

## Leverhulme Doctoral Scholarships Programme for Interdisciplinary Resilience Studies (PIRS) University of Southampton

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**RECRUITMENT CYCLE for studentships starting: October 2024**

### **SUPERVISORY TEAM**

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### **STUDENTSHIP PROJECT TITLE**

**Heritage for Human Resilience**

### **OVERVIEW**

Poor wellbeing and compassion fatigue are serious risks to the social care workforce, and to service delivery. This project investigates the psychological mechanisms underpinning the relationship between heritage engagement, the development of historical empathy, and the translation of empathy into workplace compassion to support resilience and work engagement.

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### **SUMMARY**

This project investigates the psychological mechanisms underpinning the relationship between heritage engagement (visits to heritage sites) and the development of empathy and compassion in homelessness support staff. Homelessness support staff are at high risk of burnout and compassion fatigue, posing risks both to their wellbeing and to the future functioning of the care system. Building on findings from *Places of Joy* and the *HerWellNHS Feasibility Study*, as well as recent research on compassion fatigue, this PhD takes a mixed methods approach to 1) understanding how and why heritage engagement may induce historical empathy and 2) how historical empathy may induce compassion in social care workers. The student will identify a range of heritage sites to be used in the research, and collect and analyse pre- and post-visit data from study participants. They will join an established transdisciplinary team that brings together academics, social care, charity, local authority and heritage partners in Hampshire. Their findings will help develop and design novel heritage-based programmes for workforce resilience in the social care sector.

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## PROJECT CONCEPT

### ***Rationale***

The social care system is in crisis. Workforce burnout has been described as an "extraordinarily dangerous risk to [its] future functioning" (UK Parliament, 2021). This is particularly acute for staff experiencing high emotional and psychological demands incurred by supporting people with complex needs.

The UK Government's response to the Health and Social Care Committee's report on workforce burnout and resilience recognises staff wellbeing and resilience as essential to systems resilience. It identifies the need to "ensure a culture of staff health and wellbeing is embedded across all organisations" ([Department of Health and Social Care 2022](#)). Existing wellbeing packages include support helplines, wellbeing guidance and bereavement resources, alongside support for managers including webinars and an advice line, and investment in occupational health ([Department of Health and Social Care 2021](#)). However, there is a pressing need for innovative, scalable solutions that promote staff resilience and prevent poor wellbeing, as well as to support recovery.

This PhD project builds on findings from [Places of Joy](#) and [Heritage and Wellbeing for NHS Staff \(HerWellNHS\) Feasibility Study](#) led by Sofaer, as well as Barker's research on compassion fatigue in homelessness services ([Steenekamp and Barker 2024](#)). Our previous mixed methods research on self-directed visits to heritage sites revealed:

1) The unique temporal qualities and affordances of heritage sites may offer an unusual co-location of hedonic (subjective) and eudaimonic (psychological) wellbeing effects. This combination may have particular potential for maximising wellbeing ([Gallou, Uzzell and Sofaer 2022](#); [Sofaer et al. 2021](#)).

2) A complex interplay where, despite overall low levels of well-being and life satisfaction experienced by NHS staff, heritage engagement notably amplifies compassion, work engagement and resilience (Sofaer and Zaboloteanu 2023).

We hypothesise that heritage engagement fosters historical empathy (awareness of others' experiences), leading to a deeper understanding of the universality of human suffering. This in turn enhances compassion (desire to help), leading to positive social interactions and work engagement but we do not yet understand how this works.

We aim to explore these relationships within the challenging context of social care, in particular homelessness support services where staff are at high-risk of compassion fatigue - the condition of being emotionally drained (Smith 2019) and losing compassion for clients ([Lemieux-Cumberlege and Taylor 2019](#)) due to the nature of working in homelessness.

### **Key Objectives**

There is relatively little work on the relationship between heritage engagement and historical empathy. Most relates to museum encounters rather than site visits (e.g. [Savenije and de Bruijn 2017](#)). The link between historical empathy and compassion is almost completely unexplored. We thus have very little understanding of underlying psychological mechanisms, particularly in the context of occupational wellbeing and resilience. This PhD addresses this gap by asking:

- 1) What are the qualities of heritage that most effectively foster i) historical empathy ii) compassion at work amongst social care staff?
- 2) Are there discernible differences in the quantity and quality of heritage engagement leading to i) historical empathy and ii) compassion at work for staff varying in a) experience levels b) self-reported wellbeing iii) job roles iv) protected characteristics (gender, ethnicity, age)?
- 3) How do induced historical empathy and compassion translate into work engagement?

### **Methods**

Research will take place in Southampton, Portsmouth and Basingstoke utilising existing team connections to homeless support services. Following literature review, and building on successful HerWellNHS approaches to community engagement, a suite of mixed methods will be chosen in conjunction with the student in order to understand underlying constructs and identify moderating variables. Work will include the following:

- 1) Systematic review of the literature to contextualise this research in existing knowledge and identify areas for original contribution
- 2) Develop study design including identification of a range of heritage sites to be used in the research, sensitive to the diversity of the

workforce. A theoretical review (possibly a realist review) ([Wong et al 2016](#)) will be carried out in order to understand the potential range of underlying mechanisms contributing to the effectiveness of heritage visits. Free-to-access heritage sites are found in urban and rural locations; 99.3% of people in England live less than one mile from a listed heritage asset ([Historic England 2018](#)), while local authority Historic Environment Records identify hundreds of thousands of locally designated and undesignated heritage assets of all periods, including historic buildings, parks and gardens, archaeological findspots and places commemorating events and people. Selected sites will be mapped using the existing HerWellNHS interface and access supplied to participants.

- 3) Ethics and participant recruitment (IRAS and UoS). Estimated 75 participants. This is not a clinical or therapeutic project. Participants with diagnosed mental health conditions or clinical levels of poor wellbeing will be excluded.
- 4) Quantitative Component: Pre- and post-heritage visit surveys will be administered to measure changes in compassion and work engagement levels. These will include established scales such as the Professional Quality of Life Scale (ProQOL) and Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES), with additional items to assess compassion, resilience and empathy. A control group of staff not participating in heritage visits will be included to ascertain the specific effects of the intervention.
- 5) Qualitative Component: In-depth interviews and focus groups. These will aim to uncover how and why interactions with sites and narratives may foster a sense of historical empathy and its potential subsequent translation to workplace attitudes and behaviours. They will enable extraction of underlying constructs linking development of heritage engagement, historical empathy, and compassion. Thematic analysis to identify themes and patterns.

### ***Implications***

This research is poised to make a significant contribution to occupational wellbeing and resilience. Understanding and harnessing the untapped potential of heritage engagement as a tool for staff wellbeing and professional efficacy could be transformative in developing innovative strategies for individual resilience and informing policy and programme development. The research will have implications for a wide range of social care workers at high risk of burn out and compassion fatigue beyond those in homelessness support; there are 1.52 million workers in adult social care in the UK ([House of Commons Library 2024](#)). Thus, its implications for systems resilience could be substantial.

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### **Contribution to interdisciplinary resilience studies:**

This project draws together heritage studies and psychology to address the challenge of human resilience and systems resilience in an innovative way. It

generates fundamental research on the qualities and potential of heritage to generate empathy. Empathetic distress is detrimental to wellbeing ([Singer and Klimecki 2014](#)) but the time depth associated with heritage - its temporal distance from the present - may mean that heritage exposure is less likely to provoke such distress. It may therefore offer a means to 'design for resilient empathy' ([Peters and Calvo 2014](#)). Furthermore, compassion has itself been identified as a form of resilience as it offers a coping strategy that elicits positive affect in the face of suffering (Klimecki et al 2013). This supports wellbeing and buffers stress ([Peters and Calvo 2014](#)). This project offers the opportunity to critically explore intersections between these different forms and theoretical approaches to resilience. It further locates resilience as a feature of social and cultural values, which emerge from the relationship between people and places. It contributes to PIRS critical evaluation of resilience paradigms and the Health and Wellbeing strand of the PIRS.

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**Please list and describe any specific/additional technical training or support to undertake and successfully deliver this project.** *Note that students recruited into this programme will undertake a bespoke training curriculum. Students and their supervisory teams will also identify generic skills gaps to address through training courses offered by the University's Doctoral College.*

Required training will depend on the skill set of the successful candidate. The ideal candidate will have a background in psychology and will therefore need training in heritage studies. However, a strong heritage student could also be appointed. They would require qualitative and quantitative methods training, including in appropriate statistical analysis. In both cases, training in resilience studies including critical and contextual approaches will be required, as indicated on the PIRS website.

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