you have those conversations, find out who they are."

Grace's comments underline the idea that one's local area is generally imagined to be one of "familiarity, predictability and comfort, a scale within in which people feel 'at

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home'" (Yarker, 2019, p.536) – yet for many people this connection has been limited by working lives which have proven incompatible with nurturing local social relations. Yet these are just as fundamental to a familiarity with one's surroundings and a sense of local attachment – a 'dwelling perspective' (Savage, 2010) – as connection to physical place. In Figure 1 we highlight this by articulating the spatial concentration of daily life driven by lockdowns as a primary enabler of key aspects of sustainable future lifestyles.

Across the board, our participants reported feeling happier about their strengthened local social connections, citing feelings of reassurance and safety, as well as simply enjoyment in newfound local conviviality (Yarker, 2019). For some, these local connections were both facilitated and strengthened by digital connectivity. Estelle (40s, full-time university administrator, lives with husband and two children, Cambridge), a woman who, even pre-pandemic, was very well socially networked in her local area, found new connections that helped her manage the stresses of lockdown. Asked who she felt more connected with during this time she replied:

> "The neighbours WhatsApp. Definitely. I mean everything from bins to chickens escaping at the other end of the street. We're in a city and someone's chasing chickens called Nero and Anastasia across the [street], you know, so there's that."

Estelle's neighbourhood 'chicken rescue' evidently proved a memorable moment during a period where, for many, every day felt the same. We are prompted by anecdotes like this to wonder how the temporal landscape of lockdown(s), with its long periods of 'sameness', will manifest in future memories, particularly the relative neo-nostalgic power of an unexpected or unusual event compared with the very differently emotionally textured protracted sameness. Indeed, whilst we identify moments of levity

as a form of transposable knowledge in Figure 1, we equally note that the role of humour and fun in enabling sustainable lifestyles remains under-researched.

The 'sameness' of much of daily life during 2020 was a significant feature in the context of participants' expressions of how they coped on a deeply personal level. Almost all referred to how this prompted acts of self-care, either as a distraction from their frustrations, as a way of managing challenging household dynamics, or – for some – as a means of revelling in the 'slowing down' of a pace of life which previously felt too fast. Cliff (30s, works full-time, lives with wife and two primary school-aged children, Merseyside) explained how he had come to treasure what he called 'dead time':

> "I think it's probably just a case of kind of, you know, sitting down with my wife and to a lesser extent my kids and just trying to build in some dead time, if for want of a better phrase, you know, let's not have an activity after every school night, let's keep Fridays free, let's keep Sunday free but we'll be busy Saturday, you know, that kind of thing really."

Households with children seemed to particularly value the 'slowing down' of everyday life. Here again we heard echoes of vicarious nostalgia for an imagined past characterised by fewer expectations of participation in the 'scheduled' social life of classes and clubs. Although the loss of school and children's activities presented challenges, the reprieve from the sense that much of everyday life was fixedly 'timetabled' gave parents like Cliff chance to express familial and self-care by 'not doing' rather than 'always doing'.

Suza, having regained the time she would previously have spent getting ready for and commuting to work, had started a morning yoga practice – although she then admitted, laughing, "… and I don't do that anymore." She continued:

"I mean I do do other things, I think I've kind of, I still make that time and space for myself to do, you know, something just for me, something for my wellbeing and it might be sitting and doing some devotional or mindfulness, or you know, prayer time, something like that first thing in the morning, just kind of centres me. And I feel that that's a habit that I developed because of lockdown, and that's something that I have managed to continue to do because of what I just mentioned with the travel times, not needing to be quite so early."

Placing (care for) her body and mind at the centre of her adaptive response underlines the importance of self-care within articulations of both crisis resilience and sustainable lifestyles (Corral-Verdugo et al., 2021). As Cliff implied, freedom from some forms of social obligation can be conducive to this. At the same time, new, more localised forms of social interaction – if not (yet) obligation – have become valued for their role in creating a sense of reassurance and security, including through forms of labour fundamental to a socially sustainable community, such as ensuring that everyone has 'enough'. With reference to the inherent tension we articulate here between participants' desire for 'dead time' as well as more profound social connections, we note Battaglia's (1995, p.78) recognition of "[T]he capacity of nostalgia to engender its own ironies…" - here, that our participants may find themselves struggling to reconcile simultaneously true but emotionally conflicting recollections of their lockdown-induced needs.

We look now across these thematic sections in order to articulate how a back-casting approach might utilise the idea of neo-nostalgia to chart a pathway from the COVID-19 crisis to more sustainable lifestyles.

Conclusions: Back-casting with neo-nostalgia

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"… we've got to remember the time that lockdown has brought us and the changes that we made and try and stick to them somehow…" (Lucia)

In their discussion of a range of 'futuring' practices used to experimentally articulate alternative futures, Bendor et al. (2021, p.1) state:

> "As the old, well-worn adage goes, without the past there is no future; try as hard as you can and you will not be able to imagine a future without involuntarily invoking past occurrences."

Twenty years earlier, writing specifically about the potency of nostalgia as a mechanism – intentional or otherwise – for shaping futures, Boym (2001) notes that, "[F]antasies of the past determined by the needs of the present have a direct impact on the realities of the future" (p. xvi). Whilst recollections or re-imaginings of the past through the lens of nostalgia might well be rose-tinted, so too are the fantasies of the sustainable futures it is increasingly urgent to imagine. Making more sustainable lifestyles desirable, relatable and achievable requires coupling such imaginations – inflected with nostalgised personal and collective histories – to the practical realities of heterogenous lived realities.

Here, with limited scope to do justice to the multi-faceted nature of 'lockdown living' and sustainable lifestyles, or the detail in our fifty interviews which illuminate so many different aspects of them, we have focused on i) interactions with nature as a proxy for local environmental sustainability, and ii) acts of mutual and self-care as proxies for local social sustainability, as exemplars of the workings of our conceptual approach. In doing so we have acknowledged the varied economic circumstances of our participants, how these shape and are shaped by their individual circumstances and

priorities, and the fact that those different circumstances will have in turn shaped their individual pandemic experiences. There is much work still to be done – in our own project (but outside this paper) and in future research – to unpick the long tail of COVID-induced economic impacts, how these will shape new social and cultural norms, and the intersections of these with (un)sustainable and (un)just futures. With that in mind, we also acknowledge the partiality of the mechanism in Figure 1, whilst emphasising its value as a practical tool for productively mapping forwards and backwards between the unsustainable present and an aspirational future.

Our concern here has been to articulate back-cast trajectories from what participants have experienced during lockdowns to characteristics of sustainable lifestyles, drawing out necessary enablers of those trajectories. Central to this enabling process have been a range of adaptive embodiments that have produced a form of behavioural template, characterised by positive associations (reassurance, social connection, fun) that, in the future, may provide a sense that moving further towards more sustainable modes of everyday living is not just achievable, but desirable through elements of familiarity. In particular we recognise the suggestion by Garduño Garcia and Gaziulusoy (2021) that if people can find a sense of 'everydayness' which brings them comfort in times of challenge, and if that new-found 'everydayness' forms part of a new daily routine, then that can constitute a step towards an alternative, desirable future. We see these connections as an extension of Hitchings et al.'s (2015) 'inadvertent environmentalism', bringing the under-acknowledged social dimensions of everyday sustainability into clearer view. We suggest that 'inadvertent environmentalism' might effectively be reframed as 'inadvertently sustainable lifestyles' in order to better accommodate the social connectivity and self-care that our study has shown to be crucial to everyday resilience in times of crisis. Further, we

identify an opportunity to bring embodiment – as a conceptual-analytical lens, set of lived experiences, and as a research tool – to bear on questions of how best to expedite the shift to sustainable future lifestyles. For example, how might the potential of fun joy and humour for encouraging and enabling sustainable lifestyles be explored and, in turn, realised?

Though not primarily motivated by a concern with living sustainably, the adaptive embodiments and temporalities of neo-nostalgia are evidently capable of producing benefits aligned with both environmental and social sustainabilities. Indeed, our research indicates the value of casting the temporal net wider when theorising how sustainability might inadvertently be catalysed, to make use of historical, nostalgised drivers as well as imaginations of the future. In contrast, the spatial scope of neo-nostalgia may be somewhat narrower. Premised on the accessibility of memory triggers, its 'can do' orientation is both locally generated (through lockdown experiences) and locally prompted (through subsequent encounters that echo those lockdown experiences). This presents further questions about how far neo-nostalgia can travel, or its transposability between specific locations – questions geographers concerned with the spatial and scalar movement of social and cultural practices will be well placed to answer.

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i To give a detailed timeline of phases of lockdown and non-lockdown across the UK would be extremely complex, not least because of the differing restrictions across the four constituent nations of the UK, and the fact that regions within England were also subject to differing restrictions over the course of the year March 2020 – March 2021. As such, we simply note the complexity and variability in national and local 'rules' during this time.

ii 'Weeds' is placed in inverted commas as some naturalists would argue the term unhelpfully categories some plants as unwanted or unwelcome.

iii The end of Lockdown 1 was staggered, with phased reopening of schools from 1 June, the reopening of non-essential shops from 15 June, and further gradual release of restrictions from 23 June (Institute for Government, 2021).

iv In the UK, 'social distancing measures' have generally referred to the requirement to maintain a distance of two metres from any person outside of one's own household in contexts of social interaction, including everyday activities such as shopping and travelling to work.

v 'Clap For Carers' was a relatively short-lived national event, in which members of the public were invited to stand on their doorsteps at 8pm every Thursday evening to applaud medical and care workers in recognition of their efforts to tackle the pandemic. See, for example: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-52234176

vi Whilst 'over the fence' socialities may have persisted pre-pandemic in parts of the UK, they are widely accepted to be considerably less common in the twenty-first century than in the twentieth as a result of several socio-economic factors including changing patterns of employment and increased fluidity in housing markets (at local and national levels).