

Rambling on: exploring the complexity of walking as a meaningful activity

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ABSTRACT

Walking is widely endorsed by health promotion strategists as a means to improve the health of the nation. However, little is known about the value of walking beyond the physiological and psychological benefits. This research seeks to contribute to our understanding of the manifold benefits provided by walking in the British countryside and implications for health promotion.

This qualitative study utilises a novel approach to explore the whole person benefits of walking outdoors for recreation, by drawing insight from experiences of guests on a walking radio programme. Data was thematically analysed to identify and report on patterns emerging from the interviews, highlighting key discoveries. Male participants articulated how and why walking outdoors was meaningful to them, with three main themes emerging; appreciation of surroundings, awareness of self, and opportunities. These findings suggest that walking is a complex leisure activity and that it is meaningful as a result of individual experience rather than the just physical activity itself.

Key words: walking, leisure, men, individual experience

INTRODUCTION

Walking is the most popular leisure activity in the UK and is considered to be appropriate exercise for maintaining physical health, for both men and women, of all ages (Kay and Moxham, 1996; Morris and Hardman, 1997; Fox and Rickards, 2004; Curry, et al, 2012). It is a fundamental part of human development (Solnit 2006), and is also felt, by participants, to be highly therapeutic (Robertson and Babic, 2009), providing a range of physiological and psychological health benefits (Department of Health, 2009; Roe and Aspinall, 2011). These benefits are particularly important as people enter older age and their range of leisure pursuits declines (Freysinger and Ray, 1994) yet, as a population we tend to walk less than we used to (Department of Health 2009), many healthy walking initiatives have failed (Curry, et al, 2012), and more than half of the adults in England are not meeting the minimum recommendations for physical activity (Health and Social Care Information Centre 2012). This is particularly the case for men, whose relative lack of engagement with walking is likely to be influenced by activity patterns and identities that are formed early in their lives and remain stable across their lives (Liechty and Genoe, 2013).

Given the undoubted benefits of walking to men, we want in this chapter to examine the meanings of walking as a way of shifting debates away from

instrumental associations with physical health towards a more rounded view of meaning that may resonate more strongly with many men's established leisure activities and identities.

The literature that explores walking is diverse, including many disciplines, and focuses on the benefits. What follows is a review of leisure-focused walking literature, in order to explore meanings, rather than outcomes.

The benefits of walking

While the benefits of walking and hiking in extreme environments, such as wilderness, are well established (Russell and Phillips-Miller, 2002; Caulkins, et al, 2006), the multiple benefits of recreational walking are still being articulated. In their paper on walking as a remedy for modernity, for example, Robertson and Babic (2009) found that walkers in a park near Zagreb identified many of the same attributes of walking that are found in more extreme environments, including feeling fitter and more resourceful, experiencing a connection with nature and the outdoors; and enjoying the company of others. This is consistent with the work by Markwell, et al (2004) which found that walking through historic areas can raise walkers' awareness of the surroundings. Similarly, in a study of organised outdoor physical activity conducted by Allen-Collinson and Leledaki (2014), both visual and haptic sensory engagement were felt to contribute to participants' self-awareness, which offered heightened feelings of being alive. Other studies, by Hynds and Allibone (2009) and Wensley and Slade

(2012), have found that recreational walking is associated with social connectedness, connections to nature and to a sense of wellbeing.

Much of the research on walking focusses on the health benefits of organised walking groups (Hynds and Allibone 2009; Curry, et al, 2012; Wensley and Slade 2012). These studies demonstrate that social connection is an important aspect of participating in group walking and, possibly as a result, tend to focus on women, who tend to be more highly represented in such groups (Hynds and Allibone 2009). However, as Curry, et al (2012) have argued, the broader benefits of such groups must be cast in doubt given that few of them survive in the long term. Rather, as Wylie (2005) has argued, walking is not centrally experienced as a means of achieving physical health gains, but is more about the psychological benefits of aligning self, others and nature.

This raises the question of whether the benefits of activities such as walking are experienced universally, or according to social and cultural divisions such as age and sex. As Liechty and Genoe (2013) have noted, while there have been studies that have observed different patterns of leisure behaviours between men and women (see Freysinger and Ray, 1994, for example) - and between men and women at different life stages - there have been few attempts to study the experiences and perspectives of men (for exceptions, see Scraton and Holland, 2006; Wiersma and Chesser, 2011). Yet, as Nimrod and Janke (2012) have argued, there is considerably complexity in men's leisure lives, particularly as

these are bound up with their traditional work identities, and are exacerbated as they move from paid work into retirement.

Leisure activity is generally associated with improved life expectancy in older adults (Agahi, et al, 2011). However, as Nimrod and Janke (2012) suggest, this masks variations between men and women, in terms of what they do, how they perceive themselves and, consequently, what benefits they gain. A quantitative study of older adults in Sweden found, for example, that men participated later in life in solitary pursuits such as cultural activities, gardening and reading books, while older women tended to be more involved in group activities. In both cases there is continuity with their earlier phases of life, with men, in particular, seeking to continue to use their work experiences through deployment of the skills that they have learned in new leisure activities (Liechty and Genoe, 2013). Because of this emphasis, there is growing concern that men do not benefit from simple physical activities such as walking to the extent that women do, which can impact negatively on men's health and wellbeing, especially in later life.

A research project was undertaken to explore the leisure experience of walking for men. In recent years there has been an increased interest in the phenomenological analysis of embodied leisure experience (Allen-Collinson and Leledaki 2014).

Walking as a meaningful activity is a topic that has the potential for research bias at every point, in order to remove the bias of the data being generated for a health researcher, by health research participants, alternatives to traditional interviews

were explored, including web based and broadcast materials. A rich source of data was discovered in a series of BBC podcast interviews about rambling.

METHOD

A qualitative study using a phenomenological approach to analyse semi structured interviews was designed. This design allowed the exploration of the participants experiences of walking as a meaningful activity. Phenomenology has been described as a two-step process, the participant provides a natural description of specific experience or situations, and the researcher seeks to explain the experience (Finlay and Ballinger 2006, Finlay 2014). An existential phenomenological perspective values the importance of the physical body in human experience (Merleau-Ponty 2001), this is the perspective held in this research.

Participants

A BBC radio podcast series about rambling in the UK was explored in order to find personal accounts of the experience of walking for leisure for men. Ethical approval was granted through the research ethics process of the authors' host institution. Consent was obtained from the producer of the radio programme. Although the data was public in nature, confidentiality was maintained and pseudonyms were used to ensure anonymity in this work.

The sample consisted of eight men aged between 39 and 60 years old speaking in interviews aired between 2011 and 2013. Due to the nature of this data, it is not possible to establish health status, ethnicity or other identifying characteristics of the participants. This purposive sampling strategy focused on men's experience of walking for leisure. Using eight participants is appropriate to gain a rich description of the meaning of walking outdoors to men (Morse 2000).

Selection Procedure

The series of podcasts was selected due to the rich content; 55 interviews were screened for inclusion. The first author selected 18 interviews that indicated discussion of leisure walking, these were listened to in full, in order to gain context, broaden the researchers understandings, and choose those that focused on men's experience of walking for leisure. Podcasts with the same professional broadcast interviewer were chosen to ensure consistency of interview technique. A final six podcasts were selected four with individual men, and two with two men that did not know each other. Interviews took place in rural settings, chosen by the participants, the setting eliciting rich discussion. Each interview lasted 25 to 30 minutes. The interviews were downloaded and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

Interview information was transcribed fully ensuring there was a clear distinction between the opinions and questions of the interviewer and the interviewee. These transcripts were then thematically analysed following the method outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Each transcript was read and re read to highlight major themes before the data were considered as a whole. Initial analytical comments were included on the left of the transcripts while emerging themes were included in a column to the right (Braun and Clarke 2006). Finally the data set as a whole was analysed and a table of key findings and supporting quotes from the text was produced.

In order to increase the rigour of the analysis, the first author analysed the data, and the second author reviewed the data, themes and sub-themes to ensure the themes represented the data, using a process of facilitated critical reflection (Finlay 2014). A reflective journal focused on the first author's position as a committed leisure walker was maintained throughout the research by the first author, enabling researcher preconceptions on the meaning of walking for leisure to be acknowledged and developed using reflexivity in order to become aware of personal meanings that might influence the data analysis (Finlay 2014). This journal was shared with the second author in order to facilitate critical reflection on the generation of themes. This was used to ensure that the data analysis was rigorous, and congruent with the participant's experience of walking, rather than the first authors and therefore reducing researcher bias and increasing dependability of the findings (Finlay 2014).

FINDINGS

Three main themes emerged, each with three subthemes (see Table 1). Example quotes from the transcripts are illustrated in the text, using pseudonyms to identify participants.

Table 1 Key themes

Key themes
Appreciation of surroundings
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Connection to past• Connection to place• Connection to nature
Awareness of self
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Present self• Past self• Wellbeing<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Emotional• Freedom• Physical
Opportunities
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Viewing the world differently• Inspiration

- Exploration and discovery
-

Appreciation of surroundings

One of the main motivations found was to take the time to notice the setting.

Participants made a point of commenting on their surroundings over the course of the walk, which was often linked and intertwined with the past, the place and nature.

Connection to past

Throughout the transcripts, participants commented on how the space in which they were walking had historically been used or changed. They eluded to the present being physically linked to the past by paths which had been created and maintained to access the landscape (Rory) and appreciated that the past has shaped and influenced the experience of the walk in the present (Nigel).

“...We’re on a local road but we’re going to pick up a little field path and the field path will lead us to a roman road and the roman road will lead us to the Icknield Way and then that is this immense thoroughfare that joins up with the Ridgeway and all the other famous old track ways.”

(Rory)

“It’s the depth, the knowledge that millions of people’s feet have walked these islands before us. And they’ve left traces in various ways. And it’s being able to pick up on that...All that we’re experiencing and what people have done with it.”

(Nigel)

Connection to place

Participants discussed how the place can evoke strong emotions and provide motivation to walk (Rory). The location of the walk was often described as holding personal significance for many of the participants.

“I’m more interested in the places through which I pass and the people I meet. And, this ongoing puzzle of how landscape shapes us and fascinates us and drives us to risk our lives in the mountains or spend years of our life, walking if we’re a long term pilgrim or walker.”

(Rory)

Connection to nature

Aspects of nature were considered by participants over the course of their interview, attributing specific meaning to the amount of life that exists beyond themselves on the walk (Garry). A number of participants expressed a sense that

walking outdoors in the natural environment offered an opportunity to connect to the earth and therefore with life (Mark).

“We’re coming in amongst the trees; already we’re feeling less of the wind and coming into this special quiet space. Which, if you look hard enough you see is teeming with life.”

(Garry)

“Be connected with the earth. If you’re connected with the earth you’re connected with life. If you’re connected with the earth you’re connected with your body. If you’re connected with the earth you will become very sensitive and centred. And that’s what’s needed.”

(Mark)

Awareness of self

Participants expressed their sense of self in terms of their present selves, how the walk inspires remembrance of past self and in terms of the overall wellbeing experienced while walking.

Present self

From the data there was a sense that walking offered an opportunity to be mindful and how this may be a contributing factor to your physical and psychological

health (Jack). Being in the present often evoked strong emotional responses from the participants (Garry).

“When you’re walking and you’re walking within yourself that’s the time when I feel at my best.”

(Jack)

“When I stumbled across this particular tree. And then found that this gorge is actually full of them... I feel a sense of rootedness I feel comfortable here in a way that I didn’t out on the bare exposed hills. And it’s a sense of being surrounded by this rich warm ecosystem.”

(Garry)

Past self

Due to the personal nature of the landscape a number of participants disclosed a strong sense of how walking in that place reminded them of their past (Adrian). This also often inspired participants to reflect on previous walks in the area and in the case of Garry how it made him feel primal to engage in the natural environment to the extent that it made him feel ‘at home’.

“I feel right now at this second that I’m standing in a kind of blizzard of visible things coming at me from the past. I see my mother and I see my

brother I see the weather in a particular day I see what this little place used to look like.”

(Adrian)

“I was trying to spear flounders in the local estuary here ... I was really tuned in and suddenly this other very weird thing happened I was possessed ... by this absolute conviction that I had done it before, not just once but a thousand times till I was walking through this with the familiarity with which I might be walking home and again I realised I was tapping into that deeply buried set of vestigial emotions.”

(Garry)

Wellbeing

Participants were all aware of their wellbeing, which was related to experiences of spirituality, liberation, awareness of self and surroundings.

“It’s a bit of a drug to me as well as like my gym. And I think also it’s a little bit of a church to me as well in the sense that I don’t get much spirituality unless I’m, unless I’m out here.”

(Jack)

Walking generated positive feelings among the participants, who often commented on how much they enjoyed the experience. Walking was a way to

counteract the stresses and strains of life (Richard) and to work through problems. Participants described feelings of freedom from walking outdoors and being free from life's constraints; often alluding to savouring the illusion of isolation and independence felt when walking (Bob). A number of participants also discussed the need to keep moving all the time and linked walking with physical health (Adrian).

“You know so much of life involves a need to be somewhere at a certain time or the stress of responsibility and ... when you walk you don't have any of that you have no guilt, no responsibility you have no stress. But you have maybe a goal which is ... and a time to do it in which is enough reason for the day really.”

(Richard)

“...we should stick to our own two feet. Because it allowed us to strike out on the road amongst mountains and moors. In a manor completely independent.”

(Bob)

“I do try and make a point of walking as much as I can around town as I possibly can. Partly to stop myself getting too fat but also because you

look at things in a way you don't look at them when you're sitting on the bus. You just slow yourself down a bit."

(Adrian)

Opportunities

Participants demonstrated that walking provides opportunities to view the world differently, gaining inspiration from the surroundings and from the rhythm of walking, as well as discovering and exploring new things.

Viewing the world differently

Some participants reflected on accessing the landscape (Rory), and the physical perspective gained when walking (Bob).

"The footpath network is the key to this ... it's the way in. It's a way of walking into a landscape as well as across it and it ... is a kind of territorial miracle really and it allows you to pick your way across what would otherwise be private land and find your way into nooks and crannies."

(Rory)

"We are really high. We're very isolated ... it takes your breath away. A place like this, a view like this and a day like this."

(Bob)

Inspiration

A number of the participants identified the rhythmic nature of walking influenced their work (Adrian).

“The actual physical business of moving yourself about getting your blood stream going, feeling a certain rhythm establish itself in your body which then in a mysterious way transmits itself into the poems if that’s what you’re writing. I mean I think that’s really fundamental.”

(Adrian)

Exploration and discovery

A motivator for a number of participants was the unknown aspect of walking, the opportunity to explore and discover new things (Richard).

“It’s a fantastic way to see things in the countryside but you’re never quite sure what you’re going to see it’s always a surprise you know.”

(Richard)

DISCUSSION

This study illustrates the multifaceted and complex nature of walking as leisure, demonstrated by the three main themes and nine subthemes emerging from the data. Participants discussed similar and different aspects of walking which provides a deeper understanding of the rich complexities of engaging in this

activity and the perceived resulting positive benefits (Reed, 2011). It is certainly clear from the findings that the benefits of walking go well beyond achieving the recommended weekly activity intake. Indeed, the physical benefits of the activity were routinely lost within a deeper connection with the landscape, nature and a keen sense of the past. This study thus illustrates that there are a number of different meanings for men of walking for leisure, challenging ideas of walking as simply physical exercise and men's leisure as essentially instrumental. Walking for these participants provided a platform to connect with themselves and the natural environment, both in the present and the past, and to reap the benefits of these connections.

While tending to support previous studies that suggest that the benefit depends on the individual's experience of walking (Reed, 2011) and the environment in which this leisure occupation occurred (Wensley and Slade, 2012) these findings offer new insights into the potential value of walking for men. Chief amongst these insights is that – unlike many of their other activities – walking can introduce sociability into men's lives, as well as giving them an apparently safe space in which to experience themselves. Contrary to current literature which places significance on walking in a group and values social connectedness (Wensley and Slade, 2012; Hynds and Allibone, 2009), this study demonstrates the importance of surroundings. This was important to the participants' experiences of meaningfulness; supporting the findings of Hammell's (2004) earlier work on connecting past and present. The surroundings offered participants a sense of

home coming, belonging and familiarity, and were related to the physical environment in terms of history, landscape and nature. Participants disclosed feelings of the past influencing their experience in the present and how in the present there is an opportunity to be a part of history.

Participants described a connection to specific places, which suggests that the landscape provides cultural importance to the individual. This supports the unique value of personal experience and the finding that people access different landscapes for different reasons to meet specific needs. Beyond this, local places matter to people, as they are part of their history or heritage and therefore contribute to the experience of walking as a meaningful activity. The participants considered nature over the course of their walk. The natural environment allowed participants to live in the moment and feel a part of something greater than themselves. Connecting to nature made participants feel alive which supports the value of outdoors and the natural environment providing emotional and cognitive restorative benefits to psychological wellbeing (Roe and Aspinall, 2011).

An awareness of self was a strong theme emerging from the participants' experiences of walking. The participants reflected on aspects of themselves as part of their walking experience and these emerged in three sub themes of present, past and wellbeing. They disclosed experiences of being grounded as well as reminiscing about their past, positive emotional wellbeing, freedom and physical wellbeing. Aspects of personal past recurred throughout the interviews, which

may indicate that the value and meaning of walking for leisure was created in the formative years of these participants. This supports the work by Lougher and Creek (2008) and Freysinger and Ray (1994) that activities performed while growing up are carried through men's lives and inform habits and routines that tend to enforce social and gender roles.

Contrary to common discourse about walking, social aspects (Hynds and Allibone, 2009) did not appear to be a key element for participants in this study. Masculinity also did not emerge as a main finding within awareness of self, which may be incongruent with the social construction of men portrayed in leisure studies (Connell, 2005). This may be due to the type of walking or rambling that the men were discussing, as it could be argued that this level of activity lacks many of the more masculine characteristics such as competition or stamina. The physical aspects of wellbeing were not commonly highlighted as a main part of engaging in walking outdoors. Similarly, negative aspects of walking alone such as vulnerability (Foster, et al, 2004) were also not raised which may suggest why the physical benefits of walking were not at the forefront of the discourse; participants may not directly have considered walking primarily as a form of exercise.

Walking provided a platform to engage in other activities. Participants were able to view the world differently, gain inspiration to feed their creativity and explore and discover new things. This theme is congruent with doing, which values

exploring new opportunities as a way of experiencing meaningful occupations (Hammell, 2004). A main factor of this theme was being able to experience life without stress, guilt or responsibility which is congruent with previous research (Wensley and Slade, 2012). Walking and the surroundings offered an opportunity to be inspired, building on recent research that suggests that the act of walking itself can improve creativity, separate from the surroundings in which it takes place (Opezzo and Schwartz, 2014). Walking also elicited a sense of adventure which appeared to motivate many of the participants to engage in it, because they valued the unpredictability of the experience.

Ultimately this study highlights, for men, the complexity of meanings and experiences that can be associated with walking for leisure. Rather than concentrate on the physical benefits that can accrue from such exercise, or the extent to which they can deploy skills learned in other parts of their lives, the participants in this study identified a range of meanings and emotions not conventionally associated with men's leisure.

Conclusions

At the start of this chapter we commented on the decline in walking being experienced in the UK, and the negative impacts that this may have on people's health. We noted that this is particularly the case for men, who tend not to engage in this type of activity, either alone or in groups, to the extent that women do. While this may be the case, our study demonstrates that men have much to gain

from walking, whether alone or in groups. Indeed, the findings indicate that men gain manifold benefits from walking – benefits that they may not routinely get from their other leisure activities. It is clear that this knowledge should be utilised when considering appropriate leisure interventions to encourage men to engage in more physical activity. The complexities and unique aspect of the participants' experience highlights the benefit of meaningful occupation and the need to remain focused on the individual person in context. The work thus offers a contribution to the understanding of the meaning of walking for leisure in a rural setting, and offers an insight into why men walk and may therefore be used to inform practice and health promotion to encourage those who do not.

Strengths and limitations

The unique source of interviews ensured that there was no health bias on data collection. However, there may be researcher bias on interpretation as bracketing personal experiences is thought to be difficult to implement and is therefore acknowledged as a limitation to this methodology (Creswell, 2013). While the interviewer was experienced and well-prepared, the nature of the questions may have put pressure on the participants to come up with something 'interesting' to say. The participants were also discussing rural areas, which may not be so relevant to walking experienced in urban settings.

Recommendations and implications

The participants in this study walked with an interviewer and a producer, therefore an alternative strategy to gain information solely about the experience of walking may entail walkers self-recording their responses to a number of exploratory questions. Similarly investigating the experience of walking in urban areas could be studied as this may negate the benefits received from the natural environment and reveal other aspects of the walking experience which may be beneficial. Group walking could also be revisited to explore the meaning of walking for the men that do participate in walking for health groups, and therefore gain an understanding of the motivations of men in both cases.

Physical health was not a priority when discussing the meaning of walking for these participants. Therefore the occupational benefits discussed, such as the role of outdoors, stress relieving and liberation from daily routine, may offer important findings for health promotion policy in encouraging walking as an enjoyable leisure activity. By encouraging alternatives to walking for health groups, such as geocaching or history walks, it may be possible to provide an opportunity to engage with the surroundings while remaining physically active.

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